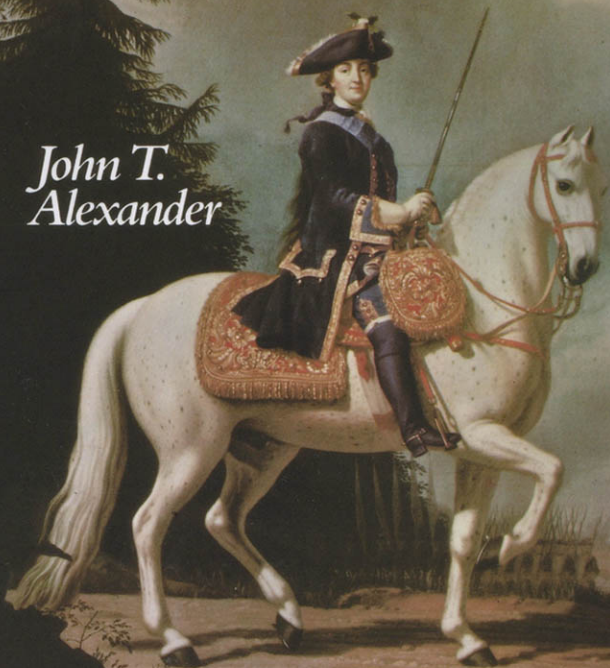


# CATHERINE THE GREAT LIFE AND LEGEND

*John T.  
Alexander*



CATHERINE  
THE GREAT

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# CATHERINE THE GREAT

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*Life and Legend*

*John T. Alexander*

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To Maria, the other empress in my life,  
with love and heartfelt gratitude

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## *Preface*

The woman who became known as Catherine the Great led a life so full of varied activities in such exotic settings, amid so many dramatic events and memorable personalities, that it took on all the trappings of legend. Throughout her lengthy, turbulent career (1729–1796) she confronted multiple crises—personal and political, physical and psychological. She seemed to surmount them all so successfully that her long reign (from 1762 to 1796) ranks among the most celebrated in Russian, European, and world history. Almost two centuries after her death, she still enjoys immense recognition as celebrity, superstar, and sex symbol—reputations that show no sign of flagging. Both the culturally literate and the ordinary public know her name and sense her fame or notoriety.

The many books about Catherine the Great may be divided into two main types: broad popular treatments that are long on gossip and drama but short on facts and context, and specialized scholarly studies that are often inaccessible to general readers. This book aspires to bridge the chasm between the two. It aims to utilize both specialized literature and popular accounts, together with a broad cross section of published and unpublished sources, for the purpose of presenting a balanced biography accessible to the average educated reader. In contrast to most popular biographies, which follow Catherine's autobiographical writings in their disproportionate focus on her life before she seized the throne, my attention will concentrate on her long reign: the personality, actions, policies, and events that made her career memorable for millions of people over many generations. Relatively less space will be apportioned to Catherine's early life, not because it was unimportant for her later years, but because that period is better known through her own so-called memoirs and, more particularly, because her primary claim to fame rests on her multiple roles as sovereign ruler of the



emergent political colossus of Europe and Asia—the multinational Russian Empire.

Some of the attractions of Catherine's life are the controversies that she stirred in contemporaries and posterity alike. Nobody reacts neutrally to her. You are infatuated and intrigued by her charm immediately, or dismayed and disgusted by her supposed hypocrisy, vanity, conceit, brazen ambition, manipulation, and exploitation of others. Her career raises fundamental issues between the sexes. Is it any surprise that women writers have generally treated her more sympathetically than their male counterparts? Or that the scandalous, pornographic tales about her private life are overwhelmingly the product of male imaginations? Indeed, the images of Catherine that have spanned three centuries testify to the strong emotions her life aroused at the time and long afterwards. On the one hand, the title and surtitle added to her Russian name—*Empress Catherine the Great*—conjure up notions of imperial splendor, military glory, political genius, territorial advance, and intellectual brilliance. Challenging such praise, on the other hand, are the attacks of an army of critics and moralists who brand her an adulteress, usurper, murderess, tyrant, conqueror, oppressor, hypocrite, egotist, bad mother, nymphomaniac, and worse. One favorite label, applied by friend and foe, is "the Semiramis of the North"—after the mythical Queen of Babylonia who used charm and religion to usurp the throne and rule over her contentious subjects. Another comparison was with Messalina, the lustful third wife of the Roman Emperor Claudius who was executed by her enemies in A.D. 48.

This biography will look into the basis of such adulation and condemnation. It evinces neither prudish disdain for the charges of sexual license, nor prurient preoccupation with their significance. The main effort will be to present Catherine as ruler of the largest territorial political unit in modern history. That she was a fascinating woman with wide interests will also be explored. And her own endeavors to influence posterity's opinion of her reign will be explicated, for she was always concerned about her image.

Anyone who ruled such a large state for more than three decades would rank as a significant historical personage. It is doubly odd, therefore, that such a figure should go unheralded (or be spurned) in the USSR today. No Soviet author has yet published a biography of Catherine, in sharp contrast to the continual praise heaped on her illustrious predecessor, Peter the Great. Several reasons may be suggested for such neglect. For one, Catherine's foreign origins may challenge Russian national self-esteem. For another, her sex and her checkered reputation may not help her cause with the overwhelmingly male, officially Victorian historical establishment in the Soviet Union, where a nationalistic brand of Marxism-Leninism finds little justification for the study of a great, female, foreign-born, pre-revolutionary sovereign. Such attitudes have caused most Soviet writers to shy away from Catherine and her era in general, except for the study of rebels and critics of various sorts. Fortunately, much basic research was accomplished and published in Russia before 1917, and British, European, and North American scholars have extended this tradition during the last few decades, tapping Soviet archives in

the process. The moment seems ripe for a fresh look at Catherine that will synthesize Russian and foreign scholarship.

The present study differs from others, most of all, in its concept of Catherine's life as a series of crises and conquests, psychological and political. Despite her own efforts to celebrate will power and wit in explanation of her triumphant life against unfavorable odds, her own voluminous writings and the testimony of contemporaries convey abundant hints of doubts, uncertainties, anxieties, frustrations, and fears, all of which depict her development in terms at once more human and more conventional than the encomia or slander of her own and later generations. In reconstructing her life I have given greater attention than usual to questions of health, mental and physical alike, and have attempted to address soberly the issue of her sexuality. This presentation taps graphic as well as written sources. It uses several little known caches of Catherine's letters: her love notes to Peter Zavadovskii, her informal notes to Procurator-General Viazemskii, and her letters to Governor-General Saltykov. This presentation draws extensively on the officially published court ceremonial journals, a rich source (perhaps 20,000 pages for Catherine's reign) strangely neglected by previous scholars. It also cites some manuscript sources and many unpublished dissertations. These pages seek to convey an intimate appraisal of Catherine's career in the context of her time and in the light of recent scholarship on Russian and European history.

*Lawrence, Kansas*  
*March 1988*

J. T. A.

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## Acknowledgments

As a work of synthesis this book has drawn on more than twenty years of research at home and abroad that involved scores of institutions and individuals. For purposes of brevity, however, I will here enumerate only those institutions and individuals that contributed directly to my work on this manuscript over the past seven years. Financial support and release time were provided by a semester-long sabbatical grant from the University of Kansas in the spring of 1981 and by summer grants from its General Research Fund: no. 3708 for 1979–80, no. 3680 for 1981–82, no. 3308 for 1982–83, no. 3748 for 1984–85, no. 3453 for 1986–87, and no. 3528 for 1987–88. Outside assistance was received from the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies, which supported a month's research in Washington, D.C., in January 1981 and again in June 1987; from the Penrose Fund of the American Philosophical Society (no. 9216 in 1982); and from the National Endowment for the Humanities travel to collections program (RY-20639-84) in 1984. Research was conducted at the following libraries: the Watson, Kenneth E. Spencer Research, and Helen F. Spencer Art Libraries of the University of Kansas; the Library of Congress, the Indiana University Library, and the Library of the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. At the last named institution three sojourns at the summer research laboratory on Russia and East Europe, in 1979, 1982, and 1984, resulted in much intellectual stimulation from a variety of scholars, especially Marianna Choldin, Ralph Fisher, Maurice Friedberg, David Ransel, and Benjamin Uroff among the local staff, and from fellow participants Kenneth Craven, James Duran, Karen Rasmussen, Mary Hrabik-Samal, and Mary Zirin. Portions of this study were inflicted on conference or public audiences at San Antonio in 1982, Albuquerque and Vancouver in 1983, Urbana, Bloomington, Columbia, and Hays in 1984, London, Aberystwyth, and Leeds

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# I

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## Catherine's Youth and Her Accession to the Throne



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## *Catherine's Coup d'état*

By five A.M. on 28 June 1762 dawn would have dispersed the last vestiges of the “white nights” that illuminate the brief St. Petersburg summer. Catherine, the estranged wife of Emperor Peter III of Russia, was awakened that Friday morning in the small palace of Mon Plaisir built for Peter the Great in his favorite summer residence of Peterhof twenty-nine kilometers from the new imperial capital. A chambermaid announced her visitor, Aleksei Orlov, the ferocious scar-faced brother of her current lover and one of the principal backers of her bid for the throne. “Time to rise,” he advised; “everything is prepared to proclaim you.” When Catherine inquired about specifics, Orlov replied that their fellow conspirator Captain Passek had been arrested. That meant they must act at once, before the Emperor heard the news at his nearby estate of Oranienbaum. Catherine dressed quickly, followed Orlov through the gardens to his coach, and sat tensely as the vehicle hurtled toward Petersburg.<sup>1</sup>

If one cannot reconstruct Catherine’s thoughts as she hurried to claim her great destiny, the circumstances that inspired them can be briefly sketched. The threat of death, physical or political, animated her conspiracy. At a formal dinner three weeks earlier the erratic Emperor had publicly humiliated her by shrieking that she was a fool (*dura!*) in declining to rise for a toast. Moreover, it was widely believed that he had ordered her arrest that same evening in preparation for incarcerating her in a convent, disinheriting their son Grand Duke Paul Petrovich, and marrying his fat, ugly mistress, Elizaveta Vorontsova. But her uncle from Holstein, Prince Georg, had supposedly talked Peter out of such rash measures. Nevertheless, rumors were rife that the Emperor wished to rid himself of his troublesome spouse, by prison or by poison.<sup>2</sup>

This drama involved issues far weightier than an eighteenth-century court

soap opera. The future of the mighty Russian Empire and its ruling dynasty was at stake. In less than six months of rule Peter III had managed to offend important segments of the narrow elite that administered the Empire's central institutions. His piercing voice, foreign accent, contempt for things Russian, and drunken antics irritated the Russian courtiers who could not understand why his aunt, the childless Empress Elizabeth, had brought the sickly simpleton from his native Holstein to become heir presumptive to the all-Russian throne. Many suspected that only Elizabeth's death on 25 December 1761 had foiled a plan to set aside her bumptious nephew in favor of his son with Catherine as regent. Peter's outspoken Prussophile sentiments, his public avowal that he would gladly serve under his idol Frederick the Great, outraged Russian patriotism inflamed by six years of bloody warfare against Prussia. Insult superseded injury when Peter III abruptly pulled Russia out of the conflict, thereby extricating "Old Fritz" from a critical position, and then allied with him to declare war on Denmark for the purpose of recovering Holstein territory. Furthermore, his Lutheran proclivities combined with his scorn for Russian Orthodox ritual to incite anxiety among the Russian clergy. That anxiety took on sharper tones when the Emperor ordered church estates, and the peasants bound to them, to be secularized under direct state control. He even halted persecution of the schismatic Old Believers and offered those who had fled abroad incentives to return. The Orthodox hierarchy was not pleased.<sup>3</sup>

Even more blatantly provocative were steps that seemed to challenge the Empire's political bases. Enraptured with military drill as only an armchair commander can be, Peter III strove to upgrade Russia's army after the Prussian pattern. He scorned the elite Guards regiments as "janissaries"—a military liability and a political menace—ordered expensive new uniforms in the Prussian style, disbanded one unit, and constantly drilled the others. Meanwhile, the stature of the Holstein regiment climbed higher and higher, to the deepening jealousy of other units. Some Guardsmen surmised that the ultimate aim was to abolish the Guards altogether, a move fraught with political implications because of their noble composition and their strategic location in the capital. Prominent aristocrats such as Count Kirill Razumovskii and Prince Nikita Trubetskoi were promoted to high military rank and required to drill their units in person, discomfiting them and their troops alike.<sup>4</sup> Even the celebrated emancipation of the nobility from compulsory state service in peacetime, an enactment warmly received in most quarters, contained the troubling implication that the nobility might forfeit its traditional role in society and find its functions taken over by pen-pushing bureaucrats, commoners, and foreign favorites. Finally, in regard to civil administration, the new Emperor reorganized procedures in a way that undermined the status of the Governing Senate, an executive and judicial council comprising a cross section of the Russian power elite.<sup>5</sup>

Abolition of the dreaded political police, the so-called Secret Chancery, together with the return of several prominent personages from exile, could not compensate for the Emperor's affronts to Russian national sentiments. There was nothing to prevent the restoration of the political police whenever the

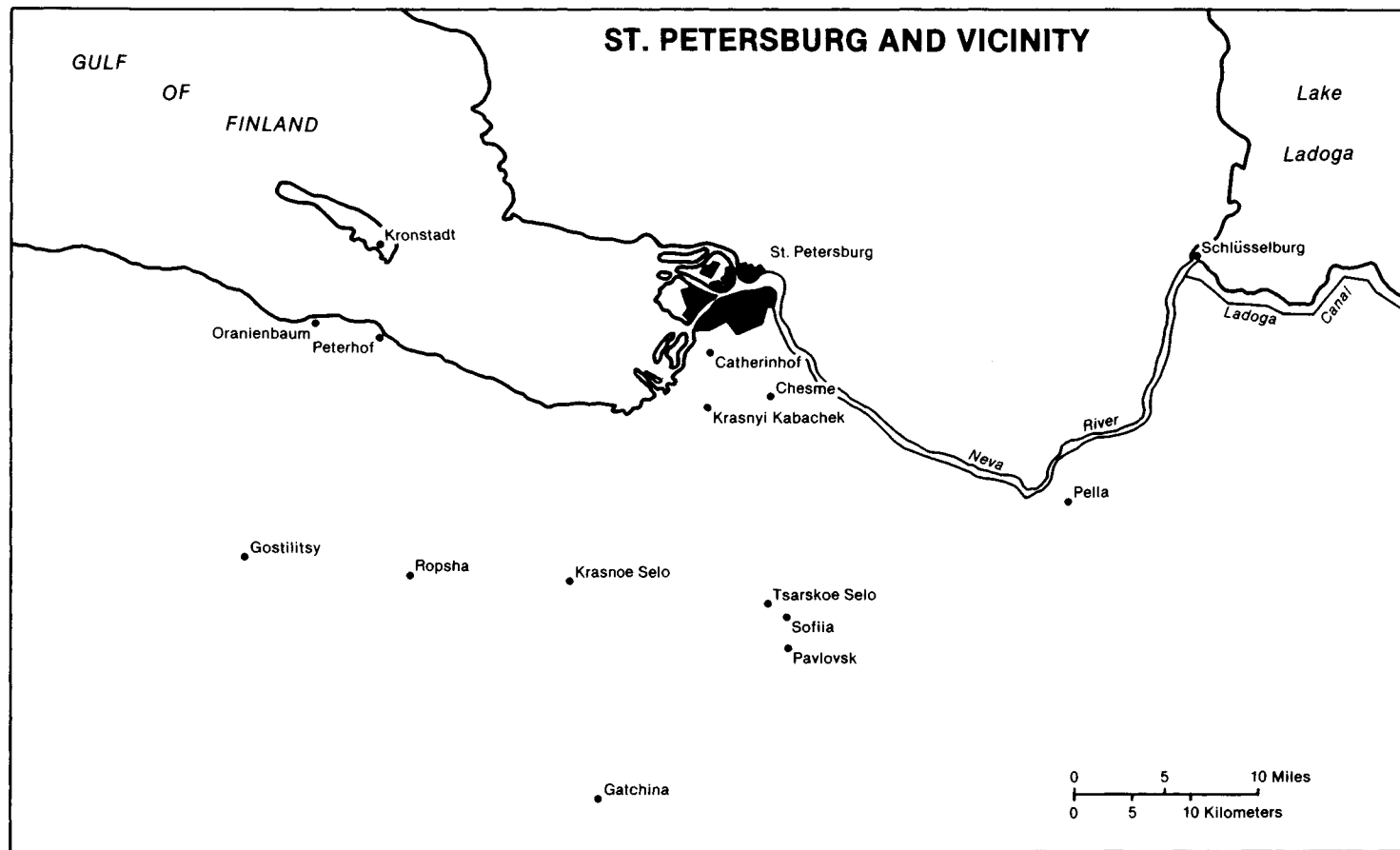
sovereign needed it, as time would show, although the temporary eclipse of that venerable Russian institution may have weakened Peter's regime in the crucial months ahead. Thus Peter III appeared to be aiming for a more centralized, bureaucratic regime than his indolent aunt had favored. It seemed certain that foreigners would play key roles under the foreign-born Emperor.<sup>6</sup>

All these policy changes left influential groups and individuals threatened, disgruntled, anxious. Catherine headed the list of those aggrieved. She enjoyed widespread sympathy and valuable personal contacts, beginning with her lover Grigorii Orlov, whose towering physique, courage in battle, free-spending manner, and amorous exploits had all secured a spirited following among his fellow Guardsmen. He worked closely with his four brothers. As the mother of Grand Duke Paul Petrovich, age seven, Catherine also cultivated the goodwill of Nikita Panin, an experienced diplomat who supervised her son's education as his "governor." Panin had suffered personal insult at the Emperor's hands, feared for his own and his pupil's future, and detested the arbitrary, capricious policies of the new regime. In Catherine he saw a promising alternative and hoped that she might agree to take the throne as regent until Paul attained his majority. A third kind of support accrued to Catherine from persons such as Princess Ekaterina Dashkova, born Vorontsova, the nineteen-year-old sister of Peter III's mistress. Eager for fame and fortune, Dashkova was as enthralled by Catherine's charm and shrewdness as she was appalled by her sister's taste in lovers. Her family's eminence facilitated extensive acquaintanceships within the governmental elite.<sup>7</sup>

These three different factions—the Orlovs, Panin, and Dashkova—all wanted Catherine to reign for different reasons. Of course, Catherine had her own reasons, and she kept the three factions largely unaware of each other's efforts. The role of coordinator she reserved for herself, making liberal use of money secretly advanced by the anti-Prussian governments of Denmark, Austria, and France.<sup>8</sup> Since arriving in Russia in 1744, she had sensed a great future. Bitter experience and self-education had prepared her to make the future her own, which she did on 28 June 1762 when she "fled" from Peterhof back to St. Petersburg.

At the time that Catherine's flight turned into triumph she was thirty-three years old. If the first flush of youth had faded, her appearance and manner captivated all who saw her. "Nature seemed to have formed this Princess for the highest state of human elevation," remarked Claude Carloman de Rulhière, an employee of the French embassy in Petersburg, who left this portrait of Catherine:

Her figure is noble and agreeably impressive; her gait majestic; her person and deportment graceful in the highest degree. Her air is that of a sovereign. Every feature proclaims a superior character. Her neck is lofty, and the head finely detached. The union of these two parts, especially in profile, possesses wonderful beauty; and this beauty, in the movements of her head, she has the art of setting off to wonderful advantage. Her forehead is large and open; the nose borders on the aquiline; her mouth is sweetly fresh, and embellished by a singularly regular and beautiful set of teeth, the chin somewhat plump, and rather inclin-



ing to double, but without the smallest tendency to fatness. Her hair is chestnut-coloured, and uncommonly fine; the eyebrows are dark brown; the eyes hazel, and extremely fascinating. The reflexes of light give them a bluish tint; and her complexion is dazzlingly clear. Loftiness is the true character of her physiognomy, taken as a whole. The softer characters of gentleness and goodness, which are there likewise depicted, appear, to a penetrating observer, only as the effort of an ardent desire to please; and those seductive expressions discover but too plainly an intention to seduce.<sup>9</sup>

Five kilometers outside Petersburg, after Catherine's exhausted horses had pulled up lame, Grigorii Orlov whisked her into his small coach and conducted his mistress to the suburban quarters of the Izmailovskii Guards. The bleary-eyed Guardsmen, roused by Orlov, streamed out to receive their "Little Mother" (*matushka*) as their new sovereign, and to repudiate Peter III by swearing allegiance to Catherine. Hurrahs punctuated the morning quiet. Some soldiers kissed her hand or the hem of her dress. Others wept with joy. Several assisted the regiment's venerable priest, Father Aleksei, as he approached, cross in hand, to administer the new oath of allegiance. Count Kirill Razumovskii, colonel of the regiment and longtime admirer of Catherine, hurried forward to kiss her hand on bended knee.<sup>10</sup> Whether choreographed or improvised on the spot, the first phase of the coup had proceeded without a hitch. It was planned to be a bloodless palace revolution—swift and safe and lucrative for those who backed the winner. All assumed the common people would applaud the revolt.

Toward eight o'clock the excited crowd formed a column behind Father Aleksei and Count Razumovskii and then convoyed Catherine's carriage through town toward the quarters of the Semenovskii Guards. The news had preceded them, however, so that crowds of *Semenovtsy* rushed out to greet their new sovereign. The multiplying crowd diverted the procession from visiting the other Guards quarters and led it onto Nevskii Prospekt, the capital's central avenue. Meanwhile, companies from Peter III's favorite Guards regiment, the *Preobrazhenskii*, ignored attempts by some officers to restrain them from joining the crowds then streaming toward the center of town. When some *Preobrazhentsy* overtook the procession on Nevskii Prospekt they apologized for their lateness and loudly declared: "We want the same thing our brethren do!"<sup>11</sup>

Growing by the minute, the dense crowd filled the broad avenue as it slowly moved toward the Church of Our Lady of Kazan. Catherine entered the packed church in the company of the Orlovs, Count Razumovskii, Prince Volkonskii, Count Bruce, Count Stroganov, and a throng of Guards officers. Priests greeted her with icons, offered prayers for the long life of "autocratrix Catherine the Second" and of her heir Tsarevich Paul Petrovich, and rang the church bells as the procession resumed its progress toward the Winter Palace. Surrounded by grandees on horseback, with Grigorii Orlov on the running board of her two-seat carriage, Catherine waved and smiled to the crowd as she arrived at the Winter Palace about ten A.M.<sup>12</sup>

On the squares before and beside the palace, regiments of regular troops

stood guard and quickly swore the oath of allegiance read by Veniamin, archbishop of Petersburg. Inside the palace the same oath was administered to everybody there including many high court, military, and ecclesiastical officials. For several hours the palace was open to anyone who wished to see the Empress. As a further gesture to the crowds, Nikita Panin hustled young Paul Petrovich, still clad in night clothes, from the Summer Palace to the Winter Palace, where Catherine displayed her son from the balcony to joyous exclamations. There was no talk of a regency, however, since neither Catherine nor the Orlovs favored any such arrangement.<sup>13</sup>

That morning the Empress's first manifesto—composed by Grigorii Teplov and Kirill Razumovskii, printed a few days earlier, and concealed by the Piedmontese Odart—announced her assumption of the throne but made no mention of Paul.<sup>14</sup> Her accession was justified by claims that Orthodoxy had been endangered, Russia's military glory sullied and enslaved by the alliance with Prussia, and the Empire's institutions "completely undermined." "Therefore, being convinced of such danger to all our loyal subjects, We were compelled, accepting God and His justice as assistance, and especially seeing the clear and unfeigned desire of all our loyal subjects, to mount our all-Russian sovereign throne, wherein all our loyal subjects have solemnly given us the oath." Assuredly, it was no oversight that the manifesto ignored Peter III's person altogether. The absolutist political tradition of Russia held no place for an ex-emperor who, once he lost the throne, was presumed to be politically dead. An ambiguous phrase blamed the rapprochement with Prussia on "its very miscreant," evidently meaning Peter III, but some thought the reference was to Frederick II.<sup>15</sup>

Catherine and the conspirators spent the rest of the day consolidating their coup. Troops were assigned to guard every approach to the capital with orders to prevent departures and detain anybody who arrived from Oranienbaum or Peterhof. Scant resistance occurred. The Life Cuirassiers Regiment, one of Peter III's favorites, vacillated at news of the coup and could only be brought to the oath after the arrest of its German officers. Prince Georg of Holstein, whom many soldiers hated because of the favor he enjoyed with Peter III, was arrested along with Policemaster-General Korf. The German Korf, whom Catherine had carefully cultivated some months before, was taken to swear his loyalty to the Empress, who named him to the Senate that very evening; but Prince Georg was confined to his house, which the soldiers vengefully looted. Within a few weeks, however, Prince Georg was awarded 100,000 rubles for his losses and allowed to return to Holstein with sixty-two others. He died a year later. These incidents were exceptional, for the general spirit in town was happy yet orderly, though the people and soldiers took vodka and beer from the taverns for free. (Tavernkeepers and spirits merchants later submitted claims for about 105,000 rubles worth of drink lost during Catherine's accession.) Some foreigners were rumored to have bought barrels of vodka for distribution, to advertise their approval of the coup and cushion themselves against popular animosity, especially anti-Prussian feeling. Perhaps for some of the same reasons, after noon the Empress left the newly finished Winter Palace for the old wooden one where Elizabeth had

died. She was greeted enthusiastically by the troops still surrounding the palace and was surprised to notice that they had changed to the old uniforms of Elizabeth's time. The men gladly doffed the despised Prussian-style uniforms prescribed by the former Emperor.<sup>16</sup>

By two o'clock in the afternoon the initial excitement had waned. Petersburg was secure and Catherine was officially Empress. But what should she do about her husband and his courtiers at Oranienbaum? Obviously, he would try to rally support from troops outside the capital who had not yet acknowledged the new government. The Empress and her advisers therefore dispatched couriers to army and naval units with her manifesto and sheets for signatures to the oath of allegiance. They worried about the forces at Kronstadt in particular, for that island-fortress lay within sight of Oranienbaum. Peter III would find naval forces, infantry, and munitions there with which he might mount an attack on Petersburg or escape by sea. Since the conspirators were unsure how much of the day's events had become known in Kronstadt, they sent Admiral Talyzin with a note from Catherine empowering him to do whatever he thought fit. They also ordered Rear-Admiral Miloslavskii to administer the oath to naval units in the Gulf of Finland and guard against any seaborne assault from that direction. And they resolved the issue of Peter III's fate. On capture, he would be taken to the fortress-prison of Schlüsselburg, situated on an island at the source of the Neva River some forty kilometers upstream from the capital.<sup>17</sup>

Later in the afternoon several members of Peter III's entourage arrived from Peterhof, ostensibly to remonstrate with Catherine or, more likely, to switch allegiance while propriety still permitted. Chancellor Mikhail Vorontsov, for example, upbraided the Empress for her impetuosity. She led him to the window, gestured to the massed troops on the square below, and exclaimed: "You see—it's not I who is acting; I only obey the people's wish." Vorontsov submitted, soon followed by Prince Nikita Trubetskoi and Count Alexander Shuvalov. The most prominent officials of the old government had recognized the new regime.<sup>18</sup>

Catherine's confidence rose even higher at the news, relayed from spies at Peterhof, that Peter III had not yet concerted any countermeasures. Firmly in control of the capital, she resolved on an immediate offensive against her deposed consort. The Senate, to which she had just appointed four new members, received responsibility for Petersburg and for Grand Duke Paul Petrovich. As the Empress explained to the senators before she mounted her steed Brilliant about ten o'clock that evening: "I go now with the army to reinforce and to secure the throne, leaving to you, as my supreme government, with complete confidence, to guard the fatherland, the people, and my son."<sup>19</sup>

The "campaign" against Peterhof cast Catherine in a new role with scant precedent in Russia: a woman sovereign as commander-in-chief. It also challenged Peter III in the most direct fashion. A lifelong drillmaster imbued with "military mania," he never saw action until confronted by his wife at the head of overwhelming forces. Catherine reveled in her military role. An expert horsewoman, she bestrode the white stallion, saber in hand, dressed in the green uniform of a colonel of the Preobrazhenskii Guards—the same rank



Peter the Great had taken. As the platoons of Guards filed past in the twilight of the white night, they lustily cheered their new sovereign, who personally commanded the rearguard. Accompanying Catherine on horseback was Princess Dashkova, also dressed in a Guards uniform, and a convoy of high officials: Prince Trubetskoi, Count Buturlin, Count Razumovskii, Prince Volkonskii, Quartermaster-General Villebois, and Count Shuvalov. Aleksei Orlov led the advanceguard of cavalry and mounted hussars, which had left several hours earlier, followed by artillery units. All three detachments took the road along the Gulf of Finland toward Peterhof, confident that their advance would encounter little resistance. Indeed, fatigued by the day's tensions, excitement, and revelry, Catherine's army dawdled along the road. The rearguard only reached Krasnyi Kabachek, a tavern five kilometers outside Petersburg, at two A.M. There they stopped for a rest.<sup>20</sup>

### **The End of a Reign**

The morning of 28 June, while Catherine was being enthroned in Petersburg, Peter III arose late at Oranienbaum with a throbbing headache. But his mood brightened after he watched his Holsteiners drill smartly. At one P.M. the Emperor, his mistress Vorontsova, the Prussian envoy Baron Goltz, and a score of courtiers climbed into conveyances for the short drive over to Peterhof, where they expected to dine with Catherine on the eve of Peter's and Paul's nameday. Imagine their astonishment when they found the Empress's palace empty! Peter scoured the premises, even looked under the bed, all the while complaining to his mistress: "I told you she was capable of anything!"<sup>21</sup>

Everybody sensed something awry. Soon three senior officials—Prince Trubetskoi, Count Shuvalov, and Count Vorontsov—proposed going to Petersburg to find Catherine and dissuade her from whatever folly had possessed her. Peter agreed. Trubetskoi and Shuvalov returned, but only the next day and as members of Catherine's triumphant troupe. In preparation for flight, the courtiers followed the Emperor down to the seashore, where several boats rocked at the wharf. A longboat pulled up with a Guards officer and fireworks for the celebration. On leaving Petersburg at nine o'clock that morning, the officer admitted, he had heard a tumult among the Preobrazhenskii Regiment and had seen soldiers running about with bared sabers proclaiming Catherine as their sovereign. This news demolished all doubts and hopes. Sobbing and moaning seized the stunned courtiers.<sup>22</sup>

Yet Peter and his aides quickly dispatched officers to Petersburg and Kronstadt to reconnoiter and rally troops for the Emperor. After this flurry of activity Peter spent the rest of the afternoon awaiting the return of his couriers and considering his options. He and his advisers decided that, for his safety, they should sail over to nearby Kronstadt, but Peter first wished to wait until they learned more exactly what had happened in Petersburg. Field Marshal Münnich, the eighty-year-old veteran of three previous coups whom Peter had brought back from exile, urged him to imitate Peter the Great by dashing into the capital with a select band of supporters to confront the conspirators

before they could get their footing. His bold plan was rejected as too hazardous. Obviously, Peter III was not like his celebrated grandfather. Baron Goltz, the Prussian envoy, suggested fleeing westward to Holstein, Finland, or the Ukraine. Although none of these plans was adopted, General Count Peter Devier was dispatched to Kronstadt at four P.M. with orders to prepare the 3,000-man garrison for the Emperor's arrival.<sup>23</sup>

General Gustav Nummers, the commandant of Kronstadt, found himself in a quandary when Devier arrived at five o'clock with news of Peter's impending visit and, two hours later, a courier from Admiral Talyzin in Petersburg brought a sealed order directing Nummers to isolate the island. Unsure what to do, the commandant took no chances; he hid the secret order from General Devier but allowed his aide, Prince Bariatinskii, to report back to Peterhof. Nummers' uncertainty was soon resolved by the arrival of Admiral Talyzin himself, who showed him Catherine's authorization. With Nummers' assistance, he promptly administered the oath of allegiance to the garrison and the army and naval forces. General Devier was arrested. Then Talyzin put the island-fortress on alert and sounded the alarm after eleven P.M. to make certain the troops were awake.<sup>24</sup>

Of all Peter's efforts, only the move to Kronstadt seemed ready by the early evening. His other couriers had failed to return. Tired and tipsy, the Emperor ordered the embarkation to Kronstadt. Forty-seven courtiers and officials clambered aboard a galley and a yacht, which cast off at midnight and caught the breeze toward the island-fortress. Within an hour the flotilla approached the Kronstadt harbor, where access was blocked by a boom. The Emperor's galley dropped anchor and sent a boat to request removal of the boom. But the sentry on the bastion refused with threats. Thinking that the sentry was merely following General Devier's orders not to admit anybody, Peter III identified himself, displayed his ribbon of St. Andrew, and loudly demanded entry. The sentry yelled back that Peter III no longer existed, only Catherine II. He was told to depart or he would be fired on, as the alarm sounded inside Kronstadt.<sup>25</sup>

Since an armed vessel blocked the channel westward to the open sea, the galley headed for Oranienbaum while the yacht returned to Peterhof. Utterly unstrung, Peter descended into the cabin and fainted away. As Frederick the Great remarked at the news of his disciple's overthrow, Peter III "let himself be driven from the throne as a child is sent to bed."<sup>26</sup> His confused efforts to mobilize support simply revealed his own ineptitude. Absolutism is an effective form of government only insofar as the sovereign can inspire loyalty or fear. Peter III inspired neither and Catherine filled the political void.

After five o'clock in the morning of Saturday, 29 June, the Empress's army resumed its march on Peterhof. Along the road they met deserters from the Emperor's suite and arrested several Holsteiner hussars sent to reconnoiter. At the Trinity Monastery appeared Vice-Chancellor Alexander Golitsyn with a letter from Peter to Catherine in which he acknowledged his injustice to her, promised to reform, and asked for reconciliation. The Empress declined to reply, but she relaxed somewhat at the news that Aleksei Orlov's vanguard had already occupied Peterhof and Oranienbaum without resistance or blood-

shed. Loud hurrahs and cannon salutes welcomed Catherine to Peterhof after ten A.M. A second letter, handwritten in pencil, arrived from Peter imploring forgiveness, renouncing the throne, and requesting permission to leave for Holstein with Vorontsova and General Gudovich. This time Catherine must have smiled, all the more so when the messenger, General Izmailov, offered to deliver Peter to her after he freely signed a formal abdication. The document was drafted on the spot and dispatched at once with General Izmailov, accompanied by Vice-Chancellor Golitsyn and Grigorii Orlov. Peter signed immediately. Shortly afterwards he entered his carriage, with Vorontsova, Gudovich, and Izmailov, and rode glumly over to Peterhof with a convoy of jubilant hussars and horse-guards. Throngs of troops greeted the ex-emperor with shouts of "Long Live Catherine the Second!"<sup>27</sup>

In a virtual trance Peter stepped out of the carriage and handed over his sword and his ribbon of St. Andrew. Vorontsova and Gudovich were led away under arrest. Taken to the room where he had frequently resided while visiting Peterhof, the ex-Emperor had to surrender his Preobrazhenskii Guards uniform. Nikita Panin visited Peter there and long remembered the pathetic sight, "the greatest misfortune of my life." So disoriented was Peter that he begged only not to be separated from his "Fräulein," Vorontsova. He did not even request a meeting with Catherine, who discreetly avoided witnessing her husband's humiliation.<sup>28</sup>

Later that afternoon a select guard led by Aleksei Orlov, Captain Passek, whose arrest had triggered the start of the coup, Prince Fedor Bariatskii, and Lieutenant Baskakov supervised Peter's transfer to Ropsha, an estate some thirty kilometers inland that Empress Elizabeth had granted him as grand duke. A large coach pulled by more than six horses, the side curtains drawn shut and with armed guards on the running boards, spirited the former sovereign into temporary captivity at Ropsha, until permanent accommodations could be readied at Schlüsselburg.<sup>29</sup> There could be no thought of allowing him to leave the country.

Peter's abdication completed the coup's formalities, so Catherine left Peterhof that evening in a carriage convoyed by horse-guards. Halfway back to Petersburg, the Empress halted at Prince Kurakin's dacha where she crumpled into bed completely exhausted—the first sleep she had savored in more than forty hours. In barely two days her prospects had completely changed. From a threatened, neglected, and powerless consort, Catherine had abruptly wrested command of the entire political arena and re-entered St. Petersburg in triumph on the morning of Sunday, 30 June. On horseback once again, the Empress rode into the capital at the head of the Preobrazhenskii Regiment along with the other Guards regiments, artillery, and three line regiments. The city turned out to see her grand entry, so unlike the one she had made two days before, as the clergy blessed her with holy water, churchbells pealed, and martial music rippled the summer air. Crowds lined the streets and speckled the rooftops. At noon Catherine pulled up before the Summer Palace, where Grand Duke Paul welcomed his mother amid rank upon rank of government and church officials. Constantly solicitous of Russian religious sentiments, the Empress proceeded directly to the court chapel for prayers.<sup>30</sup>

Sunday in Russia is also the traditional time for tippling. The raucous drinking, which began the day of the coup and resulted in some looting while Catherine was away at Peterhof, now redoubled in volume, led by delirious Guardsmen and abetted by police inaction or complicity. Shouting, singing, fighting resounded through the city far into the luminous night. Suddenly some drunken hussar started bellowing about a threat to Catherine's safety—30,000 Prussians were allegedly coming "to kidnap our Little Mother!" Others joined the tumult and refused to calm down even at the urging of Aleksei and Grigorii Orlov. Though the exhausted Empress had already retired for the night, Captain Passek awakened her in alarm and accompanied her carriage on a visit to the Izmailovskii Guards past midnight. "I told them that I was completely healthy," the Empress later recalled, "that they should go to sleep and leave me in peace, that I had not slept for three nights and had just fallen asleep; I expressed my desire that henceforth they obey their officers. They replied that the damned Prussians had alarmed them but that they were ready to die for me. I told them: 'Well, fine, thanks; but now go to sleep.' They wished me a good night, good health, and dispersed like lambs, all looking back at my carriage."<sup>31</sup> The role of mediator and peacemaker appealed to the new autocratrix.

Early the next morning all drinking establishments were ordered to close. Pickets of troops with loaded cannon and lighted linstocks were arrayed along all bridges, public squares, and street crossings. In the face of such measures and in the natural course of things the celebration/agitation quickly subsided. Within a week the taverns could reopen. The troops ringing the capital were withdrawn; commercial and postal communications were restored. On Sunday, 7 July, the public parks were reopened to persons of all classes and both sexes, clean and neatly dressed, except for those wearing bast footwear (i.e., peasants) or Prussian clothes. That same day, with life in the capital having returned to normal, Catherine's government issued a lengthy "detailed" manifesto justifying her accession. Presumably Catherine herself dictated the basic ideas, which her state secretaries then carefully reworked and rephrased into the slightly archaic Russian used in official pronouncements.<sup>32</sup>

Addressed to "All Our loyal subjects ecclesiastical, military, and civil," Catherine's manifesto amounted to a full-scale indictment of Peter III, who was charged with manifold crimes and criminal designs against Catherine and Paul, church and state, the army and the Guards in particular. Indeed, the manifesto maintained that the Emperor, after provoking universal discontent, had blamed it on Catherine and planned "to destroy Us completely and to deprive Us of life." He was also branded as unfit to rule, tyrannical, and ungrateful; for he had supposedly planned to exclude Paul from the succession instituted by Empress Elizabeth, whose pious memory he had repeatedly insulted. It was the threat to Catherine and the country, the manifesto insisted, that had caused "loyal subjects selected from the people" to rush to her defense and save the Empire from enslavement or bloody rebellion. The coup was itself depicted as simply a matter of Catherine, "armed with the might of the Lord," agreeing with the wishes of those "selected from the people" (who selected them and who they were, of course, went unsaid) and accepting the

allegiance willingly tendered by church, military, and civil officials. Peter's abdication, quoted in full, was described as having been arranged only after he had ordered Catherine to be killed.<sup>33</sup>

"By this action, thanks be to God, We accepted the Sovereign throne of Our beloved fatherland upon Ourselves without any bloodshed, but God alone and Our beloved fatherland helped Us through those they selected." Then the manifesto outlined the new regime's aspirations. In sharp contrast to Peter III, Catherine promised to preserve and to protect "Our Orthodox Faith," to strengthen and to defend the Empire, to uphold justice, and to extirpate "evil and all sorts of injustices and oppressions." The Empress professed notions sometimes termed "democratic autocracy," in her desire "to be worthy of the love of Our people," to prescribe limits for all offices and laws so as to facilitate "good order in everything," all of which would "preserve the integrity of the Empire and Our Sovereign authority, somewhat undermined by the recent adversity, and deliver from despondency and insult those truly loyal and zealous for their fatherland."<sup>34</sup> In short, Catherine envisioned a government in the tradition of Russian absolutism, unlimited in law but prescribed by religious precepts, custom, and national sentiments. Autocratrix meant simply "independent ruler" or "sovereign mistress," according to English commentators of the time, who saw in Catherine's "revolution" momentous constitutional change: "the most absolute power on earth is now held by an elective monarch."<sup>35</sup>

Not everybody believed the account of Peter III purveyed in this manifesto. Some thirty-five years later, a few months after Catherine's death, Emperor Paul ordered the document stricken from the published laws of the Empire. Yet the same day Catherine's manifesto appeared the government issued a traditional boon to the populace by lowering the price of state-sold salt by ten copecks per *pud* (36 lbs.). This gesture provoked one historian to sarcasm: "The people, like the nightingale, could not live on fables: one would have to eat a whole *pud* of salt in order to experience 10 copecks' worth of the Empress's thanks."<sup>36</sup>

Other events of these days signified the completion of Catherine's coup in a practical as well as a formal sense. Peter abruptly perished at Ropsha on 6 July. Catherine received the news that very evening and issued an announcement the next day attributing his demise to a "hemorrhoidal colic." (A French wit, the philosophe D'Alembert, would later comment that hemorrhoids are very dangerous in Russia!)<sup>37</sup> It was a surprise that was no surprise. Peter was an embarrassment to Catherine and her cronies so long as he lived. Although locked away from the world, he would have attracted constant attention and awkward questions. He might have escaped. Followers might try to free him or act in his name. The logic of the situation demanded his extinction. Otherwise Catherine could never sit securely on the Russian throne. The examples of Ivan the Terrible and Peter the Great, both of whom had killed their own heirs, evoked no protest when mentioned in Catherine's presence. Apparently her intimates, the Orlov brothers in particular, silently drew the conclusion that she wished the prisoner eliminated

but could not explicitly order it. Their position was fragile as long as hers was. Moreover, Grigorii Orlov could not marry her as long as Peter was alive. Whatever Catherine thought of such a marriage in principle, she would not subject herself to the indignity of a public divorce to marry Orlov.<sup>38</sup>

For more than a century, only hearsay contradicted the official version of Peter's death. In 1881, however, was published the letter of Aleksei Orlov to Catherine that informed her of the violent deed, took full responsibility for it, and begged her forgiveness. To this day many circumstances of the death remain murky—one in the long dark line of disputed deaths in Russian history. This much is certain: Peter was murdered—probably strangled or smothered in much the same fashion that his son, Emperor Paul, would be four decades later. The act occurred with the direct complicity of Aleksei Orlov and Fedor Bariatinskii, as Orlov's letter admitted, and in the presence of several other persons—perhaps as many as fourteen. Evidently drink inflamed the scene; some later suspected poison. In fact, Catherine demanded a postmortem, which revealed nothing.<sup>39</sup> Thirty years later the following version was still being whispered about in Petersburg:

Two Corporals were employed to put him between two feather beds and in which they succeeded and Baratinski and another person were actually upon the bed for the purpose of smothering him. But being though not a strong man very active he disengaged himself. Alexi Orloff then went in, seized him exhausted as he was by the throat, squeezed it with all his extraordinary force, and the unhappy Prince dropped down dead as if he had been shot. The two Corporals did not survive that day. For Poison had been administered to them before they undertook the business.<sup>40</sup>

Although the news stunned the Empress momentarily (the allegation that some conspirators were poisoned was probably a later invention), she recovered quickly and moved swiftly to cope with the consequences. The new reign could not be allowed to begin with a murder, Catherine and her advisers resolved; hence her manifesto announcing Peter's death and calling on the people to pay their last respects at the Alexander Nevskii Monastery, where the body lay in state. Orlov's letter she locked in her study, where it lay in oblivion thirty-four years until Emperor Paul unsealed it the day of her death and, relieved that it exonerated his mother of direct complicity, burned it. (Fortunately for history, one of Paul's friends had made a copy.)

Peter's corpse, dressed in a light blue Holstein uniform with an ample cravat covering his throat and a large hat concealing much of his darkened face (as if victimized by apoplexy, some thought), lay on public display for two days. Crowds of common folk filed past the bier in perplexity, urged on by insistent guards. It was hoped that such publicity would squelch any doubts that the ex-Emperor was actually dead, and forestall the possibility that pretenders might fasten on the imperial persona. Catherine made motions as if to attend the burial on 10 July, but the Senate dissuaded her, supposedly out of concern for her health. In a further effort to play down Peter III's

political significance and separate him from the ruling dynasty, his body was interred at the same monastery instead of being placed with his imperial forebears in the Peter and Paul Cathedral in central Petersburg.<sup>41</sup>

Despite all these efforts to justify Catherine's accession, cloak the true nature of Peter's death, and distance the Empress from her spouse's demise, doubts surfaced at once about the legitimacy of it all. In refusing the oath of allegiance, for instance, one Elychin confided to a priest in the town of Odoev on 8 July: "Be there anywhere in the world that a wife might take liberty from a husband? Alas, there's nobody for me to ask, and then I won't have to go all around the city for the oath!" When chided for not swearing allegiance and told "it's an important matter," Elychin retorted: "What's it to me? Will copecks be given out? Let them announce a decree, to swear by what power and is the former sovereign alive or not?"<sup>42</sup>

Catherine's coup had dethroned Peter in two days and compassed his death a week later, but his ghost could not be exorcised so easily. In various guises he would stalk her until death. Neither promises nor processions, oaths of allegiance or copecks however liberally disbursed or insistently repeated, could camouflage the fact that Catherine had usurped the throne from a legitimate monarch by force and deceit. That she had overthrown her own husband only complicated the crime in the minds of many.

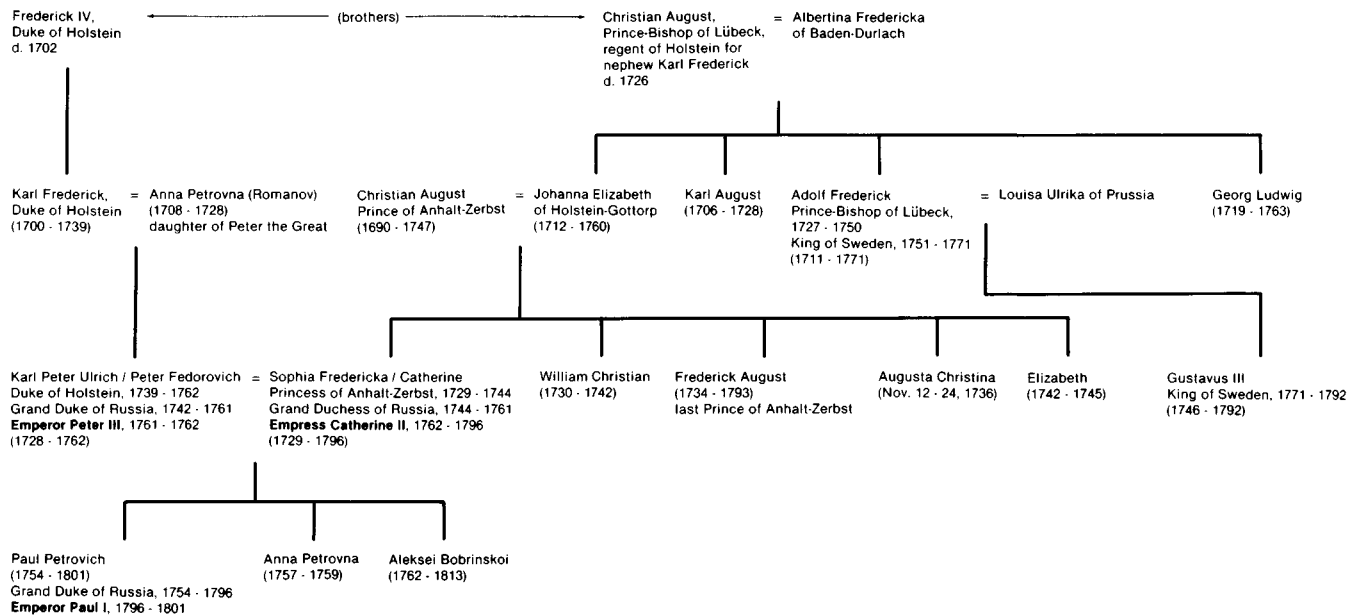
## *The Education of a Russian Empress (1729-1762)*

Empress Catherine the Great, born an obscure German princess, could never have become sovereign of all the Russias without the political and dynastic transformations wrought by Peter the Great (1672–1725). His imperious image dominated her life. Before her birth he had made Muscovy into the Russian Empire, named himself emperor, and pushed the western border of his giant domain hundreds of leagues closer to the north European nations he sought to emulate. To cement Russia's commitment to the new, avowedly European orientation, the tsar-emperor abolished the traditional order of dynastic succession by seniority through the male line. As absolute ruler he proclaimed his right to select whomever he deemed fit for the throne—a sure formula for dynastic chaos, intrafamily competition, and political instability.

Having already murdered one son (Aleksei, 1690–1718) and heir by his first wife, Peter compounded the confusion by elevating his plebeian second wife Catherine to the status of empress (officially crowned in 1724), marrying off one daughter and one niece to German princes, and then failing to specify a successor. His cronies and the Guards regiments therefore declared his wife Empress Catherine I the first female ruler in modern Russian history. Illiterate and sottish, she functioned mainly as a figurehead for her brief reign (1725–1727); but she strove to resolve the dynastic muddle by decreeing that, if Grand Duke Peter should die without children, the succession should then pass to her daughters Anna and Elizabeth and their descendants but with the male heirs to be favored over the females whenever possible.<sup>1</sup> Nature and human frailty allowed that possibility but rarely. Besides, aspirants with another crown or those who did not accept Russian Orthodoxy were explicitly excluded. The late tsarevich Aleksei's son (Peter the Great's grandson by his first marriage) succeeded Catherine I as Peter II, but he spent all of his short reign in Moscow under a regency and died from smallpox without issue—and without naming a successor—in 1730.



## CATHERINE'S FAMILY TREE



The implications of the Petrine transformation of the order of succession now became manifest, with no adult male heir available and with multiple female candidates at home and abroad and from different family branches. The Supreme Privy Council, a small conclave of aristocrats who had administered the empire under Catherine I and Peter II, attempted to halt such dynastic drift and overthrow the principle of absolute rule by imposing restrictive conditions on Peter the Great's niece Anna Ivanovna, the widowed duchess of Kurland. The council offered the crown to Anna Ivanovna in preference to any Petrine descendant because she had neither children nor spouse to complicate the chaos of conflicting dynastic claims and because, moreover, as a solitary middle-aged woman she could be expected to abide by the prescribed conditions. Anna Ivanovna accepted the crown and the council's conditions, but tore up the latter when she discovered that few noblemen supported the oligarchs' pretensions. Thus she became Russia's first female sovereign to rule in fact. She abolished the Supreme Privy Council and exiled several of its members, although she also adopted some of the reforms it had proposed to conciliate the noble elite. Furthermore, she reaffirmed her fidelity to the Petrine legacy by returning the court to St. Petersburg.<sup>2</sup> Since she was childless, however, she faced the same problems of succession as her immediate predecessors had. Although Russian tradition sanctioned the preference for male succession, there were still no adult male heirs available, and the political crisis of 1730 had dramatized the dangers of a regency. At the same time the claims of a female successor loomed ever larger in the person of Peter the Great's daughter Elizabeth, whose engagement to Prince Karl August of Holstein-Gottorp had ended with his death from smallpox in 1727. Born in 1709 (before her parents officially married), the vivacious Elizabeth combined the robust vigor and commanding presence of her parents in a way that promised wide popularity. Princely suitors coveted her hand and, although she stayed away from the imperial court, her amorous affairs sparked constant gossip.

The intrafamily competition took on greater complexity when Anna Ivanovna invited her niece Anna Leopoldovna, daughter of Catherine Duchess of Mecklenburg, to come to Russia with her husband, Prince Anton Ulrich of Brunswick-Lüneburg, as heirs presumptive to the throne. Shortly before the Empress's death on 17 October 1740, she appointed their baby son, Prince Ivan Antonovich, her successor under the regency of her German favorite, Ernst Johann Biron, Duke of Kurland. Biron's regency lasted barely three weeks. On 9 November 1740 Field Marshal Münnich led the Guards regiments against him and proclaimed Anna Leopoldovna as the new regent for Ivan Antonovich (Ivan VI). One year later, on the night of 24/25 November 1741, Grand Duchess Elizabeth seized power with the backing of the Guards, the connivance of the French envoy, and the assistance of adventurers such as the court surgeon Armand Lestocq.<sup>3</sup>

The latest coup proved as bloodless as the others. Elizabeth arrested and imprisoned the infant tsar, his parents, and family, but she also declared that her actions had been in the interest of Peter the Great's grandson, her nephew Duke Peter Karl Ulrich of Holstein. Thus Elizabeth restored the rights of her branch of the family—the direct line from Peter the Great—and followed her

mother's succession rule in choosing an heir from the male offspring of her deceased elder sister. To guarantee the succession against the claims of Ivan VI, Elizabeth hastily brought her teenage nephew from Holstein to Russia, had him renounce his claim to the Swedish crown and convert to Orthodoxy, and then proclaimed him heir presumptive. The next step was to find a suitable bride for the newly renamed Grand Duke Peter Fedorovich. The Empress looked abroad again and promptly found a promising candidate in the niece of her late fiancé from Holstein.<sup>4</sup>

It was through these dynastic machinations, political overturns, and genealogical calculations that a young German princess arrived in Russia to marry the sole surviving grandson of Peter the Great. Through further twists and turns of fate and nature this young woman made herself into Catherine the Great, Empress and autocratrix of all the Russias.

### **Youth and Girlhood**

The future empress of Russia was born Sophia Augusta Fredericka, Princess of Anhalt-Zerbst, on 21 April/2 May 1729 in the Pomeranian seaport of Stettin (part of Poland since World War II). Pomerania was a Baltic borderland between Poland and Prussia that had been under Swedish control throughout the seventeenth century until the western part was ceded to Prussia in 1720. Indeed, Sophia's father, Prince Christian August, served in the Prussian army as a major-general in command of the Anhalt-Zerbst infantry regiment no. 8. His was an obscure and penurious German princely family, its ancestral lands so paltry that Christian August entered Prussian service in his youth and spent the flower of his manhood fighting the French and the Swedes all over Europe. Born in 1690, he married at age thirty-seven the sixteen-year-old Princess Johanna Elizabeth of Holstein-Gottorp, the younger sister of Prince Karl August who had been engaged to Grand Duchess Elizabeth of Russia before his sudden death in Petersburg in 1727. If the bride's family ties overshadowed the groom's, her immediate prospects were dim. Her father was already dead and her marriage to a Prussian general hardly promised repute or riches.<sup>5</sup> Yet she was ambitious for her family, which was closely linked to the royal houses of Denmark and Sweden (her brother Adolf Frederick became the constitutional monarch of Sweden in 1751); and she may have persuaded her stolid spouse to inform the Russian court of their marriage, mentioning the bride's close relation to Elizabeth's unfortunate fiancé and the groom's distant relation to Peter II through the tsar's mother.<sup>6</sup> Johanna Elizabeth seized on Russia's ties with Holstein; for Duke Karl Frederick, whose marriage to Peter the Great's daughter Anna had produced the future Grand Duke Peter Fedorovich, was her first cousin. Of course, many German princely families recognized the bright dynastic prospects opened by the Romanovs' new respectability in the European monarchical marriage mart. Like many other German princesses, Johanna Elizabeth's allotted role in life was to produce marriageable children, preferably males so as to ensure family continuity and preservation of ancestral lands. She must have been slightly

disappointed when her first-born was a girl. Despite a difficult delivery, mother and daughter displayed excellent health. Indeed, Johanna Elizabeth gave birth to four more children in short order. Since all were sickly and two were male, she devoted most of her attention to them. Both girls died young; only one son survived to adulthood. Meanwhile, her daughter, nicknamed Fike or the diminutive Figchen, grew up quite independently. Little is known about her youth except what she chose to record several decades later when she had already gained the Russian throne. She wrote at least seven different versions of her reminiscences over a period of some forty years and, not surprisingly, changed many details from one draft to another. Although some specifics are questionable or incomplete and the chronology is occasionally awry, these memoirs offer much insight into Catherine's attitudes and her psychosocial development, particularly when one compares different versions of the same events. It then becomes evident that Catherine artfully selected facts and deduced motives in fashioning a dramatic account of her brilliant career.<sup>7</sup>

Young Fike showed early signs of precocity and stubbornness. Her French Huguenot governess, Elizabeth Cardel, remarked on her independence of mind or "*esprit gauche*."<sup>8</sup> She loved playing with other children, especially at rough and tumble boys' games, and being the center of attention. But she also soon learned to hide her feelings and cultivate others—to please and be pleasing. Her relationship with her mother seems to have been cool and sporadic. She felt unwanted, unattractive, unloved. Serious illness at age seven resulted in a curvature of the spine that eventually straightened out in a few years, thanks in part to folk remedies—rubdowns with a maid's spittle and wearing a corrective harness. Supervised by the local hangman, these treatments may have contributed to Catherine's lifelong suspicion of medical practitioners, whether professionals or quacks. Even so, she developed both splendid posture and periodic backaches. Highspirited and energetic, she chaffed at "tedious lessons" from tutors in German, French, religion, and music, but loved dancing and reading. Apparently she never attended a school or group lessons. One of her disputes with her tutor in religion, a Lutheran pastor, revealed an early interest in sexuality. She wished to know the meaning of circumcision, but neither pastor nor governess would explain.<sup>9</sup>

By age ten or a bit later Fike's interest in matters sensual became more persistent and pronounced. Evidently she began masturbating frequently. "I was very boisterous in those days," she admitted later, feigning sleep when put to bed early; "but as soon as I was alone I climbed astride my pillows and galloped in my bed until I was quite worn out. . . . I was never caught in the act, nor did anyone ever know that I travelled post-haste in my bed on my pillows."<sup>10</sup>

Princess Fike learned a great deal by accompanying her mother, whom she remembered as "beautiful, gay, and frivolous," as well as "extravagant and exceedingly generous" and "fond of entertainment and social life," on frequent trips to other courts. The "truly regal" court of Brunswick captivated the young princess with its constant round of "balls, operas, concerts, hunts, excursions, dinners, gossip, and matchmaking." By contrast, the court of

Berlin seemed less civilized and not as splendid.<sup>11</sup> During a visit in 1739 to her mother's brother Adolf Frederick, the Prince-Bishop of Lübeck and future king of Sweden, Catherine first laid eyes on her cousin, Duke Peter Karl Ulrich of Holstein, whom she would follow to Russia and to the throne. The eleven-year-old boy, though pale and delicate, struck her as "goodlooking, well-mannered, and courteous"—praise that she carefully tempered by noting his hot temper, rebelliousness, and proclivity for drink.<sup>12</sup> But it is hard to know what ten-year-old Sophia actually thought of her cousin at the time. In some reminiscences she professes indifference but notes her mother's interest; in others she describes his appearance and the rumors about him, blaming his defects of character on parental neglect and excessive discipline by his guardians, officials, and tutors.<sup>13</sup>

By her teenage years Princess Sophia began to perceive that she was not an ugly duckling after all. At age thirteen, on a visit to Varel in the Duchy of Oldenburg, she met an impressively liberated woman, Countess Bentinck, who fascinated her by riding a horse astride, flaunting a child out of wedlock, and behaving as she pleased: "danced when the whim took her to do so, sang and laughed and pranced about like a child, though she was well into her thirties at the time—she was already separated from her husband."<sup>14</sup> Riding horses like a man later became one of Catherine's "dominant passions" in Russia. The psychosexual implications of such passion are apparent: the desire for mastery, personal autonomy, sensual gratification, and power. Countess Bentinck, who may have been Voltaire's mistress while he was in Prussia and later corresponded with him after 1750, captivated the young princess despite her parents' disapproval of such dissolute "manners." These multiple challenges to social conventions could only give the youngster strange ideas about marriage, love, and happiness. If Bentinck did not become a role model for Sophia, she certainly made a strong impression.<sup>15</sup>

Another relationship recollected by the adult Catherine reveals her deepening awareness of male/female and mother/daughter tensions. Prince Georg Ludwig, Sophia's uncle and senior by ten years, began frequenting his sister's household and spending hours with his teenaged niece. Babette Cardel protested at this interference with her charge's studies, but Sophia considered his attentions thoughtful and affectionate, and innocently led him on. Complaining of gossip and constraints, he finally declared his passion and begged her to marry him. She thought he was joking at first. "I knew nothing about love and never associated him with it." She scoffed at the idea, felt embarrassed around him, and avoided his company. Even so, he pressed his suit and her defenses crumbled. "He was very good-looking at the time, had beautiful eyes, and knew my disposition. I was accustomed to him, I began to feel attracted by him and did not avoid him." She even promised to marry him if her parents approved; years later she concluded that her mother must have known what was going on. Evidently she enjoyed teasing her "bashful lover, very repressed" and making him jealous, "but, except for a few kisses, our relationship remained very innocent." She concealed the affair from Babette Cardel and her mother. But when her journey to Russia was arranged, her mother suddenly voiced misgivings over Prince Georg's reception of the news.<sup>16</sup> It

is difficult to discern the meaning of these Lolita-like episodes and whether Catherine remembered them accurately. At the very least, the story highlights an awakening sexuality, a latent desire for adult experience, and ambivalent feelings toward her mother—accusatory hints of connivance mixed with barely concealed boasts of sexual rivalry. Told that she was mature beyond her years, Sophia may have started believing it.

### **Matchmaking and the Journey to Russia**

There was much talk about Sophia's marital prospects as she entered her teens in the 1740s. But the invitation to come to Russia still triggered tremendous excitement in Zerbst when it arrived via Berlin on 1 January 1744. Actually the matter had been painstakingly arranged by the two determined women, Empress Elizabeth and Princess Johanna Elizabeth, working independently and with different motives. Certainly neither conceived of the political career that they were launching.

Although Princess Johanna and Empress Elizabeth had never met, they had known about each other, through mutual friends and relations in Holstein, for many years. So, when Elizabeth seized power on 25 November 1741, Johanna immediately wrote to congratulate the new empress, wishing her a long reign and praising the portrait of the young Elizabeth with her late sister, Duchess Anna of Holstein. This portrait piqued Elizabeth's sentimental memories, and "cousin" Johanna speedily honored her request for it. The Empress reciprocated by sending Johanna her own portrait encrusted with diamonds (18,000 rubles worth), the most fabulous gift ever seen in Zerbst! And even King Frederick hastened to cultivate Petersburg's goodwill toward the Zerbst family, promoting his general Prince Christian August to the rank of field marshal. Meanwhile, Elizabeth summoned to Petersburg her Holstein nephew, "the infant of Kiel" and "little devil" as he had been unceremoniously called by the nervous government of Anna Ivanovna. On 7 November 1742 he was proclaimed heir to the Russian throne. His renunciation of his rights to the Swedish throne also benefited Johanna's family, for at Russian insistence her brother was chosen crown-prince of Sweden. Alive to further possibilities and encouraged by King Frederick, Johanna also sent her daughter's portrait to Petersburg, personally delivered by her brother Prince Augustus of Holstein in March 1743. The young princess's "expressive physiognomy" delighted the Empress and the Grand Duke<sup>17</sup>

The childless Elizabeth had spent many months reviewing possible brides for her nephew and heir. A foreign princess was preferred as a symbol of prestige and to avoid domestic complications, but French, British, Prussian, and Saxon candidates were all rejected in the brisk competition. Several considerations recommended Princess Sophia. She was the right age, Elizabeth knew her family, and she came from the same cultural background as Grand Duke Peter. Her selection would conciliate Prussia, a rising power on the European stage. Indeed, Elizabeth included King Frederick in the arrangements to invite Princess Johanna and her daughter to Russia. Money for

travel expenses was channeled through Berlin, which mother and daughter visited before setting out on their winter journey. Both Frederick and Elizabeth took pains to conceal the purpose of the invitation. In retrospect, their attempts at secrecy and speed look ridiculously amateurish. Using the alias of Countess Rheinbeck, Johanna was to accompany her daughter alone with only a small suite; her husband was not invited. So the travellers took "only" four coaches when they left Berlin on 16 January 1744. Their convoy lumbered across the frozen plains of Pomerania and East Prussia in three weeks, dodging highwaymen, enduring provincial inns, and swilling beer.<sup>18</sup>

At Riga, on 6 February 1744, the world majestically brightened for the two German princesses. They entered the Russian Empire in a special coach, conducted into the city by troops and officials amid cannon salutes, trumpets, and kettledrums. This reception was intended to awe the newcomers with the splendor and grandeur of Elizabeth's mighty realm. A letter from Brümmer, the Grand Duke's Holsteiner governor, urged the newcomers to hasten onward to Moscow via St. Petersburg and advised them how to greet the Empress at first, namely, to show "extraordinary respect, kissing her hand, according to the custom of this country." From Riga on 29 January/9 February—the Julian calendar of Russia was now adopted, eleven days behind Europe's Gregorian calendar—the guests left in special imperial sleighs fitted with carriage bodies, swathed in sables and cushioned by silk mattresses, each vehicle pulled swiftly by ten horses. At noon of 3 February when the imperial train stopped in front of St. Petersburg's Winter Palace, the guns of the Peter and Paul Fortress thundered a welcome across the ice-clad Neva.<sup>19</sup>

St. Petersburg, Peter the Great's northern "paradise" founded in 1703 astride the marshy delta of the Neva's multiple arms debouching into the Gulf of Finland, epitomized the new Russia forcibly wrenched westward to meet maritime Europe. European in layout and architecture, the new capital glistened half-finished and, with the court away at Moscow, half-deserted. Still, it was the largest, most magnificent city the princesses of Anhalt-Zerbst had ever seen. All visitors agreed that St. Petersburg, already a busy port with a population approaching 100,000, would soon rank among the great cosmopolitan capitals of Europe.

The Zerbst princesses spent the next three days meeting whole battalions of officials, aristocrats, generals, ambassadors, and clergymen. Even elephants were brought to edify the German guests. They toured the city, heard elderly generals recount the deeds of their "creator" Peter the Great, and inspected the barracks of the Preobrazhenskii Guards from where Elizabeth had initiated her coup. Baron Mardefeld, the Prussian envoy, and the Marquis de la Chétardie, the French minister, bent Johanna's ear with tales of the political situation at the Russian court, execrating the malevolent intrigues of Vice-Chancellor Aleksei Petrovich Bestuzhev-Riumin to block her daughter's candidacy. They advised her to work with Brümmer, the Grand Duke's governor, and with Lestocq, the wily confidant of the Empress, against Bestuzhev's overweening influence. The flighty Johanna, certain that she understood Russian court politics, left for Moscow on the night of 5/6 Febru-

ary 1744 determined to secure Sophia's future by dislodging the odious Bestuzhev.<sup>20</sup>

Eager to reach Moscow by 9 February, the eve of the Grand Duke's birthday, the guests sped through the snow in a caravan of twenty or thirty sleighs travelling day and night, only pausing at roadside palaces for meals. Courtiers met them several times to report their progress and urge them onward; the Empress and the Grand Duke were counting the seconds till their arrival. Seventy kilometers from Moscow on the afternoon of 9 February, they were told what to wear at supper with the Empress that evening and sixteen horses were hitched to the sleigh for the final dash, which they covered in four hours, driving up to the Golovin Palace in Moscow's Foreign Suburb after seven P.M. Brümmer and Lestocq met the guests in the entryway and ushered them into their rooms, where Grand Duke Peter tenderly greeted them. Soon they were taken to the main reception hall to meet the Empress, who embraced and kissed mother and daughter in the warmly vigorous Russian manner. As instructed beforehand, Princess Johanna kissed Elizabeth's hand and effusively acknowledged her favor, generosity, and hospitality.<sup>21</sup>

Elizabeth cut an impressive figure before her would-be relatives. At thirty-five, Peter the Great's daughter carried her hefty torso majestically, her bulk enveloped in a huge hooped dress of silvery moire with gold braid; a black feather and diamonds in her hair set off her noble head and beautiful complexion. Goodnatured and highly emotional, she radiated maternal affection as she gazed intently at the young princess in whom she hoped to find a dynastic helpmate. Did she ever guess that this slim fourteen-year-old would surpass her own daring and vivacity in pursuit of power, pomp, and popularity in Russia and the world? Probably not, though they liked each other at once. Indeed, Princess Sophia had been advised by her father on leaving Zerbst that she must exert herself to please the Empress and the Grand Duke while adapting to the culture of her new homeland. For her part, Elizabeth was enraptured by daughter and mother alike. The day after their arrival she awarded them both the Order of St. Catherine, established in memory of her mother, in a splendid ceremony.<sup>22</sup>

At Moscow the two princesses received their own court: two gentlemen of the chamber, two officers of the chamber, four chamber pages, and a multitude of servants. "We are living like queens," Johanna crowed to her husband. "Everything is in lace, faced with gold, magnificent. When we go out, our going out is splendid." She decided that the Empress was on her side and plunged into intrigues aimed at undermining the Prussophobe Bestuzhev-Riumin. Meanwhile, her daughter charmed all and sundry, beginning with the Empress and the Grand Duke, and within ten days Johanna wrote her husband that their main purpose had been achieved. Sophia had won the Empress's enthusiastic approval and was already being prepared for her role as grand duchess; "c'est une affaire faite."<sup>23</sup>

Princess Sophia pleased the Grand Duke most of all, he confided to her right away, because she was his relative and someone with whom he could freely converse—in French, apparently, for he knew little more Russian than she did, which was none. At one of their first meetings he confessed his love



for a lady-in-waiting who had been banished from court the previous year when her mother, Madame Lopukhina, suffered torture and exile for involvement in a plot against the Empress. Since the lady in question could not be his bride now, he was resigned to pleasing his aunt by marrying Princess Sophia, who blushed at this "premature confidence." Nevertheless, she acknowledged Peter's assiduous attentions and his concern to help her gain her bearings in the unfamiliar environment. She quickly won his trust by listening attentively to his self-absorbed discourses without interruption.<sup>24</sup>

In fact, Peter and Sophia shared many of the same problems. The need to adapt rapidly to a strange country and culture, to cultivate the favor of an uncertain autocratrix who felt constantly threatened; the lack of parental guidance and emotional support, the intellectual deficiencies left by sporadic, solitary educational experiences, the passions and frivolities of the teenage years—all these difficulties bound the two cousins together. Besides, he loved to talk and to joke; she was willing to listen and laugh. They became good friends for a time.

### **Illness, Conversion, and Engagement**

Soon they had another experience in common: life-threatening illness. Peter Fedorovich, born on 10/21 February 1728, did not inherit his grandfather's robust physique; he remained pale, thin, and sickly throughout his life. Almost as soon as he came to Russia he endured a serious bout with measles. Three months before Princess Sophia's arrival Peter fainted with a fever and spent five weeks in bed; the doctors despaired that he would ever recover and confined him to his room for two months. During this period his sporadic lessons were discontinued. He lost interest in everything, even music, one of his lifelong amusements.<sup>25</sup>

By contrast, Princess Sophia had rarely been ill, never seriously. Consequently she vividly remembered the sickness she contracted in Moscow barely a month after her arrival in Russia. It was one of the reasons she disliked Moscow ever after. A pneumonic infection seized her on 6 March 1744 while the Empress was away on a pilgrimage. The high fever, delirium, and pain in the side persuaded her mother it was smallpox; so she vetoed blood-letting, which the doctors recommended, contending that her brother had died of smallpox in Russia only because he had been bled. While Princess Johanna argued with the physicians, her daughter moaned in pain. The Empress rushed back to Moscow at the news, found Sophia delirious, then cradled her head while a surgeon opened a vein. Over the next four weeks the Princess was bled frequently, sometimes four times a day, despite her mother's loud and tearful protests. An official announcement reported the malady as a "fever from flux," which had then turned into a "dangerous rheumatism with asthma."<sup>26</sup> Whatever the affliction was, young Sophia's strong constitution brought her through the ordeal, which did nothing to raise the low opinion of medical practitioners that she had imbibed from her childhood governess.

Her behavior during the crisis, however, only reinforced Elizabeth's admiration for the young Princess at the same time that it injured her mother's standing. Johanna was accused of neglecting her daughter, who later maintained that she had caught cold from rising early to study her Russian lessons. She also requested visits from Simon Todorskii, her instructor in Russian Orthodoxy, thereby reiterating her determination to become a Russian in speech and religion. Subsequently she claimed to have used the occasion for purposes of gathering information about the doings at court, as she pretended to doze while monitoring the conversations of the ladies assigned to her care. Considering that she had only just begun learning Russian, however, this seems an unlikely tale, although it may be psychologically and politically revealing: an outsider feeling her way in a new milieu. At any rate, the sickness brought her redoubled attention from the Empress and the Grand Duke, who gave her presents of jewelry—a monogram with diamonds and brooches worth 20,000 rubles (her calculating mother's estimate) and a watch studded with diamonds and rubies valued at 4,000 rubles.<sup>27</sup> These were not trifles for a penurious princess from Pomerania.

By April she began to walk around her bedchamber, but did not venture out until 20 April, when a dinner was served in her quarters for a company of courtiers. The next evening, her fifteenth birthday, she received congratulations in her quarters, attended a supper for forty persons, and appeared at her first ball, where the foreign ministers were also present. Though fast regaining her strength, she felt extremely sensitive about her appearance, wryly commenting decades later that "I suppose the company was not very taken with me. I had become thin as a skeleton; I had grown taller, but my face and all its features were drawn, my hair had fallen out, and on my face there was a mortal pallor. I myself saw that I could frighten people with my ugliness; I didn't even recognize myself. The Empress sent me a pot of rouge that day and ordered me to use it."<sup>28</sup>

On the mend as spring opened, Princess Sophia resumed her study of Russian with Vasilii Adodurov, a writer who also tutored the Grand Duke, her religious instruction with Simon Todorskii, and dancing lessons with the balletmaster Jean-Baptiste Lande. Presumably the latter included general instruction in poise and body movement, two of the Princess's skills that later elicited much favorable comment. Her excellent memory and eager application facilitated rapid progress in speaking Russian, a skill in which she soon surpassed the Grand Duke. Meanwhile, the Empress wrote Sophia's father requesting his blessing for his daughter's conversion and betrothal. To the teenaged couple, these were mere formalities; they already considered themselves engaged and looked ahead to the marriage ceremony.<sup>29</sup>

But Sophia's flighty mother nearly botched everything. Her intrigues against Bestuzhev-Riumin on behalf of France and Prussia came to light in intercepted dispatches from the Marquis de la Chétardie, dispatches that railed at Elizabeth for indolence and ignorance while revealing Princess Johanna as a veritable Prussian agent. The Empress, already cooling toward Sophia's mother because of the latter's lack of tenderness during her daughter's illness, flew into a rage at such crude political meddling, which Bestuzhev art-

fully exposed in decoded messages. As a result, on 6 June 1744 the Marquis de la Chétardie was ordered out of the country forthwith; he was escorted to the frontier. Elizabeth reduced Johanna to tears with a tongue-lashing that also threatened her expulsion. On 13 June, the Empress promoted Bestuzhev-Riumin to grand chancellor and signed a treaty with Saxony that reinforced the Austro-Russian alliance, implicitly directed against Prussia. Thenceforth the Prussian ambassador's position became untenable. Even so, none of these changes reflected on Princess Sophia personally. When her father's blessing arrived on 12 June, Grand Duke Peter jumped for joy and Elizabeth set the ceremonies for 28 and 29 June, the eve and day of her nephew's nameday. These particular dates would become memorable for the consorts in ways none could have foreseen.<sup>30</sup>

Princess Sophia's conversion to Orthodoxy took place on Wednesday, 28 June 1744, at the chapel of the Golovin Palace. Though weak from fasting in preparation, nervous and excited, she made the occasion a personal triumph. Her simple attire and unpowdered hair, adorned only with a white ribbon, contrasted strikingly with the splendid gowns, dress uniforms, and decorations of the courtiers. Before the bearded Archbishop of Novgorod, she repeated the profession of faith with a clear, confident voice in almost flawless Russian. The Empress and many others wept with joy. Elizabeth also chose the Princess's new Russian name, Catherine (*Ekaterina Alekseevna*), in honor of her own mother, Catherine I. To russify the name Sophia would have recalled the disgraceful memory of Peter the Great's half-sister who had conspired against his succession and died in prison. Perhaps the patronymic *Alekseevna* was selected simply because it sounded more Russian, for Elizabeth aspired to restore the Russian nationalism of Petrine times. In reward for Catherine's impressive performance, the Empress awarded her a diamond necklace and bodice ornament worth some 150,000 rubles. So exhausted was Catherine after the ceremony that she was excused from dinner that day. In the evening, however, she accompanied her ladies to the Grand Duke's apartments to congratulate him on his upcoming nameday with a gift of a hunting kit studded with diamonds and emeralds (undoubtedly provided by the Empress). To prepare for the next day's ceremonies, the consorts were driven incognito to the Kremlin, the spiritual and governmental center of the old capital and the historical center of the Great Russian nationality.<sup>31</sup>

Converting to Orthodoxy and assuming a Russian name signified Catherine's official membership in Russian society. Her public engagement the next day, solemnized in the Kremlin's Assumption Cathedral, confirmed her new political significance as the chosen vessel to continue the main branch of the Romanov dynasty. Princess Sophia of Anhalt-Zerbst had become Her Imperial Highness Grand Duchess Catherine of Russia. Her mother even believed, or affected to believe, that her daughter had officially entered the succession at the time of her betrothal, a curious claim later repeated by contemporaries and historians alike. Their contention held that Catherine enjoyed the right of succession in the event that Peter died without issue. The claim is false, albeit significant. Catherine later remembered that her mother's

proposal that she be titled heiress as well as grand duchess had been curtly rejected.<sup>32</sup>

There was no need for such a provision so long as Elizabeth followed her mother's rules of succession, which she had already done by proclaiming Grand Duke Peter as her successor. If Peter died without children during Elizabeth's lifetime, then the Empress could designate whomever she wished to succeed her, as her father's rule of succession had specified. In that situation, she could choose Catherine, it is true, but that would have contradicted the customary preference for blood relations, even if they were females. Besides, there was the remote possibility that Elizabeth might have children of her own from her secret,morganatic marriage to Aleksei Razumovskii, or she might legitimize the supposed offspring of some earlier liaison. In theory, Catherine's own legal claim to the Russian throne was extremely remote. In practice, however, all the rules of succession depended on the wish of the reigning sovereign, the ultimate source of all state law. The Empress could disinherit the Grand Duke, for example, if she decided he was unfit to rule. So, Princess Johanna's frivolous claim for her daughter's right of succession masked a larger truth: Catherine's future depended on winning Elizabeth's confidence and respect, independently of Grand Duke Peter, whose succession could not be assumed if only because of his uncertain health.

Catherine's new status entitled her to a small court of her own including 30,000 rubles annual allowance. The dutiful Grand Duchess immediately wrote her father offering to pay for her sick brother's treatments in Hamburg.<sup>33</sup> She also made gifts to the many new persons she met almost daily in the whirl of receptions, parties, balls, and celebrations of the peace with Sweden. This gift-giving soon put her in debt at the same time it raised her personal and political credit. Since Russian aristocrats did not worry about repaying their debts, neither did she. A grand duchess was expected to live opulently. The personnel of her court, handpicked by the Empress without consulting Catherine's mother, consisted of three gentlemen of the chamber and three young officers of the chamber: Count Zakhar Chernyshev, Count Peter Bestuzhev-Riumin, and Prince Alexander Golitsyn—all Russians who knew French and German—in addition to Countess Maria Rumiantseva, a lady-in-waiting and head mistress of the new court, and three maids of honor: two princesses Golitsyna and a mademoiselle Kosheleva. Countess Rumiantseva's high status, visits to the courts of Versailles and St. James, and long experience at court from Petrine times (she enjoyed hinting that her soldier son Peter was the product of Peter the Great's seed), offered many opportunities for the newcomer to learn Russian court lore and make new acquaintances. The Grand Duchess became especially close to Rumiantseva's daughters Praskov'ia and Anna, the future Countess Bruce and Madame Naryshkina. Within a year in age, the three became lifelong confidantes. At Catherine's behest Praskov'ia "often slept in my room and even in my bed and then the whole night went in romping, dancing, and absurdities; sometimes we only went to bed toward morning, we carried on such terrible pranks." They resembled a small sorority engaged in a perpetual pajama party.<sup>34</sup>

The new court facilitated Catherine's progress in adopting the culture and

customs of her new homeland. Furthermore, it reinforced her independence from her meddling mother, who persisted in petty intrigues that further compromised her unenviable reputation. During the Empress's pilgrimage to Kiev in August 1744, Peter and Catherine preceded the main party in two coaches with their courtiers and Princess Johanna, who complained incessantly about the youngsters' pranks and merriment. The Grand Duke's dislike for his prospective mother-in-law flared into hatred in consequence of her outburst when he accidentally upset her writing box. Catherine's own attempt to intercede only redirected Johanna's wrath to herself and reduced her to tears. Never very close, mother and daughter grew increasingly alienated.<sup>35</sup>

The journey to Kiev, a distance of some 750 kilometers by coach from Moscow, gave Catherine her first extended look at the country outside the two capitals. Although the roads were specially prepared for Elizabeth's huge entourage of 230 courtiers, Catherine could not help noticing the enormous expanses of the Russian Empire, the sparse settlement of the southern provinces, and the stark contrast between the humble peasants and the occasionally palatial estates of great aristocrats such as the Razumovskii brothers, whom Elizabeth had plucked from provincial obscurity to install in courtly splendor.<sup>36</sup>

On returning to Moscow, the young consorts plunged into another round of entertainments. A series of transvestite balls intrigued Catherine especially, for she shared Elizabeth's love of male attire, in which both looked dashing in comparison with the "comical" men: "these monstrous colossi who were very clumsy in handling their immense crinolines and kept butting into us." At one comedy, however, Count Lestocq approached Catherine after he had engaged in a heated discussion with the Empress who, he reported, was furious at the Grand Duchess's debts. Peter unctuously seconded his aunt's sentiments, and Princess Johanna declared acidly that she was washing her hands of her wilful, spendthrift daughter. These debts, Catherine explained in retrospect, stemmed from the paltry wardrobe she had brought to Russia—hence her constant need for luxurious clothes at the fashion-crazy Russian court—from her practice of cultivating friendships by presents (particularly gifts to the Grand Duke and her mother), and from Countess Rumiantseva's extravagance. "These presents were the result of a fixed principle," she declared later, "of a natural prodigality and of a contempt for riches upon which I have always looked only as a means to procure for myself anything I liked." They were all part of her campaign to please the Grand Duke, the Empress, and the nation—that is, those persons with influence at court.<sup>37</sup>

Catherine's first aim appeared to be succeeding reasonably well, although her relationship with Peter apparently included neither political conversations—they were forbidden to discuss state affairs—nor any physical intimacy. Indeed, she became incensed at her mother's accusation that she had once visited the Grand Duke's apartments on the pretext of taking a stroll in the garden.<sup>38</sup> One wonders whether she resented this "calumny" more because it was not true than because she wished it had been, if only to show her prying parent that she was a young woman who could act as she chose. Apparently she and Peter amused each other at first, but had few interests in

common except for a desire to gain some independence from the tiresome tutelage of boring adults. There must have been some mutual affection between the cousins, both struggling to find their way to adulthood in a strange society. Both gradually recognized that their individual difficulties could affect their common destiny.

Peter's poor health obviously threatened them both. On the trip to Kiev he suffered from an upset stomach, and after returning to Moscow a siege of pleurisy in October confined him to bed for several weeks. His fiancée attempted to lighten his boredom with notes in French.<sup>39</sup>

In November the Grand Duke came down with chickenpox, but his physician isolated him for fear that it was smallpox, measles, or spotted fever. Frightening precautions were taken, and only in mid-November did the Empress inform Catherine that he was recovering. On 26 November, at prayers of thanksgiving in the chapel of the Golovin Palace, the Grand Duchess wept with joy on catching sight of her consort. Two days later they danced together at a court masquerade. "The Grand Duke loved me passionately," Catherine recalled a decade later, "and everything taken together helped make me hope for a happy future." He was still quite weak in mid-December when the court left Moscow for Petersburg. Halfway there Peter became nauseated and feverish. Dr. Kau-Boerhaave thought he had overeaten, so the travellers pushed on. But at Khotilovo, 400 kilometers from Moscow, the fever prostrated the Grand Duke. The doctors kept Catherine away for fear it was smallpox, which appeared that very evening. Despite her protests, her mother took her away to Petersburg, where they arrived on 24 December. Elizabeth, whom they overtook near Novgorod, rushed back to nurse her nephew in person. This illness, if not his earlier bout with measles, may well have left young Peter permanently sterile, a condition pregnant with political complications for himself, his future wife, and Russia.<sup>40</sup>

In Petersburg, Catherine and Johanna received separate apartments near the Winter Palace, an arrangement that Elizabeth had dictated with a view toward separating daughter and mother. Catherine had been advised beforehand and was given her choice of accommodations. Johanna felt insulted, however, groused that her rooms were inferior, and upbraided Catherine for concealing her knowledge of the arrangement. Mother and daughter drifted further apart. Catherine subsequently blamed her mother for their estrangement, implying that Johanna's "great intimacy" with Ivan Betskoi displeased the Empress. Meanwhile, Elizabeth kept Catherine informed of the Grand Duke's condition via frequent letters. The Grand Duchess answered these with letters in Russian which captivated the Empress, who did not know that they were drafted in French, translated into Russian by her teacher Adodurov, and then recopied by Catherine. Only on 26 January 1745 did she see Peter again. She scarcely recognized his swollen, pockmarked features. "I stammered the customary good wishes on account of his recovery, but in fact he had become horribly ugly." Elizabeth tried to lift Catherine's spirits by showing her special solicitude. On 10 February, Peter's seventeenth birthday, the Empress dined alone with Catherine while seated on the throne, lauding both her youthful beauty and her Russian accent. She also appointed