

THE COURTS OF THE RUSSIAN EMPRESSES IN THE
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

by John T. Alexander

AFTER DECADES OF NEGLECT and disparagement, in the post-Soviet era there has been a resurgence of court history concerning Russia. Renewed vitality is reflected in a plethora of publications and in 'block-buster' international exhibitions, with elaborate catalogues concentrating on the Romanov dynasty and its more renowned representatives.¹ The reputation of Catherine the Great provides a case in point. Denigrated by Soviet scholarship for three quarters of a century, she has now regained favour in Russia. Her cultural patronage was celebrated by a large exhibition at the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg in 1993 (and earlier in Memphis, Los Angeles, and Dallas); by international scholarly conferences in 1996 on the bicentenary of her death; and by another big exhibition in Moscow at the State Tretyakov Gallery, linked to the city's 850th anniversary in 1997.² Russian scholars have published both serious and popular works about her and her predecessors, although these have not focused upon the court as an institution or cultural centre.³ Anglo-American

1 *Treasures of Imperial Russia: Catherine the Great from the State Hermitage Museum, Leningrad* (1990); *Ermittlich: Istoriia stroitel'stva i arkhitektura zdaniï*, ed. B. B. Piotrovskii, (Leningrad, 1991); *Doni Romanovykh*, ed. I. B. Kondrat'ev, comp. P. Kh. Grabel'skii and A. B. Mironis, 2nd ed. rev. (St Petersburg, 1992); *Treasures of the Czars from the State Museums of the Moscow Kremlin* (1995); *Deistvo i ìnnost' Rossiiskikh imperatorov* (Moscow, 1997); *Suisses en Russie de Pierre le Grand à Alexandre Ier; La construction de Saint-Petersbourg de Trezzini à Adamini, Château de Penthes Catalogue de l'Exposition, October 1996–February 1997* (Coppet, 1996–7); *Catharina, de keizerin en de kunsten*, ed. J. Vreze (Zwolle, 1997); *Treasures of the Tsar: Court Culture of Peter the Great from the Kremlin, Museum Boyjans-van Buningen Rotterdam, December 1995–February 1996* (Rotterdam, 1995); *Tsariska kostiumy ot Petra I do Nikolaia II, sobranieia Ermitazha Sankt-Peterburg, musée d'art et d'histoire, Genève* (St Petersburg and Geneva, 1998); F. Grimberg, *Dinastia romanovykh: zagadki, Versii, problemy* (Moscow, 1996); *Dinastia Romanovykh v izobrazitel'nom iskusstve* (Moscow, 1993); *Romanovy: Istoriicheskie portrety*, ed. A. N. Sakharov, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1998); these 'historical portraits' by different historians first appeared in the monthly journal *Voprosy istorii* and a selection aimed at the academic market was translated in *The Emperors and Empresses of Russia: Rediscovering the Romanovs*, ed. D. J. Raleigh, comp. A. A. Iskenderov (Armonk, NY, 1996)

2 The conference programme, listing more than a hundred papers (many not delivered) and abstracts, was entitled *Ekaterina Velikaia: epokha Rossiiskoi istorii* (St Petersburg, 1996). This conference in St Petersburg in August 1996 was preceded by another in March 1993, closely related to Catherine: on the 250th anniversary of the birth of Princess Dashkova (1743–1810), *Ekaterina Romanovna Dashkova: issledovanie i materialy* (St Petersburg, 1996); *Ekaterina Velikaia i Moskva: katalog vystavki 850-letniï posviashchaetsia iun-sentiabr' 1997*, Gosudarstvennaia Tretyakovskaia galeria (Moscow, 1997).

3 A. B. Kamenskii, *Pod seniu Ekateriny? Vtoraia polovina XVIII veka* (St Petersburg, 1992) and by the same author, *Zhizn' i sud'ba imperatritsy Ekateriny Velikoi* (Moscow, 1997), and *The Russian Empire in the Eighteenth Century: Searching for a Place in the World*, ed. and trans. D. Griffiths (Armonk, 1997). An early sign of new historiographical currents was E. V. Anisimov, *Rossia v seredine XVIII veka: bor'ba za nasledie Petra* (Moscow, 1986), now available in English as E. V. Anisimov, *Empress Elizabeth: Her Reign and Her Russia, 1741–1761*, trans. J. T. Alexander (Gulf Breeze, 1995), his even more revisionist *Rossia bez Petra* (St Petersburg, 1994), and his popular treatment, *Zhenshchiny na Rossiiskom prestole* (St Petersburg, 1997). Another popular survey is by N. I. Pavlenko, *Strasti u trona: istoriia dvortsykh perevatov* (Moscow, 1996), a work still being serialized in the glossy monthly historical journal *Rodina*, which has printed many small articles on court history over the past few years, e.g., O. Zakharova, 'Bal epokhi Petra Velikogo', *Rodina* 1 (1995), 117–19.

scholarship on court-related themes has also blossomed with splendidly illustrated works by Brumfield, Wortman, Roosevelt, Cracraft, Shvidkovsky, Cross, and Hughes that advance synthesizing interpretations of the international scholarly literature.⁴ New primary sources have come into print too.⁵ This new scholarship bids fair to reclaim the achievements of prerevolutionary Russian Imperial historiography, and to move beyond the prejudiced, simplistic schemata advanced by liberal and populist, as well as Soviet, historians. Indeed, Russian court historiography has been so neglected that there are still no standard synthetic treatments.

Russian scholarship generally falls into two unequal parts: broad legal-structural surveys based on official documentation like Volkov's handbook of 1900; or colourful accounts of particular episodes or personalities, as in the multiple works by M. I. Semevskii (1837–92), many of which have been recently reprinted, and selections from the journal *Russkaia starina* with more than 500 issues in 1870–1918.⁶

Romanov court history may be approached on several levels, for the imperial court may be defined in different ways. Like many early modern courts, it proves to be an 'elusive' and 'protean' institution.⁷ Building on Wortman's work, Hughes gives a solid introduction to the Petrine court in the European context, underlining the 'dualism' of its evolving combination of European norms and Russian customs, the secular and the sacred, solemn ceremony and masquerade, the new calendar of official holidays and celebrations, barracks behaviour and cultural refinement, including a penetrating inquiry into Peter's notorious 'All Drunken Assembly and Mock Court'.⁸ She makes excellent use of the fascinating diary of Friedrich Wilhelm von Bergholz to convey some sense of the court's everyday life; while admitting the problem of elucidating its interior life in the absence of detailed accounts by native Russian observers.

In the personal and biographical sense the court comprised the ruler, the ruling family as a whole, and their households and immediate entourages. Inclusive

language is advisable here because of the sudden emergence of women rulers, the 'Russian matriarchate' that almost monopolized the throne from 1725 to 1796.⁹ This era is seen as a foundation for the 'Olympian Scenarios' explored in Wortman's enticingly-titled chapters.¹⁰ Certainly there was inherent tension in the concept of autocracy (absolute monocratic power) wielded by females — traditionally the gentler sex — in the aftermath of Peter the Great's rigorous rule. In my own research into 'Amazon' images as applied to the Russian empress-autocratrixes, I have been struck by the imprecise language and confused political concepts employed by Wortman and, more recently, by Whittaker and Wirtschafter in discussing notions of autocracy and social groupings.¹¹ Citing Isabel de Madariaga's seminal study, Whittaker acknowledges Russians' vague usage of the terms autocracy and monarchy, but she herself employs autocracy and *the* autocracy interchangeably (notice how differently *the* monarchy resonates), and she endorses the supposedly common enlightenment precept that denied any significant difference between male and female rulers.¹² By contrast, the Russian aristocratic writer, historian, and political thinker Nikolai Karamzin (1766–1826) distinguished Catherine the Great from Peter the Great in just this regard: 'The main achievement of this unforgettable queen was to soften autocracy without emasculating it. Her European womanly ways eschewed Petrine brutality and coercion, elevated Russian national self-esteem, and hence 'cleansed autocracy from the stain of tyranny'.¹³ It is now well established that Catherine II did not in practice consider her authority absolute, that she nurtured reformist ideas of a 'constitutionalist' bent till the last years of her long reign (1762–96), and that she ruled with minimal coercion.¹⁴ This question of autocracy in Russia is linked to broader controversies about absolutism and gender in early modern Europe.¹⁵

The Romanov family's female representatives proliferated from the mid-seventeenth century, as Tsar Aleksei during his long reign (1645–76) sired a total

9 N. Pushkareva, *Women in Russian History: From the Tenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. and trans. E. Levin (Armonk, 1997), pp. 155–6.

10 Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, pp. 84–165.

11 C. H. Whittaker, 'The Reforming Tsar: The Redefinition of Autocratic Duty in Eighteenth-Century Russia', *Slavic Review* 51 (1992), 77–98; E. R. Dashkova i ee ideia samoderzhavii, in *Ekaterina Romanovna Dashkova*, pp. 64–70; C. H. Whittaker, 'The Idea of Autocracy among Eighteenth-Century Russian Historians', in *Imperial Russia: New Histories for the Empire*, ed. J. Burbank and D. L. Ransel (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1998), pp. 32–59; E. K. Wirtschafter, *Social Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, 1997), pp. 4–9. In Russian the word tsar is always masculine, so the term 'reforming tsar' sits awkwardly upon the women rulers who succeeded Peter the Great.

12 Isabel de Madariaga, 'Autocracy and Sovereignty', *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 16 (1982), 369–87; Whittaker, 'Idea of Autocracy', pp. 36, 57 n. 69.

13 *Karamzin's Memoir on Ancient and Modern Russia*, ed. and trans. Richard Pipes (Cambridge, MA, 1959), pp. 130–1.

14 I. de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (New Haven, 1981), pp. xi, 43, 153, 559–60, 306–7, 580, 586–7; and the same author's shorter and updated treatment, *Catherine the Great: A Short History* (New Haven, 1990), pp. 9, 217–18; O. A. Omel'chenko, 'Zakonnata monarchiia' Ekateriny II (Moscow, 1993), esp. pp. 312–82 on the late reforms, where this author employs many unpublished drafts and writings.

15 J. Goody, 'Gender in Comparison', *Journal of Early Modern History* 2 (May 1998), 181–91; and in the same journal, W. Schmale, 'The Future of "Absolutism" in Historiography: Recent Tendencies', pp. 191–202.

4 W. C. Brumfield, *A History of Russian Architecture* (Cambridge, 1993); R. S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy. I: From Peter the Great to the death of Nicholas I* (Princeton, 1995); P. Roosevelt, *Life on the Russian Country Estate: A Social and Cultural History* (New Haven, 1995); D. Shvidkovsky, *The Empress & the Architect: British Architecture and Gardens at the Court of Catherine the Great* (New Haven, 1996); J. Cracraft, *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Imagery* (Chicago, 1997); A. G. Cross, 'By the Banks of the Neva': *Chapters from the Lives and Careers of the British in Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Cambridge, 1997); L. Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great* (New Haven and London, 1998).

5 *Ekaterina II i G. A. Potemkin: Lichnaia perepiska 1769–1791*, ed. V. S. Lopatin (Moscow, 1997); *An English Lady at the Court of Catherine the Great: The Journal of Baroness Elizabeth Dimsdale, 1781*, ed. A. G. Cross (Cambridge, 1989); *Engraved in the Memory: James Walker, Engraver to the Empress Catherine the Great, and His Russian Anecdotes*, ed. A. G. Cross (Oxford and Providence, 1993).

6 N. E. Volkov, *Dvor russkikh imperatorov v ego proshlom i nastoiashchem* (St Petersburg, 1900); M. I. Semevskii, *Tsaritsa Praskov'ia 1664–1723* (reprint, Leningrad, 1991), pp. iii–xii, appendix a list of the author's publications for 1856–86; A. V. Kurchatnikov, *Russkaia Starina: Putevoditel' po XVII veku* (Moscow and St Petersburg, 1996).

7 R. J. W. Evans, 'The Court: A Protean Institution and an Elusive Subject', in *Princes, Patronage, and the Nobility: The Court at the Beginning of the Modern Era c.1450–1650*, ed. Ronald G. Asch and Adolf M. Birke (1991), pp. 481–91.

8 Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great*, ch. 6 'Peter's People', esp. v; 'Women: from boiaryni to damy', ch. 7 'St Petersburg and the Arts', ch. 8 'The Petrine Court', and ch. 12 'Family Factors'.

of sixteen children: thirteen with Maria Miloslavskaja (1626?–69) and three with Natalia Naryshkina (1651–94). Ten of these offspring were females, five of whom survived into the 1700s and yet, in accordance with recent Muscovite custom, none married. Only three males reached adulthood (Fedor died in 1682 at the age of twenty without issue) and just one (Peter I, 1672–1725) left any male heir among some fifteen offspring from two marriages — his grandson, Peter Alekseevich or Peter II (1715–30). Moreover, Peter I's half-brother Ivan (1666–96) fathered five daughters. Three lived into adulthood. All three broke tradition by marrying, two entering European princely houses. Anna Ivanovna (1693–1740), who lost her husband within weeks of marriage, reigned as dowager duchess of Courland from 1710 until her surprise selection as empress of Russia in 1730. Ekaterina Ivanovna (1692–1733) — 'Svet-Katiushka' to her doting mother — lived briefly in Mecklenburg after her marriage in 1716, before returning to Russia with her daughter, the future Anna Leopoldovna (1718–46). The third daughter, sickly from youth, married a senator and general, Ivan Dmitriev-Mamonov, who predeceased his wife in 1730.¹⁶ The number of widows among Russian princesses in the eighteenth century is striking. Three of the four empresses who followed Peter the Great were widows: Catherine I, Anna Ivanovna, and Catherine II. Maybe the post-Petrine period should be termed the Waltz of the Merry Widows?

Obviously a substantial infrastructure was necessary to house and feed the ruling family and to minister to its familial, religious, and dynastic needs. When the family's ruling and ceremonial functions are added, the supporting structures and personnel expanded dramatically. A roster of court personnel in 1730 listed 625 persons with annual salaries of 83,571 roubles. This was minuscule compared to the 1600 court personnel employed by the Romanovs in 1914 or the more than two thousand living at the Winter Palace in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁷ Expenditure on the court, which rose about sixfold during Catherine the Great's reign (uncorrected for inflation), totalled 10.6 million roubles or 13.4 percent of total state spending of 79.1 million roubles in 1795.¹⁸

As an outgrowth of the Tsar's household, the court was both a public institution and the setting for the ruling family's private life — 'private' in a fishbowl sense, of course. From 1730 if not before, all court personnel had to swear an oath on the Bible and cross, with signatures, to keep secret everything seen and heard at court, and to report all threats to the sovereign or imperial service.¹⁹ Naturally, gossip and speculation sought to breach the wall of silence. At the same time the official court heralds' journal began to be compiled in expanded form in Petrine times, and gradually enlarged its coverage of public functions, becoming unusually detailed under Catherine II.

16 Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great*, p. xxi; Semievskii, *Tsaritsa Praskov'ia*, pp. 48–52, 77, 212–13.

17 I. F. Shepelev, *Tituly, mundiry, ordena v Rossiiskoi imperii* (Leningrad, 1991), pp. 159, 162.

18 A. Kahan, *The Plow, the Hammer, and the Knout: An Economic History of Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Chicago, 1985), p. 345.

19 *Opisanie vysochaishikh povolenii po pridvornomu vedomstvu 1723–1730* (St Petersburg, 1888), pp. 85–6.

Though selective in coverage, this daily journal contains much fascinating information. Why was it compiled? No official rationale was offered. Presumably it was to record the details of increasingly elaborate ceremonies for later use, and to provide raw material for historical works memorializing the accomplishments of a court avid to advertise its status as an ascendant European Power. It was not always compiled continuously. For about two-thirds of the brief reign of Peter III in 1761–2, for example, no daily court record can be found — a puzzling loss, amid incipient palace 'revolution', that recalls the gaps in the Nixon Watergate tapes.

The totals for court personnel in 1730 hint that the imperial court in its broadest sense loomed so large as almost to defy definition. This very fact induced Sir George Macartney to deflate Russian pretensions: 'The style of the present sovereign is Empress and Autocratix of all the Russias, &c.,' he wrote in the 1767. 'This title is affected on every occasion to a most ridiculous excess, insomuch that the Russians, whether in writing or speaking, join the word imperial to every thing indifferently that has the smallest relation to the court — such as imperial palace, imperial stables, imperial ministry, imperial footmen ... &c. In short, no upstart was ever so intoxicated with undeserved honors as the court of Russia is with the epithet imperial.'²⁰

St Petersburg, the new capital and primary seat of the court from about 1712, soon blossomed into a pre-eminently European-type Residenzstadt, with monumental palaces and buildings well shown by Brumfield's marvellous photographs. But Moscow, the old capital and the empire's largest city, retained many court, church, and other central institutions. Rulers invariably spent time in both capitals — Russia's 'two hearts' Wortman calls them — which also housed many imperial palaces, gardens, and estates.²¹ Of course, in the eighteenth century diplomats routinely spoke of the Court of Saint Petersburg as a shorthand for the imperial Russian government just as we often speak of Washington or Whitehall as proxies for the the American and British governments.

From Petrine times the court encompassed a series of institutions and offices in the highly centralized Russian administration. The German or barely russified names of these offices and of the main court posts originated in Petrine times as part of the flood of foreign terms imported into Russia.²² Thus the 1730 listing began with Ober-Gofmeister, Ober-Kamerger, Gofmarshal, Kamergeri (Chamberlains), Kamer-lunkery (Gentlemen of the Bedchamber), Freiliny (Maids of Honour), and also included karlitsy and karly (female and male dwarves), Arapy (Arabs or Africans), several kitchen ranks — e.g., Zil'berdiner, Kellermeister, Kof-Shenk, Konfekturir, Tafel'dekery — pages and musicians, etc.²³

20 G. Macartney, *An Account of Russia MDCCCLXVII* (London, 1768) [Saul ms], p. 60.

21 R. S. Wortman, 'Moscow and Petersburg: The Problem of Political Center in Tsarist Russia, 1881–1914,' in *Rites of Power: Symbolism and Politics since the Middle Ages*, ed. Sean Wilentz (Philadelphia, 1985), pp. 244–71.

22 S. M. Troitskii, *Russkii absolutizm i dvorianstvo v XVIII v.: formirovanie biurokratii* (Moscow, 1974), p. 66; L. E. Shepelev, 'Prídvornnye chiny i zvaniia v dorevolutsionnoi Rossii v sviazi s ikh znacheniem dlia istoricheskikh issledovanii', *Vspomogatel'nye istoricheskie distsipliny* 8 (Leningrad, 1976), 153–4.

23 *Opisanie*, pp. 87–90.

Oddly, this listing omitted the post of stats-dama or lady in waiting — one of the most prestigious offices for married women, usually wives of prominent statesmen. (Only one case is known of an unmarried stats-dama: M. S. Gendrikova, a relative of the late Catherine I.)²⁴ On this point Catherine II late in life twitted her longtime freilina Protasova: 'Having arrived at a more than reasonable age without finding a husband, her majesty presented her with her portrait with the title "maid in waiting."²⁵ There was initial confusion about the names and interrelationships of the various women's court ranks, but by mid-century they had been reduced to five main categories: ober-gofmeisterina, gof-meisterina, stats-dama, kamer-freilina, and freilina. All were supposed to be addressed as *vashe vysokoprevoshkoditel'stvo* ('Your Excellency').²⁶ The staffing regulations of 1796 authorized twelve stats-damy and twelve freiliny. Neither post had specific duties; their bearers were not even obliged to attend court ceremonies.²⁷ Freiliny assigned to the empress were considered senior to those assigned to grand duchesses. The main reward for freiliny, many of whom lived at court,²⁸ was a court-provided dowry upon marriage, which sometimes took place at court.²⁸ Though courtiers dressed richly, as in France or Austria there was no standard court uniform until the nineteenth century.²⁹ From 1762 kamergery carried golden keys as a symbol of their office, while under Anna Ivanovna only freiliny were permitted to wear their hair in curls.³⁰ If Catherine II struggled to russify court attire in the 1780s and to discourage her women courtiers from following 'irrational fashions', Paul I immediately sought to undo this by demanding full European court dress at his coronation in March 1797.³¹

Both Russian monarchs and nobles liked to allude to foreign influences. Peter I 'prides himself in a Prussian original', English envoy Whitworth reported. 'He speaks High-Dutch pretty readily, which is now growing the court language.'³² Such reports gave rise to the myth that Peter intended to make Dutch the official language.³³ Even the barely literate Alexander Meshikov, however, spoke and understood German and spent some time abroad.³⁴ A mixture of languages was used at court till late in the century, when French became more prominent along with Russian. The coronations of Anna Ivanovna in 1730, Elizabeth in 1742, and Catherine II in 1762 were all lauded in elaborate printed and illustrated descriptions in both Russian and German.³⁵

24 Shepelev, *Žitijy*, p. 178.

25 V. Nikolaevna Golovina, *Memoirs of Countess Goltovine, a Lady at the Court of Catherine II*, trans. G. M. Fox-Davies (1910), p. 44.

26 Shepelev, *Žitijy*, p. 178.

27 Shepelev, *Žitijy*, pp. 176–7.

28 Shepelev, *Žitijy*, p. 177.

29 Volkov, *Dvor russkikh imperatorov*, pp. 43–4.

30 Shepelev, *Žitijy*, p. 189.

31 Nikolaevna Golovina, *Memoirs of Countess Goltovine*, p. 141.

32 C. Whitworth, *An Account of Russia as It was in the Year 1710* (Strawberry Hill, 1758), pp. 31, 60.

33 N. V. Riabonovskiy, *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought* (New York, 1985), p. 4.

34 Petr Veliki: *Vospominaniia, dnevnikovye zapisi, amekdoty*, ed. E. V. Anisimov (Paris, London and Moscow, 1993), pp. 99–100.

35 Wortman, *Scenarials of Power*, pp. 91–106, 118–19; M. A. Alekseeva, 'Izobrazheniia koronatsionnykh i pogrebnykh isserenonii XVIII v. Izdannye i neizdannye al'bomy', *Vspomogatel'nye istoricheskie dissipliny* 26 (St Petersburg, 1998), 232–40.

In political terms the court was identified, above all, with individual sovereigns with supposedly unbounded personal authority. 'The Government is absolute in the last degree', explained Whitworth, 'not bound up by any law or custom, but depending on the breath of the Prince, by which the lives and fortunes of all the subjects are decided.'³⁶ This was a venerable foreign contention. In the 1760s Macartney insisted that 'the government has always been despotic, is now so, and is likely to continue so... but to despotism Russia owes her greatness and dominion, so that if ever the monarchy becomes more limited she will lose her power and strength in proportion as she advances in moral virtues and civil improvement.'³⁷

In fact, supreme authority proved to be extraordinarily fragile in 'the era of palace revolutions', which used to be standard Soviet terminology for the period 1725–1801.³⁸ But dynastic disarray and coups may be dated even earlier, from Peter I's sudden enthronement and dethronement in 1682 to Paul I's equally sudden assassination in 1801. There were several lesser court scandals. These include the death under torture of tsarevich Aleksei Petrovich in 1718; the execution of Kamer-freilina Maria Hamilton for abortion and infanticide in 1719; the dowager tsaritsa Praskovia Fedorovna's beating and setting afire a courtier for suspected theft and disloyalty in 1722; the execution of chamberlain Villim Mons for corruption and suspected adultery with the empress in 1724.³⁹ Other political surprises included Catherine I's enthronement in 1725; Alexander Meshikov's rise and fall in 1725–7; Peter II's death from smallpox in January 1730 — after he and his bride-to-be stood out on the ice of the Moskva River for four hours on one of the coldest days of the year during the Epiphany ceremony;⁴⁰ Anna Ivanovna's selection for the throne in 1730 amid constitutional crisis and elite dissension; the rise and fall of the Brunswick branch of the imperial family in 1740–1.

There were more political trials and scandals during Elizabeth's reign, the glorious reign of Peter III — 186 days in 1761–2 — and the turbulent start of Catherine II's long tenure. All these events spawned popular images of the Romanov court as a place of intrigues, impostures, and life and death struggles for political survival. These images became ingrained in Russian history and lore long before the execution of the last ruling Romanovs lent an aura of martyrdom to the dynasty.

The modern Russian court gradually took shape around Peter's female relations and, most of all, around the woman who became his second wife, the foreign-born and illiterate Catherine I (1684?–1727).⁴¹ Her robust physique is confirmed by portraits and by the parade dress in the Topka exhibition decorated with an Amazon motif. Whitworth praised her as the famous Czarina and 'this memorable

36 Whitworth, *An Account*, p. 48.

37 Macartney, *Account*, p. 43.

38 *Dvorskoye perevoroty v Rossii 1725–1825* (Rostov/Don, 1998); this book had earlier appeared under the title *So shpagovoi i jakielem* (With Sword and Torch).

39 Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great*, pp. 130, 202, 372–3; Semevskii, *Tsaritsa Praskovia*, pp. 142–94.

40 [Jane, Lady Rondeau], *Letters from a Lady, Who Resided some Years in Russia, to Her Friend in England, with Historical Notes* (1775), p. 28.

41 A more detailed account of the Petrine court under Catherine I is in my essay forthcoming in a collection of conference papers edited by Lindsey Hughes for the School of Slavonic and East European Studies.

Woman,⁴² When the Holsteiner Bassevich encountered Catherine at Riga in the spring of 1721 he found her the focus of a 'brilliant' and numerous court, mostly German in culture.⁴³

Catherine also shared Peter's proclivity for strong drink, music, and dancing. Bassevich lauded the Russians' grace in dancing, and Bergholtz repeatedly marveled at how indefatigably they danced half the night.⁴⁴ A recent Russian commentator has attributed Catherine's immense influence on her consort to extra-sensory powers.⁴⁵ Peter personally crowned Catherine as empress in Moscow in May 1724, and although he may not have intended her to succeed him, her reign was made possible by his alteration of the law of succession, which led directly to the long era of independent female rule.

Because female reigns were new to Russia, they were believed to be unstable and were subjected to constant disparagement. An Ottoman envoy to St Petersburg in the 1730s, when asked by Empress Anna Ivanovna what most surprised him about Russian customs, remarked 'seeing a woman on the throne'.⁴⁶ The dynastic dilemma was complicated by the aftermath of Peter's marital invasion of Europe, beginning in 1710, when he married his son Aleksei to a German princess, and two nieces and one daughter to the rulers of Mecklenburg, Courland, and Holstein. His 'very handsome' daughter Elizabeth (1709–61) was raised for marriage to a European ruler and spoke German, French, and Italian but had to settle for the Russian crown.⁴⁷ Counting the children from these marriages there were soon several potential claimants to the throne outside Russia.

The newly Europeanized court resulted in greater public visibility, personal freedom and mobility, and broader ceremonial roles for elite women. Hardly any significant Petrine public celebration was staged without the prominent participation of women, even at such seemingly male and military occasions as the launching of warships and the annual commemorations of the Russian victories at Poltava and Hangö. Masquerades also became popular, as attested by one that lasted a week, staged at the coffeehouse *Chetyre Frigaty* (Four Frigates) in St Petersburg in 1723, with fifty-eight different groups of costumed revelers.⁴⁸

On the thirty-ninth anniversary of Peter's coronation in Petersburg on 25 June 1721 Bergholtz rapturously described Catherine's court in the Summer Garden, concluding that 'the tsaritsa's court is as fine and brilliant as almost all the German courts'.⁴⁹ Similar sentiments were expressed by French prisoners of war in St Petersburg in the summer of 1734 amid the celebrations of the Russian capture of Danzig. One quoted by Lady Rondeau 'expressed great surprise at the magnificence of this court, and its politeness. And indeed they are treated with

great civility, have the court coaches to carry them about the town, and are shewn everything generally shewn to strangers'.⁵⁰

During her own reign Catherine I instituted regular evening receptions or court days, 'kurdakhi' [i.e. Kurtagen/Kurtagi].⁵¹ Under Anna Ivanovna the institution was described as follows: 'Our drawing-room is more like an assembly; there is a circle in form, for about half an hour; then the czarina and the princesses make their party at cards, and every body that pleases make their own party.⁵² Rondeau testified to the relaxed atmosphere and the empress's ability to maintain her dignity while dissipating 'all awe' and exhibiting 'so much humanity in one who has such despotic power'.⁵³ Gradually growing in size, these informal receptions became a fixture at the imperial Russian court.⁵⁴

The court played a prominent part in the annual round of holidays and festivities celebrated by church and state. The Epiphany ceremony, or Blessing of the Waters on 6 January, was staged on the Moskva in front of the Kremlin and in St Petersburg in front of the Winter Palace, which eventually included a permanent 'Jordan Stairway' leading down to the Neva. It was both a religious holiday and one celebrated by the monarch, the court, and the armed forces. Bergholtz observed in Moscow on 6 January 1722 that it began with bellringing throughout the metropolis from midnight and climaxed with the emperor leading 14,000 troops onto the ice as backdrop for hundreds of clergy to bless the waters before an immense throng, some of whom, to Bergholtz's amazement, even swam in the icy waters amid a snowstorm.⁵⁵ The Russian court became famed for its feasts, musical and theatrical entertainments and fireworks displays.

Among the appendages of the court was the first public zoo in Russia, founded by Peter I in the Summer Garden in 1713 with exotic animals including an elephant, a lion, and birds sent by the shah of Persia. The elephant was a particular attraction and was fed a rich daily diet topped off by a bucket of common wine, whereas the birds were given a bottle of Rhine wine (presumably shared by their keepers, 'po-bratski'). Polar bears were added later, but the severe climate proved fatal to most of the animals, the elephant dying in 1717 and the lion in 1722.⁵⁶

The empresses were also interested in nature for recreation and 'curiosity'. Anna Ivanovna, Elizabeth, and Catherine II were all avid huntresses. Anna Ivanovna kept hundreds of animals and birds, collected firearms, and often hunted in the palace grounds — witness her garden carriage in the Topeka exhibition — and joined in target practice with firearms and bows and arrows. A Persian embassy arrived in 1741 with fourteen elephants, which were given special quarters and a place to bathe near the Fontanka River. More than once they broke out of their quarters, one even crossing the river to Vasil'evskii Ostrov and damaging several buildings.⁵⁷

50 Rondeau, *Letters*, pp. 102–3.

51 V. I. Buganov, 'Ekaterina I', *Voprosy istorii* 11 (1994), p. 48.

52 Rondeau, *Letters*, p. 75.

53 Rondeau, *Letters*, p. 89.

54 Nikolaevna Golovina, *Memoirs of Countess Golovine*, p. 134.

55 'Dnevnik kamer-iunkera F. V. Berkhof'tsa', II, pp. 12–19.

56 N. I. Pavlenko, *Pietusy gvezda Petrova*, 4th ed. (Moscow, 1994), pp. 283–4.

57 *Treasures of the Czars*, p. 187; E. P. Karnovich, 'Ocherki russkago pridvornogo byta v XV–III stol'tii', *Istoricheskit vestnik* 5 (1881), 249–52, 258–9, 493–6.

42 Whitworth, *An Account*, pp. xx–xxi.

43 Anisimov, ed., *Petr Velikii*, p. 162.

44 Anisimov, ed., *Petr Velikii*, pp. 162–4.

45 V. S. Belavskii, 'Zolushka na trone Rossi'. *Na rossiiskom prestole 1725–1796: monarkhii Rossii posle Petra Velikogo* (Moscow, 1993), p. 14.

46 Rondeau, *Letters*, p. 83.

47 Rondeau, *Letters*, p. 73.

48 'Dnevnik kamer-iunkera F. V. Berkhof'tsa', trans. E. A. Anmon, appendices to *Russkii arkhiv* (Moscow, 1902–3) III, pp. 188–99.

49 'Dnevnik kamer-iunkera F. V. Berkhof'tsa', I, p. 178.

The imperial stables was one of the largest departments of the court, with more than 400 personnel and an annual budget in 1739 of 100,000 roubles. Headed by an Ober-shtalmeister and a shtalmeister, it was also assigned six *reit-pazhi* (pages) from the nobility to study riding and training horses with the *beretory* (riding-masters) in the *manezh* (riding-school). These young men were also supposed to study foreign languages, arithmetic, geography, and other sciences and exercises. When trained they might be rewarded by promotion to high ranks in the court stables or in the cavalry.⁵⁸

Hundreds of horses were assigned to the court: 379 and nine camels in March 1741. Scores of equipages were available: many kinds of carriages, sleighs, specialized vehicles such as a *iakhtivagen* and small calashes (*koliasochki*), and summer liners. A special child's carriage was made for Ivan VI in 1741, with crimson upholstery and two rows of gold braid and his monogram painted in gold on the exterior.⁵⁹

To conclude, the Romanov court in the eighteenth century rapidly evolved into an avowedly European institution providing an impressive backdrop for a majestic monarchy that spared no effort to win respect from its European peers and won acclaim from European visitors for refinement and luxury, all in the service of female sovereigns who commanded fear as well as respect. 'The existence of the Amazons appeared to me no longer a fable, after I had seen the Russian women,' reported Masson after ten years in Russia: 'Had the succession of empresses continued, we might perhaps have seen that nation of female warriors locally produced, and in the same clime where they formerly flourished. Great energy is still observable in the women of the Slavonian nations, [of] which their history furnishes many proofs. That feminine activity, which love, tenderness, and domestic cares absorb in other countries, the women of the north, who are born with more cold and robust constitutions, employ in search of sway and in political intrigue. They frequently experience a physical necessity of inspiring love, but their hearts seldom feel a want of returning it.'⁶⁰

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58 Karnovich, 'Ocherki pridvornago byta', pp. 503-5.

59 Karnovich, 'Ocherki pridvornago byta', pp. 505-6.

60 Quoted by Judith Vowles, 'Marriage à la russe', in *Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture*, ed. J. T. Costlow, S. Sandler, and J. Vowles (Stanford, 1993), p. 56.