

Russia's Empress-Navigator: Transforming Modes of Monarchy During the Reign of Anna Ivanovna, 1730-1740

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2019 Winner of the James Madison Award for Excellence in Historical Scholarship

The eighteenth century was a markedly volatile period in the history of Russia, seeing its development and international emergence as a European-styled empire. In narratives of this time of change, historians tend to view the century in two parts: the reign of Peter I (r. 1682-1725), who purportedly spurred Russia into modernization, and Catherine II (r. 1762-96), the German princess-turned-empress who presided over the culmination of Russia's transformation. Yet, dismissal of nearly forty years of Russia's history does a severe disservice to the sovereigns and governments that formed the process of change. Recently, Catherine Evtuhov turned her attention to investigating Russia under the rule of Elizabeth Petrovna (r. 1741-62), bolstering the conversation with a greater perspective of one of these "forgotten reigns," but Elizabeth owed much to her post-Petrine predecessors. Specifically, Empress Anna Ivanovna (r. 1730-40) remains one of the most overlooked and underappreciated sovereigns of the interim between the "Greats."¹

Anna Ivanovna was born on February 7, 1693, the daughter of Praskovia Saltykova and Ivan V Alekseyvich (r. 1682-96), the son of Tsar Aleksey Mikhailovich (r. 1645-1676). When Anna was

¹ Anna's patronymic is also transliterated as Anna Ioannovna. I elected to use "Ivanovna" to closer resemble modern Russian. Lindsey Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998); Catherine Evtuhov's upcoming book is *Russia in the Age of Elizabeth (1741-61)*.

born, her father reigned as co-tsar alongside his half-brother, Peter I. When Ivan V died in 1696, Anna and her family passed into the care of Peter and his court. Due to her mother's amicable relations with the tsar, so Anna and her sisters lived in comfort. Married to Frederick William, the Duke of Courland, part of modern-day Latvia, Anna remained regent of the duchy after her husband's death in 1711. Upon the death of Peter II (r. 1727-30), Anna was selected as the next empress by the Supreme Privy Council, over her other sisters, Catherine and Praskovya, and the two daughters of Peter I and Catherine I (r. 1725-27), Anna Petrovna and Elizabeth Petrovna. Returning to Russia in 1730, Anna would reign for over ten years, until her death on October 28, 1740.²

Anna's reign has long been considered a "dark" one in Russian historiography. Described variously as "severe" and "comparable to a storm-threatened ship, manned by a pilot and crew who are all drunk or asleep. . . with no considerable future," it seems of little doubt that few historians have looked to the positive aspects of Anna's tenure.³ Evgenii Anisimov summed up the mainstream opinion on the reign of Anna Ivanovna in his introduction to a biography of Elizabeth Petrovna, "With Anna's death a rather dark decade of Russian history (1730-40) receded into the past. The collapse of political and social life, mediocre leaders, an unproductive foreign policy, an atmosphere of universal suspicion and terror—all these had been characteristic of the period of Anna's rule."⁴ In the past five years, Russian-speaking scholars turned to the middle reigns of the eighteenth century looking for themes of continuity from Peter to Catherine II.⁵ Yet,

² Philip Longworth, *The Three Emperors: Catherine I, Anna and Elizabeth of Russia* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 79-81.

³ Mini Curtiss, *A Forgotten Empress: Anna Ivanovna and Her Era* (New York: Frederick Unga Publishing Company, 1974), 232.

⁴ Evgenii V. Anisimov, *Empress Elizabeth: Her Reign and Her Russia, 1741-61*, translated by John T. Alexander (Gulf Breeze, FL: Academic International Press, 1995), 1.

⁵ Igor Fedyukin, "The 'German' Reign of Empress Anna: Russia's Disciplinary Moment?" *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2018): 363-384.

despite these advances in Russian scholarship, anglophone scholars of Russia heretofore dismissed Anna as a pawn of German interests or the “poor relative from Livonia who became Empress.”⁶

Understanding Russia’s change in the eighteenth century means understanding the decade-long tenure of the Empress Anna and the ways she mediated the space between past and future. The reign of Anna Ivanovna provided substance for the reforms of Peter the Great while simultaneously creating the circumstances that enabled the successful reigns of the women who followed her to the throne, Elizabeth and Catherine II. Anna’s greatest contribution in the transitional stages of Russia’s transformation was the development of a secular Russian absolutism, concentrated in the person of the sovereign, building a sense of unity between elements of Russia’s past and its imperial future. If modern scholars leave behind their pre-conceived biases against the reign of Anna Ivanovna, they will see, as one of her contemporaries asserted, “what Peter began, Anna will perfect, adorn, and multiply.”⁷

The Sovereign as First Servant to Master of the State

Peter I, through sheer force of will, capitalized on trends started under the reign of his father Aleksey Mikhailovich and half-sister Sofia Alekseyevna (r. 1682-89, as regent) to transform Russia into a European-styled empire. His overhaul of the judiciary, military, governmental structure, ecclesiastical and court culture of Russia was so successful, it altered the aesthetic fabric of Russian society, leading David MacKenzie to conclude that “the great ‘Sun King,’ Louis XIV of France” would envy Peter’s

⁶ Evgenii V. Anisimov, *Five Empresses: Court Life in Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), 55.

⁷ V.K. Trediakovskii, *Panegirik...Anne...Ioannovne*, (St. Petersburg, 1732), quoted in Cynthia Hyla Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy: Eighteenth-Century Rulers and Writers in Dialogue* (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), 78.

successes.⁸ Despite the possible envy of Louis XIV, Peter I nonetheless crafted a scenario in which he and his nobles worked in tandem, a partnership. Central to Peter I's transformation of the Russian state was a concept further espoused by Frederick II of Prussia (r. 1740-86): "He [the sovereign] is merely the principal servant of the State."⁹ Peter emulated this throughout his reign, as a number of scholars including Mark Raeff, Anisimov, and Cynthia Whittaker have assessed.¹⁰ Yet, central to Peter I's policy was the inclusion of the nobles in his grand project: his Table of Ranks, institution of compulsory service, and installation of the nobles in St. Petersburg point to this trend. The evolution of Russian autocracy away from a partnership with the nobility began with the reign of Anna Ivanovna. She crafted a system of government based on the centrality of the autocrat and demonstrations of his or her power. She performed this role in public ceremonies and in limiting the nobility's power and separating them from the functions of government. To typify this shift, Mikhail Lomonosov's first ode was a congratulations to Anna after a victory over the Ottoman Empire in 1739: "Russia, how fortunate thou art/Under Anna's mighty protection," demonstrating the undeniable role of the empress in guiding the ship of state.¹¹

In the ceremonies surrounding the coronation of Anna Ivanovna, the philosophical transition of the monarch's role became abundantly clear. This is readily seen in Anna's *Opisanie* (official descriptions, or albums, of the imperial coronations of

⁸ David MacKenzie and Michael W. Curran, *A History of Russia, the Soviet Union, and Beyond* (Belmont, CA: West/Wadsworth, 1999), 238.

⁹ Frederick II, "Forms of Government and the Duties of Rulers," (Berlin, 1777), 3.

¹⁰ Brenda Meehan-Waters, *Autocracy and Aristocracy: The Russian Service Elite of 1730* (New Brunswick, NJ: 1982), 146; Anisimov, *Empress Elizabeth*, 144; Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy*, 48-64; Marc Raeff, *Understanding Imperial Russia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 45.

¹¹ Mikhail Lomonosov, "Ode to the Sovereign Empress Anna Ioannovna on the Victory over the Turks and Tatars, and the Capture of Khotin, in the Year 1739"; B.N. Menshutkin, *Russia's Lomonosov* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1952), 34.

Russia’s rulers). Richard Wortman observed that the *Opisaniia* “present the coronations as the rulers wished them to be seen.” Anna’s *Opisanie* (1730) was the second such published coronation album, the first issued by Peter I in 1723 to commemorate the crowning of his wife, Catherine I (r. 1725-27) as empress. Wortman, who worked extensively with the albums of the later Romanovs, argued that the Russian emperors and empresses were greatly influenced by the tradition among the French kings to detail their coronations, demonstrating the dress and allegorical symbols of the nobility in attendance, as well as the kings themselves.¹² Anna’s album breaks with the tradition set by the French kings and her Petrine predecessors by placing herself, as sovereign, at the center of the album.¹³ The inverse of the cover depicts the empress, standing alone in full regalia, with the inscription, “Anna—Empress, and Herself the Ruler of All Russia” (Image 1).¹⁴



The emphasis on Anna and her personal power permeates throughout the rest of the *Opisanie*. The only rendition of a piece of the actual ceremony included in the album depicts the coronation itself, and Anna remains the center of attention. As Wortman points out, despite the grand scale of the cathedral, Anna, “being blessed by the archbishop...is the cynosure of attention, the center of the

Image 1: Front piece of Anna’s coronation album. Slavic and East European Collections, The New York Public Library, “*Anna Imperatritsa i Samoderzhitsa Vserossiiskaia*,” New York Public Library Digital Collections. *Anna Imperatritsa i Samoderzhitsa Vserossiiskaia*,” New York Public Library Digital Collections. This translation is my own.

expanse,” as “all look towards her” (Image 2).¹⁵

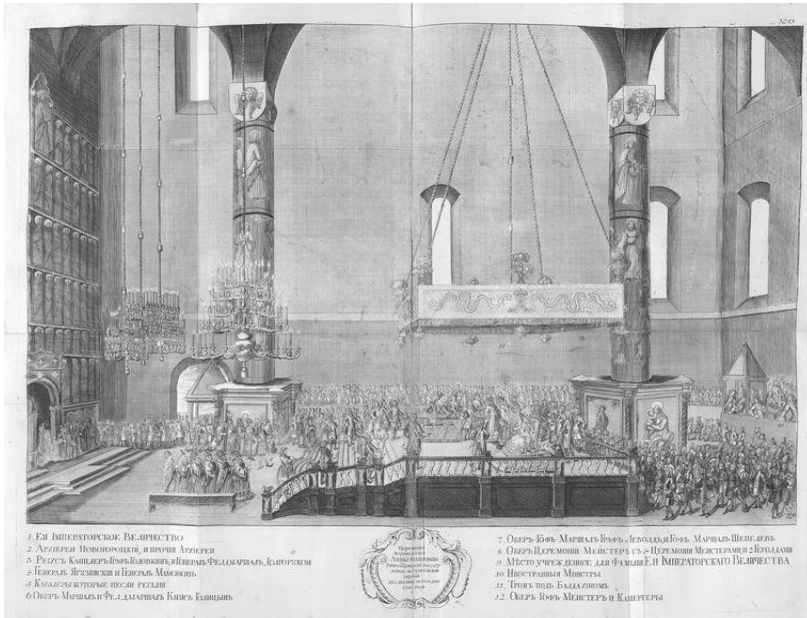


Image 2:
The
coronati
on
ceremon
y of
Anna
Ivanovna
in the
coronati
on
album.
Slavic
and East
Europea
n
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ns, The
New
York

Public Library, “*Tseremoniia koronovaniia Anny Ioannovny*,” The New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Subsequent images reinforce this theme: the last vignette depicts a fireworks display as Anna personally received ambassadors (Image 3) and images of the medals worn by Anna and her courtiers show engravements of the phrase “*za veryu i vernost*,” or, “for faith and loyalty,” indicating what all owed the empress (Image 4).¹⁶

¹⁵ Slavic and East European Collections, The New York Public Library, “*Tseremoniia koronovaniia Anny Ioannovny*,” The New York Public Library Digital Collections; Wortman, *Visual Texts*, 9.

¹⁶ Slavic and East European Collections, The New York Public Library, “*Izobrazhenie feierverka, goriashchiago v den' koronovaniia Anny Ioannovny*,” New York Public Library Digital Collections; Slavic and East European Collections, The New York Public Library, “*Medali*,” New York Public Library Digital Collections. The translation is my own.

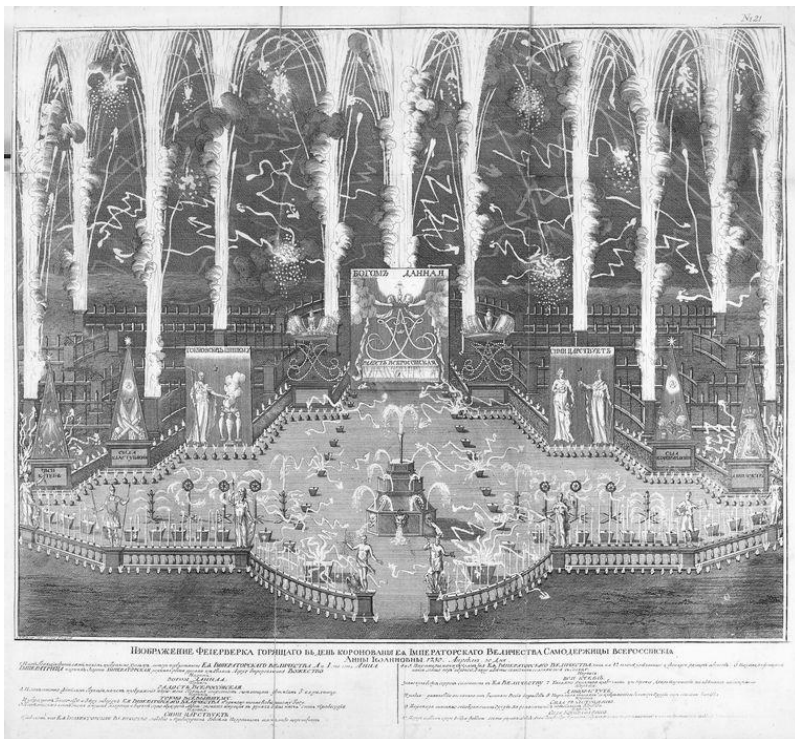


Image 3: Fireworks display at Anna’s coronation. Slavic and East European Collections, The New York Public Library, “*Izobrazhenie feierverka, goriashchiago v den’ koronovaniia Anny Ioannovny,*” New York Public Library Digital Collections.

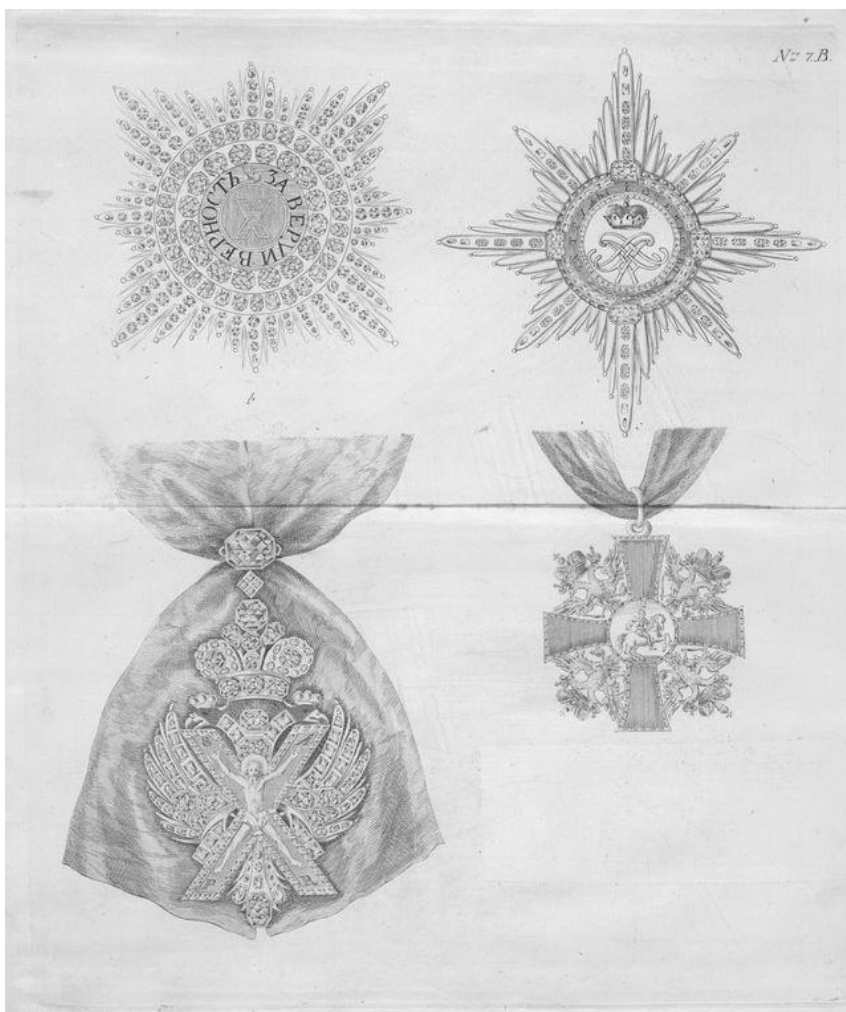


Image 4: Medals worn at Anna's coronation. Slavic and East European Collections, The New York Public Library, "Medali," New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Anna's *Opisanie* also represented a break from Petrine norms. The first few pages emphasize Anna's right to rule by blood: she was the descendent of Tsar Ivan Alekseyevich, and therefore the legitimate empress.¹⁷ Peter I abolished the notion of

¹⁷ Slavic and East European Collections, NYPL, "Anna Imperatritsa i

primogeniture succession in a 1722 Imperial Manifesto, granting the reigning emperor the right to name his successor.¹⁸ This resulted in a number of power struggles around the throne, including the one that brought Anna to power.¹⁹ Anna's succession manifesto indeed emphasized she ruled "thanks to the general desire and agreement of the entire Russian people," yet she reasserted the notion in her *Opisanie* that her qualification to rule was based on hereditary right.²⁰ Anna's pattern of claiming heredity as a right to rule was a measure invoked by her successors: Elizabeth Petrovna claimed "close blood ties" to Peter I and Catherine I and Paul I officially redacted Peter I's law of succession and re-established primogeniture succession in 1797.²¹

In fact, Anna's coming to the throne and rejection of the "Conditions" remained her enduring contribution to Russian autocracy and the most indicative marker of the transition from servant of the state to its master for the Romanov tsars. Following the death of Peter II on January 29, 1730, Anna became the first Romanov to be "elected" to the imperial seat. Members of the Supreme Privy Council, a nominal advisory board to the sovereign which assumed greater power during the reigns of Catherine I and Peter II, attempted what Anisimov labeled the establishment of an "oligarchic order" and Whittaker "a constitutional monarchy."²² Powerful aristocrats, notably Dolgorukii and Golistyn families, looked to ensure their continued hold on power at the imperial

Samoderzhitsa Vserossiiskaia."

¹⁸ Antony Lentin, *Peter the Great: The Law on the Imperial Succession; The Official Commentary* (Oxford: Headstart History, 1996), 27, 33-34, 61-70; Russell E. Martin, "Law, Succession, and the Eighteenth-Century Refounding of the Romanov Dynasty," *Dubitando: Studies in History and Culture in Honor of Donald Ostrowski*, ed. by Brian J. Boeck, Russell E. Martin, and Daniel Rowland (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2012), 225-42.

¹⁹ Richard Wortman, *Russian Monarchy: Representation and Rule* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2013), 41-45.

²⁰ Oleg Omel'chenko, "Stanovlenie zakonodatel'nogo regulirovaniia prestolonasledii v Rosiiskoi imperii," *Femis: Ezhegodnik istorii prava i pravovedeniia*, Vyp. 7, 2007, 26-28.

²¹ Wortman, *Russian Monarchy*, 49-50.

²² Anisimov, *Five Empresses*, 76; Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy*, 70.

court.²³ They selected Anna, whom they believed was sufficiently manipulatable, and imposed a series of “Conditions” on her rule. The “Conditions,” which Anna acceded to, composed a massive limitation on the autocracy in favor of the nobility. Their stipulations included taking the power levying of taxes, declarations of war and peace, promotion to office, and the selection of an heir away from the sovereign. Anna could not even marry without their consent. In signing the “Conditions,” Anna, still in Courland, accepted the terms that “should I [Anna] not carry out or fail to live up to any part of this promise, I shall be deprived of the Russian crown” before setting off for Moscow.²⁴ The “Conditions” represented one of many efforts by a resurgent nobility in 1730 to reclaim privileges lost in the wake of the Petrine reforms, at the expense of royal absolutism in Russia, inspired by similar, successful limitations imposed in England and Sweden.²⁵



Image 5: Anna tears the Conditions before an assembly of nobles. et, “Anna Ioannovna Tears Up Concessions to Privy Council,” in I.N.Bozherianov, “Nevskii prospekt,” *Kul’turno-istoricheskii dvukhvekovoi zhizni Sankt-Peterburga* (St. Petersburg, 1901-3), vol. on his 1. 57

²⁴ D. A. Korsokov, *Votsarenie Imperatritsy Anny Ioannovny* (Kazan, 1880), 8-9.

²⁵ Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy*, 70.

Anna's rejection, rather than accession, to the "Conditions" became her lasting legacy to the formation of Russian autocracy. If the newly-styled "electors" of the Supreme Privy Council believed that Anna was docile and easily-dominated, they severely underestimated her. The nobility, in fact, drew rather sexist conclusions about Anna's ability to rule: one group of 288 Muscovite nobles calling themselves the "Cherkasskii group" proposed a regency because they believed since Anna was "a female person" and "her knowledge of the laws is inadequate," the male nobility should take an active role in government "until the Almighty gives us a male person on the throne."²⁶ Upon arriving in Moscow from Mitau, Courland on February 15, 1730, Anna found a city teeming with nobles from throughout the empire, gathered for Peter II's wedding, then funeral, disgruntled with the Dolgorukii and Golistyn families. Capitalizing on this, Anna began a propaganda and letter-writing campaign to the wives of powerful magnates, building her support among the nobility excluded from the deliberations of the Supreme Privy Council.²⁷

What resulted became what Whittaker dubbed the "February Days" and Valerie Kivelson and Ronald Suny "the Constitutional Crisis of 1730" in which over 400 noblemen from the Supreme Privy Council, other branches of the nobility, and Anna and her supporters, grappled for dominance in Moscow.²⁸ To break the impasse, Anna reneged on her previous acceptance of the "Conditions" and directly defied them by mobilizing the regiments of Imperial Guards around Moscow as the "new legitimate sovereign of Russia."²⁹ Faced with mounting pressure from

²⁶ Vasilii Tatishchev, "Discourse," in Paul Dukes, *Russia Under Catherine the Great*, vol. 1, *Select Documents on Government and Society* (Newtonville, MA: 1978), 25-27. Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy*, 72-3.

²⁷ Lavender Cassels, *The Struggle for the Ottoman Empire, 1717-1740* (London: Murray, 1966), 31.

²⁸ Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy*, 75-7; Valerie A. Kivelson and Ronald Grigor Suny, *Russia's Empires* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 101.

²⁹ Korsokov, *Votsarenie*, 17-18; Vera Proskurina, *Politics and Poetry in the Age of Catherine II* (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2011), 15. Peter the Great established the regiments of guards in 1692 after a failed revolution by the *streltsy*, and elite unit of musketeers entrusted with the security of the tsars from

factions of the aristocracy and the threat of the guards, the Supreme Privy Council capitulated. Rejecting varied petitions from the assembled nobles, Anna refused to compromise the principle of her autocratic rule. Finally, on the afternoon of February 25, 1730, 262 aristocrats signed a petition to “Most illustrious, Most powerful, Great Sovereign Empress Anna Ioannovna, Autocrat of All Russia,” in which they beseeched her “to accept autocracy just as Your glorious and worthy ancestors did and to annul the Conditions sent to Your Imperial Majesty from the Supreme Council and signed by Your Majesty’s hand.”³⁰ Anna accepted this petition, ordered the “Conditions” brought to her, and “in plain view of everyone present took [them] and tore [them] in two” (Image 5).³¹

The act of tearing the “Conditions” deserves further exploration, though historians often dismiss it as theatrics.³² Anna, like her predecessors, realized the necessity to perform power that lay at the heart of autocratic rule. Her decision to tear up the “Conditions” was wrapped in layers of legal and monarchical symbolism. One ode captured the exact moment of the tearing:

В сей день Августа наша свергла долг свой ложный,
Растерзавши на себе хирограф подложный
И выняла скипетр свой от гражданского ада
И тем стала Россия весела и рада
Таково смотрение продолжи нам, боже
Да державе Российской не вредит ничто же
А ты, всяк, кто не мыслит вводить строй отманный
Бойся самодержавной прелестнице Анны
Как она бумажка, все твои подлоги

the time of Ivan the Terrible (r. 1533-84). The guards played a crucial role in palace revolutions from the death of Peter I in 1725 until the accession of Alexander I (r. 1801-25) in 1801. For more, see James Cracraft, *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004).

³⁰ Korsokov, *Votsarenie*, 274-7.

³¹ Korsokov, *Votsarenie*, 274. The torn sheet now resides in The Russian State Archives of Ancient Documents (RGADA).

³² Anisimov, *Five Empresses*, 81; Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy*, 77.

Растерзанные падут под царские ноги.

On that same day, our Augustus overthrew her false debt
Savaging (tearing) the forgery of a chirograph
Pulled her scepter (reign) out of the civic hell
And so Russia became filled with joy
May God continue to watch over us
Yes, Russian power threatens nothing
And you who wish to limit that power
Fear the autocratic charm of Anna
Like this piece of paper, all of your frauds
Torn to pieces, fall beneath the feet of the Tsar.³³

From this poetic description, two important images emerge: one, the autocratic power inherent in the physical act of tearing, and second, the association of the “Conditions” with a chirograph (*khirograf*). Chirographs, or indentures, were a type of legal contract popular in eleventh through seventeenth-century Europe, in which a contract was drawn up in two versions, on the same sheet of parchment. The word *cirographum*, a variant, or a picture of Jesus, was written between the two versions and a judge would cut or tear the sheet in half through this word. In theory, the agreement could be proven or ratified by the process of fitting together the two sheets. For chirographs, the contract became legally binding when it was torn or cut, creating a loud noise which symbolized the forming of the pact.³⁴ Additionally, the idea of

³³ Fyodor Prokopovich, “Lines Concerning 25 February,” quoted in Sergei M. Soloviev, *Istoria Rossii s drevneishikh vremen* (Moscow: Social-Economic Literature, 1963), XIX, 3. Translation is my own.

³⁴ Brigitte Bedos-Rezak, “Cutting Edge: The Economy of Mediality in Twelfth-Century Chirographic Writing,” in *Das Mittelalter* 15 (2010): 134-161; Kathryn A. Lowe, “Lay Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England: The Development of the Chirograph,” in P. Pulsiano and E. Treharne, eds., *Anglo Saxon Manuscripts and their Heritage* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 161–204. See also, H.E. Salter, *Facsimiles of Early Charters in Oxford Muniment Rooms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1929).

contract invoked images of the Russian past, notably the contracts between the Rurik princes of Novgorod entering into contract with the people of the city, limiting the power of the princes.³⁵

Anna's tearing of the "Conditions" gestured to this tradition. The tearing ceremony itself was indeed theatrical, but symbolic of the tangible power Anna claimed for herself. One, Anna summoned the nobles before her and ordered the "Conditions" brought to her, demonstrating her ability to be obeyed. Secondly, the tearing of the document itself would have been a jarring experience: when the parchment tore, the sound itself would be loud enough to startle those in the room. Finally, in ripping a contract she affixed her name to, Anna showed that she was symbolically above the law of contracts—her power transcended the agreement, hence her ability to tear it asunder—and rejected the historical precedent of the Novgorod princes. In drawing on the tradition of the chirograph, Anna channeled the idea of the making of the contract: her contract to rule autocratically without limits became legally binding when she destroyed the contract which represented an attempt to impose control over her. Anna performed her power in ripping the "Conditions" in half, showing herself to be above tradition and contract, presenting her determination to rule, rather than be ruled (Image 6).

³⁵ Simon Franklin, *Writing, Society, and Culture in Early Rus', c. 950-1300* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 175-76.

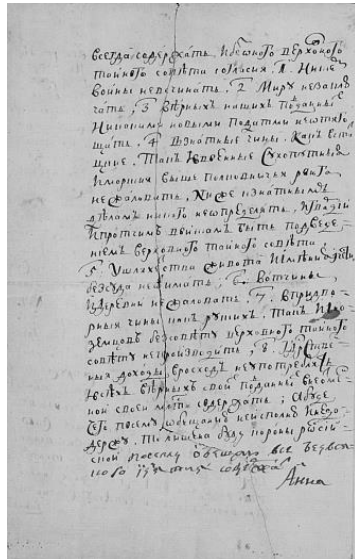
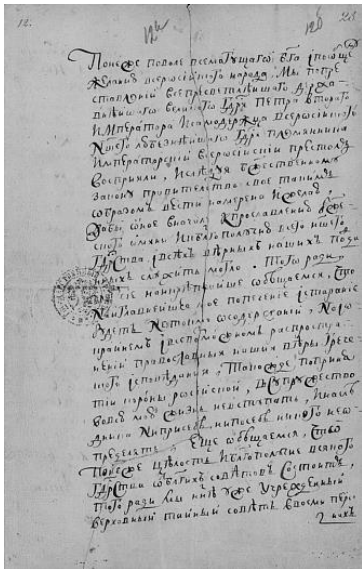


Image 6: The torn Conditions of Anna Ivanovna, note the tear through the middle of the document. “Conditions of Anna Ivanovna,” double sheet, pisarsky handwriting, torn from top to bottom obliquely, 32.0 x 20cm, Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts. F. 3. Op. 1. D. 6. L. 12a-12b. Digitized by the Russian Military Historical Society.

Anna’s rejection of oligarchical constitutionalism transformed how Russians saw their monarchy yet retained the centrality of autocracy.³⁶ As Wortman asserted, “the compact between throne and nobility was sealed” by Anna’s actions in 1730, reversing trends of aristocratic reassertion in the reigns following the death of Peter I.³⁷ The monarchy, even more than in the reign of Peter I, bore the central role as progenitor of the state’s power. Fyodor Prokopovich sermonized the national mood in his sermon “*Slovo v den’ vospominaniia koronatsii Imp. Anny Ioannovny*” (“A word on remembering the day of the coronation of Empress Anna Ivanovna”), in which he concluded “all...benefits

³⁶ Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy*, 77. Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 25.

³⁷ Richard Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, Vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 82.

and gains come to us through our autocrats.”³⁸ Anna’s early reign was marked by a reassertion of the power of the central monarchy. Symbolically, Anna shifted the capital back to St. Petersburg from Moscow, returning the seat of power to the city Peter I built to typify his imperial projects, and invested large amounts of state funds in remodeling the city in the Baroque style.³⁹ Anna made this an entirely public affair, instituted by her government, even seizing funds from the Church and private agencies to have her government undertake the originally planned project.⁴⁰ Anna indeed “conceived ways to bring new benefits to the fatherland,” as Prokopovich charged.⁴¹

Anna’s reign aimed to weaken the power of the aristocracy at court. Bearing in mind the role of the nobility in the attempted constitutionalist *coup d’état* of 1730, Anna abolished the Supreme Privy Council and re-established the Senate and cabinet system of her uncle.⁴² To further weaken the aristocracy, Anna and her ministers purged the guards regiments of the sons of the aristocracy; Anna’s trimming was so successful that Anisimov declared that by the time of Elizabeth Petrovna’s *coup d’état*, only around twenty percent of the guardsmen were of noble birth.⁴³ Anna’s government provided substantial support to the Academy

³⁸ F. Prokopovich, “Slovo v den’ vospominaniia koronatsii Imp. Anny Ioannovny (28 April 1734),” *Slova i rechi* (St. Petersburg, 1765), 78-81, cited in Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy*, 77. Translation is my own.

³⁹ S. V. Sementsov, “From Catherine the First to Anna Ioannovna. 1724-1732: The Time of Doubts and Uncertainty in the Destiny of the Capital City -- Should It Be Allowed to Remain a Town-Planning Heritage of Peter the Great?” *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta, Serii 7: Geologia, Geografii*, no. 4 (December 2013), 119-25.

⁴⁰ N. V. Pivovarova, “The Intricacies of the Church Life in St Petersburg Time of Empress Anna Ioannovna. The History of the Construction of the Church of the Nativity of the Mother of God.” *Vestnik Sankt-Peterburgskogo Universiteta, Iskusstvovedenie* 6, no. 2 (June 2016), 76-77.

⁴¹ F. Prokopovich, “Slovo v den’ Koronatsii Anny Ioannovny (28 April 1731),” *Slova i rechi*, 78-81, quoted in Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy*, 77.

⁴² Alexander Lipski, “A Re-Examination of the ‘Dark Era’ of Anna Ioannovna,” *The American Slavic and East European Review*, Vol. 15, No. 4 (Dec. 1956), 483-85.

⁴³ Anisimov, *Empress Elizabeth*, 24-6; Anisimov, *Five Empresses*, 174-75.

of Sciences and encouraged foreign trade and local manufactory (Aleksandr Kamenskii argued that “by 1740 Russia produced more cast iron than any other country in the world”), all to strengthen the prestige and monetary power of the sovereign.⁴⁴

To further limit the influence of Russia’s nobility, Anna’s government increasingly involved itself in their private lives. Several “condemnations” of Anna’s reign stem from this attempt. Anna’s reign became known for its “police-state cruelty,” her penchant for “matchmaking,” and also for lessening the obligations of the nobles to the state instituted by Peter I.⁴⁵ Yet, each supported an attempt by the throne to centralize its own authority. In arranging marriages, Anna demonstrated her power over the persons of her court, the most famous example being the “Wedding in the Ice Palace” in which Anna married her court jester to a Kalmyk woman inside a house fashioned from large blocks of ice, where courtiers were forced to remain, under guard, throughout the wedding night.⁴⁶ This was carnivalesque spectacle in the extreme, yet demonstrated the power of the autocrat over the very persons of her subjects, and nature itself. Anna’s government actively pursued intrigue and plots against the throne, giving her reign the epitaph of “police state,” yet these executions only served to demonstrate the pervasiveness of the autocrat. Finally, in allowing noble families to retain one son on their estates instead of enforcing the requirements set by Peter I, Anna split the attention of aristocratic families between their estates and the court.⁴⁷ All of these acts pointed to the symbolic and tangible power of the sovereign, centralizing the government of Russia in a single entity: Anna Ivanovna.

⁴⁴ Alexander Lipski, “Aspects of Russia’s Westernization during the Reign of Anna Ioannovna, 1730-1740.” *The American Slavic and East European Review* 18, No. 1 (Feb. 1959), 2-5; Lipski, “A Re-Examination,” 478-82; Alexander B. Kamenskii, *The Russian Empire in the Eighteenth Century: Searching for a Place in the World*, translated and edited by David Griffiths (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997), 152.

⁴⁵ Raleigh, *Russia’s Emperors and Empresses*, 45, 58-9.

⁴⁶ Kamenskii, *The Russian Empire*, 146-7.

⁴⁷ Raleigh, *Russia’s Emperors and Empresses*, 58-61.

Anna created the pageantry of Russian monarchy, emphasizing its role as *union* with the sovereign at its head. Russian scholars in the past two decades explored at length the ways in which Anna's predecessors, Peter I and Catherine I, strengthened absolutist authority by invoking religious symbols. Ernest Zitser, in his *The Transfigured Kingdom: Sacred Parody and Charismatic Authority at the Court of Peter the Great*, argued that through the institution of the "Unholy Synod," Peter inverted the roles of Christ and prince, making himself the religious and charismatic head of the state with religious undertones.⁴⁸ The symbolism continued with the accession of his wife, Catherine I, whose government, Gary Marker argued, consciously invoked the image of St. Catherine of Alexandria in relation to the sovereign, espousing a religious origin of female rule to ensure loyalty among Russia's ecclesiastical hierarchy.⁴⁹ Anna's reign, by contrast, saw the imposition of a secular scenario of unity. There was a "union" between the autocrat and her ancestors, while simultaneously a union between the autocrat and the people grounded in the body of the sovereign herself, as her accession manifesto decreed: "And since all our loyal subjects unanimously asked that We deign to accept Autocracy for Our Russian Empire, as had our forefathers from the earliest times, We have so deigned."⁵⁰ Another union existed between a Russian past and future: Anna was, after all, selected because of her descent from Ivan Alekseyevich and association with a pre-Petrine past, yet pushed Russia farther down the road Peter I began.⁵¹ As one scholar asserted: "It was as if different eras came together in Empress Anna's court: the

⁴⁸ Ernest A. Zitser, *The Transfigured Kingdom: Sacred Parody and Charismatic Authority at the Court of Peter the Great* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 1.

⁴⁹ Gary Marker, *Imperial Saint: The Cult of St. Catherine and the Dawn of Female Rule in Russia* (De Kalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), 226.

⁵⁰ As quoted in David Ransel, "Nikita Panin's Imperial Council Project and the Struggle of Hierarchy Groups at the Court of Catherine II," *Canadian Slavic Studies* 4 (Fall 1970), 448.

⁵¹ Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy*, 69-70.

Muscovite seventeenth century met the coarse manners of the new Russian capital city and the European eighteenth century.”⁵² Anna’s reign was built on the secularized pageantry of unity, situated in the person of the sovereign empress around whom the court revolved.

Charting the Course of Russian Absolutism

Anna’s succession battle achieved much more than the preservation of Russian autocracy in the style of her “worthy ancestors:” it provided a performance model for female rulers to seize the throne of Russia. Vera Proskurina notes how Anna mobilized the guards regiments by declaring herself their colonel and “performed several ritual acts of cross-dressing,” donning the uniform of a guard to greet the regiments and awarding herself the Order of Saint Apostle Andrew the First Called (marked by a blue ribbon). Proskurina points out that the Order of Saint Andrew was “conferred only upon the highest-ranking male officials of the state” and had a female equivalent, the Order of Saint Catherine the Martyr of God, which Peter I created for his wife, Catherine I.⁵³ Anna, however, purposefully chose the masculine medal, reinforcing an idea of gender-bending in the person of the sovereign.

By actively choosing to assume a masculine persona in her *coup d’état*, Anna set a precedent for the women who would rule after her, namely Elizabeth Petrovna and Catherine II. When Elizabeth seized the throne on November 25, 1741, she donned a guardsman’s uniform and cuirass to lead a troop of the Preobrazhenskii regiment with a Saint Andrew ribbon pinned on her chest.⁵⁴ Catherine II emulated both Anna and Elizabeth when she deposed her husband, Peter III (r. 1762), in 1762.⁵⁵ “Catherine

⁵² Donald J. Raleigh, ed., *The Emperors and Empresses of Russia: Rediscovering the Romanovs*, compiled by A.A. Iskenderov (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 44.

⁵³ Proskurina, *Politics and Poetry in the Age of Catherine II*, 14-15.

⁵⁴ Soloviev, *Istoria Rossii s drevneishikh vremen*, XI: 21-22, 124.

⁵⁵ John T. Alexander, “Amazon Autocratixes: Images of Female Rule in the Eighteenth Century,” in Peter I. Barta, ed., *Gender and Sexuality in Russian*

II on horseback,” a portrait commissioned by Catherine after her *coup d'état*, depicts the empress in full uniform with the Order of Saint Andrew draped across her (Image 7)

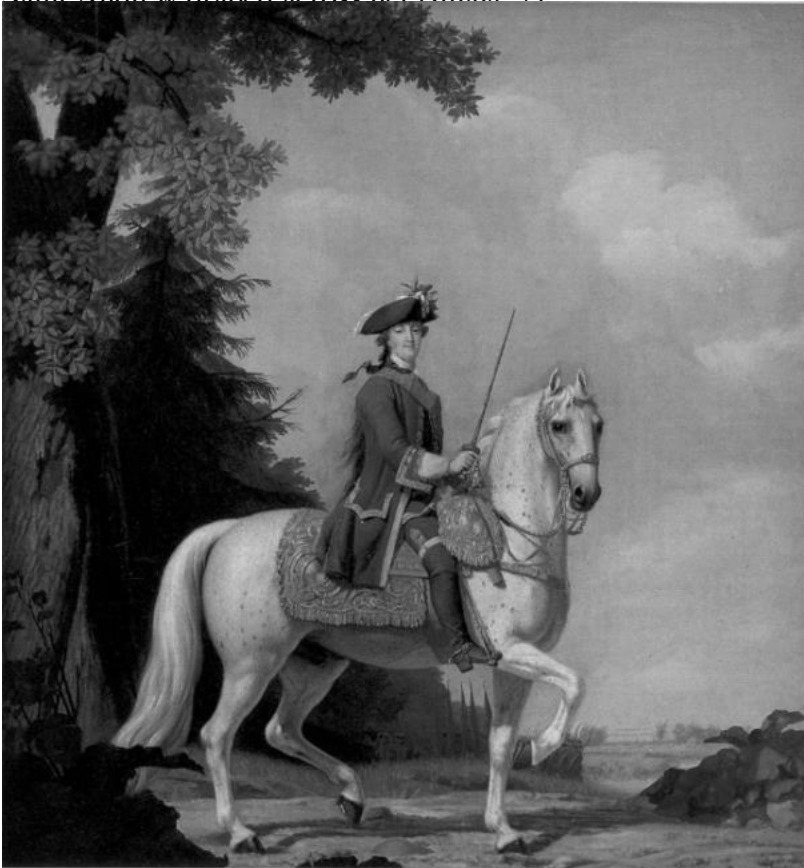


Image 7: Catherine II in uniform, leading guardsmen during her *coup d'état*. Vigilius Ericksen, “Catherine II of Russia in Life Guard Uniform on the Horse Brillante,” 1771, oil on canvas, 358x388cm, Copenhagen, Denmark, Statens Museum for Kunst.

The example set by of Anna Ivanovna created a scenario of female rule and inspired the women who followed her to incorporate elements of her performance.

Anna provided the example not only of a means for a woman to seize power, but also a way to exercise it. The most enduring attack on the reign of Anna was the epithet attached to it: *Bironovshchina*, or, “Age of Biron.” This title derives from the close affair between Anna and Ernst Johann Biron, Duke of Courland and Semigalia. Anisimov asserts that the title *Bironovshchina* stems from the idea that Biron was “the actual ruler” and came to be “associated closely with the hegemony of foreign favorites and a system of ferocious political terror.”⁵⁶ Contemporaries of Anna certainly appeared to ascribe to this worldview. A song with the following verse became quite popular and circulated around Petersburg:

The tsar no longer rules us
And it is not a Russian Prince who issues orders,
Instead, it is an evil tyrant from Germania
Who commands, who amuses himself.⁵⁷

In another instance, a series of water-colored pornographic prints circulated in the 1790s and now housed in the New York Public Library depict Anna and Biron *in flagrante delicto* with the accompanying verse:

Сей знатной господин
Большой имеет чин
Заслугою своей
Гордился перед нами
Бирон сей господин
И он вот перед вами
Внук конюха
И сам барейтор
Он душой Анною
В конец был возлюблен
Ебая Анну Россию
Еб во всю

⁵⁶ Anisimov, *Empress Elizabeth*, 1.

⁵⁷ P.V. Kireevskii, *Piesni sobrannia* (Moscow, 1871), 8:291, quoted in Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy*, 78-9.

Но после восприял
Кару за то всюю

This distinguished gentleman
holds a lofty rank.
He prided himself on his merits over us.
This gentleman's name is Biron
and here he is in front of you.
Although he was the grandson of a groom,
and had himself served as Bareiter,
in the end he became the paramour of that fool Anna.
Screwing Anna,
he really fucked Russia over.
However, he did get his come-uppance for it all in the end.⁵⁸

The condemnation of Anna's rule as one of rule by "foreigners" found its roots in deep xenophobia and Russian patriotism. Popular anecdotes about Ivan Balakriev, the former jester for Peter I, often juxtaposed the wit of the "true" Russian jester against the ignorance of Germans.⁵⁹ As Sergei Soloviev asserted, favorites were never the problem, as Peter I and Catherine I kept them, but that those "were ours, they were Russians," as opposed to the German clique of Anna.⁶⁰ This idea of retaking the Russian land from the hands of foreigners was promoted by the government of Elizabeth Petrovna after she ascended the throne.

⁵⁸ Russian, Anonymous, "Ernst Johann von Btiren (Biron) and Empress Anna Ioannovna," "Folded" or "double picture," first half of the nineteenth century, watercolor and iron-gall ink on unmarked, hand-pressed sheet of medium-weight, wove paper, 18 x 29 cm. New York Public Library (NYPL), Slavic Reserve 01-1316, reprinted and translated in Ernest A. Zitzer "A Full-Frontal History of the Romanov Dynasty: Pictorial 'Political Pornography' in Pre-Reform Russia," *The Russian Review*, vol. 70, no. 4 (October 2011): 557-583.

⁵⁹ James von Geldern and Louise McReynolds, eds., *Entertaining Tsarist Russia: Tales, Songs, Plays, Movies, Jokes, Ads, and Images from Russian Urban Life, 1779-1917* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 4-6.

⁶⁰ Soloviev, *Istoriia Rossii*, X: 652-53.

Indeed, Elizabeth Petrovna's accession in 1741 was heralded by over one hundred sermons across the empire which extolled the return of the native to the throne of Russia, the recapture of "Peter's heritage from the hands of foreigners."⁶¹ While Germans like Biron did dominate Anna's government, it was not entirely to the detriment of the empire. In a recent article in the *Slavic Review*, Igor Fedyukin argued that the "German" reign of Anna advanced the Petrine mode of reform from above because her ministers incorporated elements of Prussian state-building and centralization to the Russian administration.⁶² While certainly the target of patriotic fervor, Anna's reliance on Biron and other Germans was not merely a means of bolstering westernization, it also provided another mechanism of Russian autocratic rule: the favorite.

Each of the empresses of Russia, Catherine I, Anna, Elizabeth, and Catherine II, as well as the regent Anna Leopoldovna, earned the ire of contemporaries and modern scholars for keeping lovers at court. The Russian word for these men was "фаворит," which most directly translates as "favorite." Academic readings of the favorites divide them into two distinct camps: one that sees them as proof of the innate licentiousness of the Russian empresses, especially Catherine II, or merely an expression of the Russian desire to be "ruled by a man."⁶³ However, the relationships between the favorites and the empresses should not be so misogynistically read, nor misconstrued as having to be purely platonic or entirely romantic. For instance, Anna almost certainly loved Biron, yet she had no intentions of granting him autocratic power. Rather, the favorites became a functioning member of the apparatus of government: they held prominent ministerial positions while in favor and the empresses used them as a means to screen and filter personal requests to the sovereign. They received stipends and access at

⁶¹ Evgenii V. Anisimov, *Rossia v seredine XVIII veka: bor'ba za nasledie Petra* (Moscow, 1986), 27-29, 134-5.

⁶² Fedyukin, "The 'German' Reign of Empress Anna," 381-4.

⁶³ Isabel de Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981), 530-81.

court but held very little tangible authority.⁶⁴ The office of favorite was a means of ensuring loyalty from competent administrators, not unlike the *maîtresse-en-titre* of the French court at Versailles. Much like her accession blueprint, Anna bequeathed the effective performance of favorite/benefactress to her successors. Both Elizabeth and Catherine II would take long-term partners as Anna did with Biron and weave them into the apparatus of government.⁶⁵

Conclusions: Change as Navigation, Anna as Navigator

Far from the period of stagnation detractors accused it of, the reign of Anna Ivanovna represented a volatile series of performances which strengthened Russian absolutism.⁶⁶ Her re-orientation of the principles of autocracy, symbolized by her tearing of the “Conditions,” re-affirmed the role of the monarch as the holder of true power in the Russian Empire. Subsequent performances, seen in her coronation album and public displays, re-iterated the unquestionable authority of not only the institution of monarchy, but the monarch herself. Anna reasserted herself at the heart of the web of rule: power disseminated out from the center, with the government spearheading the renovation of the capital and personally intervening in the lives of courtiers. In a way, more than her uncle Peter I, Anna brought the power of the Russian monarchy over the nobility to a level equitable with that of the court at Versailles. Anna, not Peter, would have been the envy of the Sun King.

In the reign of Anna, the intricacies of the processes of change become evident. Anna inherited a mixed legacy of rule and power from Peter I and his immediate successors. A resentful and powerful nobility, no longer content with cooperation in the transformation of the state, manipulated the autocracy in an

⁶⁴ De Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great*, 575-81.

⁶⁵ Alexei Razumovsky, the chief favorite of Elizabeth was a Ukrainian serf, who impressed the Empress with his bass vocal range. She purchased him from his master and kept him as a companion for the rest of her life. Evidence suggests she secretly married him while Empress, and she lobbied Charles VII to make Razumovsky a count of the Holy Roman Empire in 1742.

⁶⁶ Kamenskii, *The Russian Empire*, 145.

attempt to reassert their own desires. Some dreamed of a return to the *zemskii sobor* which elected Mikhail Romanov tsar in 1613, some desired a greater say in governmental policy, others wanted nothing more than a release from service and a return to their estates.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, Anna found a means to unify the nobility in the image of the monarchy. The sovereign became the bridge between the pre and post-Petrine Russia, the “people” and the state, and the dynasty at large. By promoting the institution of the emperor/empress as the unifying dogma of the state, Anna continued the work of Peter I and translated his grand schemes of reform into a tangible path that found its fruition under her successors.

Wortman’s classic study, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, demonstrated the mechanics of performance utilized by the Romanovs to demonstrate their ethos of power, but glossed over the particular modes of collective female power in the eighteenth century: women rule in Russia was not an “accident of genetics,” but a concentrated scenario of its own.⁶⁸ From 1725-96, Russia experienced less than four years of direct male rule because a subsequent line of empresses utilized existing systems of absolutism. Central to this development was the reign of Anna Ivanovna, for she set the tone for decades of female rule in Russia. By tying rulership more tightly to the person of the sovereign (a figure able to bend the lines of gender normativity when needed), secularizing notions of charismatic rule, trimming the nobility out of the apparatus of power, re-emphasizing dynastic heritage, and creating an organ of government in the person of the favorite, Anna set the stage for Elizabeth Petrovna and Catherine II, who emulated her performances as they themselves came to and maintained power. Anna became the progenitor of a new style of Russian monarchy, performing a scenario that became literary canon over subsequent acts of Romanov rule in Russia.

⁶⁷ Whittaker, *Russian Monarchy*, 70-7.

⁶⁸ Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, 3-9; Kivelson and Suny, *Russia’s Empires*, 103.