Succession to the Throne in Early Modern Russia

This revisionist history of succession to the throne in early modern Russia, from the Moscow princes of the fifteenth century to Peter the Great, argues that legal primogeniture never existed: the monarch designated an heir that was usually the eldest son only by custom, not by law. Overturning generations of scholarship, Paul Bushkovitch persuasively demonstrates the many paths to succession to the throne, where designation of the heir and occasional elections were part of the relations of the monarch with the ruling elite, and to some extent the larger population. Exploring how the forms of designation evolved over the centuries as Russian culture changed, and in the later seventeenth century made use of Western practices, this study shows how, when Peter the Great finally formalized the custom in 1722 by enshrining the power of the tsar to designate in law, this was not a radical innovation but was in fact consistent with the experience of the previous centuries.

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The Transfer of Power 1450–1725

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Preface

> [O]n croit que chez les Rousses quand le pere est mort, et qu'il y ait un fils qui soit mineur et un oncle, ou frere du defunct père, qui soit majeur et capable de regner, ils ne regardent pas tant le droit du fils a succeder au père, que l'utilité du Roiyaume, etant gouverné par un peine en age a gouverner seul.
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> J. G. Sparwenfeld, 9 March 1684.[1]

In 1913 the Russian government and Russian educated society celebrated the 300th anniversary of the Romanovs. The ceremonies were grand, and historians took part in the event as well: most of Russia's prominent historians participated in the publication of a six-volume history of Russia under the Romanov dynasty with the title *Tri veka: Rossiia ot Smuty do nashego vremeni*. Edited by the Russian-Ukrainian literary scholar and ethnographer V. V. Kallash, the volumes were illustrated with photographs and decorative engravings and published by the Sytin firm, one of Moscow's prestigious publishers, over 1912–13. The first volume included an account of the Smuta, the Time of Troubles, describing how the young Michael Romanov came to the throne. Written by A. E. Presniakov, one of Russia's most accomplished historians, the account virtually ignored the fact that Tsar Michael came to the throne as the result of an election by a *sobor*, an assembly of the people that included not only the boyar elite (or part of it), but also the gentry, townspeople, and even Cossacks. Presniakov, following closely the already standard account of events by his colleague S. F. Platonov, recounted the events and analyzed the social composition of the *sobor*, but never

[1] Ulla Birgegård, ed., *J. G. Sparwenfeld's Diary of a Journey to Russia 1684–87*, Kung. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, Slavica Suecana, Series A, Publications, vol. 1 (Stockholm: Almquist & Wiksell, 2002), 60–61.The scholar and sometime diplomat Sparwenfeld was reporting the views of the Narva merchant Tunderfeld and his friends. Tunderfeld had a brother living in Moscow and the context was a discussion of the events of 1682. Sparwenfeld already knew that the Danish ambassador in Russia, Hildebrand von Horn, a friend of Sparwenfeld's, was in close contact with Prince Boris Golitsyn, the leader of the Naryshkin faction. Boris Golitsyn became one of the Swede's friends in Russia. Sparwenfeld's views were based on those of his contacts in Russia: *Sparwenfeld's Diary*, 228, 231.

commented on the fact that the tsar-autocrat was elected, or on the election as a form of succession to the throne.[2] Published after the 1905 revolution, the book's omissions had nothing to do with censorship and reflected the usual way of presenting Russian history at that time. On this issue little has changed since 1912. Historians have analyzed some of the better known cases of succession in great detail, but the process as a whole and the rules of succession have not found favor with scholars. They have assumed that succession to the throne was a matter of primogeniture, yet contemporaries did not see it that way. The Swedish polymath J. G. Sparwenfeld thought that the Russians decided succession by consideration of utility to the state, not by genealogy.

No state exists without a mechanism for the transfer of power from one ruler or group of rulers to another. In European history most states with powerful monarchs were hereditary. Hereditary succession by custom, tradition, and sometimes law removed the issue from the wishes and designs of great aristocrats and the populace as well. It restricted the ruling monarch to passing the throne to his eldest son (and occasionally daughter), but it kept power within the royal family. Outside of Europe some states had culture and traditions which included polygamy, such as the Ottoman Empire, the Tatar khanates, Persia, or China, and succession could be quite complicated, even when the eldest son was preferred. In Christian Europe, including Russia, monogamy radically simplified the problem, though it also meant that the chance of a ruler leaving no children at all was much higher.[3]

The throne of the monarch in Russia, the grand prince/tsar, is assumed to have been hereditary in the eldest son until Peter the Great's decree of 1722 that established testamentary succession. The practice of hereditary succession from father to eldest son, bypassing the ruler's brothers, is also supposed to have been established in the fifteenth or early sixteenth century by the conscious policy of the rulers. This is the assumption, though the only full study of succession practices after the Kievan era is the 1972 work of the German historian Peter Nitsche. The more recent account of Russell Martin is in the same vein.[4] Thus Russia seems to fit

[2] V. V. Kallash, ed. *Tri veka: Rossiia ot Smuty do nashego vremeni*, vol. 1 (Moscow: I. D. Sytin, 1912), 1–3; S. F. Platonov, *Ocherki po istorii Smuty v Moskovskom gosudarstve*, 3rd ed. (St. Petersburg: Ia. Bashmakov i Ko., 1910).

[3] Nicholas Vatin and Gilles Veinstein, *Le sérail ébranlé: Essai sur les morts, dépositions et avènements des sultans ottomans, XIV^e–XIX^e siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2003), 81–258. The Ming dynasty attempted, with some success, to ensure succession of the eldest son by the emperor's principal consort: Frederick W. Mote and Dennis Twitchett, eds., *The Cambridge History of China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), vol. 7, pt. 1, 192–193, 440–450, 461–465.

[4] Peter Nitsche, *Großfürst und Thronfolger: Die Nachfolgepolitik der Moskauer Herrscher bis zum Ende des Rjurikidenhauses*. Kölner historische Abhandlungen 21 (Cologne and Vienna: Böhlau, 1972); Russell Martin, "Anticipatory Association of the Heir in Early

the European pattern, but in fact the actual forms of succession and the concepts that surrounded them were not as simple as they have seemed. While historians have analyzed a few cases of succession (Vasilii III, Boris Godunov) to such an extent that it often appears that there is nothing new to find about those examples, there are many fundamental questions that remain unanswered. Was the Russian monarchy really hereditary? Or was the monarch's designation of the heir crucial? Did heredity imply primogeniture? Did the forms of succession strengthen the monarch? Did they make the state "autocratic" or "absolute" or at least point in that direction? Did these forms add an element of instability to the state, or was it strong enough to survive the changing fortunes of the ruling family? How did the instability of the early modern family influence the forms of succession? In the early modern era child mortality was enormous, and childhood diseases, not only hereditary bodily or mental anomalies, could make living children unfit to rule.

The need for an heir required the ruler to have a wife, with the result that succession was part of the issue in marriage politics. Since the rulers of Russia after 1503 married not foreign princesses, but Russian noblewomen, marriage politics are part of the succession question. The marriages of the tsars to Russian noblewomen have been analyzed by historians frequently if not systematically (Russell Martin apart), but foreign marriages did not entirely disappear from the agenda of the tsars. Boris Godunov and Tsar Michael Romanov both tried to find foreign princes to marry their daughters, the most important attempts being made with Denmark. These attempts were not irrelevant to succession, since no one could guarantee that the sons of the rulers would survive the perils of disease and accident. Boris, for example, promised Johan, his prospective Danish son-in-law, an appanage (Tver') in Russia. Boris had only one son: had the marriage taken place and the son died, Johan would have been the consort of the presumed heir, since there was nothing in law or custom that prohibited female rule, which in any case could have been a de facto regency for a child tsar. Regency was the case for the first years of the reign of Tsar Michael. Peter the Great turned to foreign princesses for a bride for his heir. As soon as he made his journey to Western Europe, the European courts began to show an interest in his

Modern Russia: Primogeniture and Succession in Russia's Ruling Dynasties." In *The Routledge History of Monarchy*, ed. Elena Woodacre, Lucinda H. S. Dean, Chris Jones, Russell E. Martin, and Zita Eva Rohr (Abingdon and New York, New York: Routledge, 2019), 420–444. Russell Martin's work on the tsars' marriages, and related to them, also contributes greatly to the topic: Russell E. Martin, *A Bride for the Tsar: Bride Shows and Marriage Politics in Early Modern Russia* (DeKalb, Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012).

son, at first for the heir's education, and ultimately tsarevich Aleksei married a German princess. All marriage negotiations involved succession. Exactly how remains largely unknown.

The presence of a potential heir meant that the tsar's sons had to be brought up to be fit rulers. The tsars also, as we shall see, presented their choices to the population, mainly but not exclusively the elites. Education and the rituals of presentation, as well as conceptions of succession, took forms that arose from Russian culture. Before the latter part of the seventeenth century, culture in Russia meant Orthodox Christianity as well as the unwritten customs of the Russian state. With the advent of various streams of Western culture after about 1660, education, presentation, and concepts began to change. Consequently, the story of the evolution of Russian culture as it touched on succession is part of the story. Again, the issue of succession has been studied in some very particular cultural forms (e.g., the court poetry of Simeon Polotskii), but as a whole has not been investigated.

As the nature of succession is a crucial part of the structure and functions of the state, it is entangled with the ideas historians use to describe the state. The terminology that historians employ to describe the past is not an abstract issue or one of mere pedantry. Aside from their pedagogical importance, these terms serve as shorthand for larger conceptions that provide a framework for analysis. Words can convey the uniqueness of the past or impose a modern framework that reflects modern ideologies. In Russian history the two fundamental organizing terms for the political history of the early modern era have been autocracy and absolutism. Both of them are essentially modern concepts, derived from late-eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century ideas of politics and the state. Absolutism comes from European history, though it was not a common usage in early modern Europe, coming into vogue in the time of the French Revolution and the liberal constitutional struggles of the first half of the nineteenth century. It referred to a government where the monarch was the sole source of law in the absence of any sort of legislature. Autocracy, in contrast, seems to be a more "Russian" notion, since the Russian word *samoderzhavie* has a history going far back into the Middle Ages. At the same time, its actual meaning for most scholars has been the same as absolutism, that is, unlimited rule. The problem is that this notion of Russian autocracy in the early modern era has crumbled as historians have provided more realistic accounts of the role of the boyar elite as well as the relations of the state to society as a whole. These more accurate portrayals of the operations of the state have produced a great deal of information on what the state was not (an autocracy as an "absolute" monarchy) but have not provided as much knowledge on how it

actually operated. Succession to the throne was central to those operations and thus its history throws some light on the utility of these terms.

Succession to the throne in Russian history is also entangled with the notion of absolutism for a very particular reason. When Peter the Great issued his succession decree in 1722, he also had his principal spokesman, the Ukrainian Bishop Feofan Prokopovich, write a tract in its defense, *The Justice of the Monarch's Will* (*Pravda voli monarshei*). This was the first political treatise in Russian history to make use of Western juridical and political thought. In Russian historiography this tract is normally labeled as a defense of absolutism. Absolutism as a term for historians of Russia really caught on only in the middle of the twentieth century, but it had a pioneer in the person of Georgii Gurvich. It was Gurvich who argued in 1915 that bishop Feofan's little book introduced into Russian thought the Western notion of absolute monarchy. In his basic contention about the presence of "absolutist" ideas in Prokopovich's tract Gurvich was wrong (and he later changed his mind about a crucial point), but his 1915 conclusions are still present in almost all writing on Peter's time and that of his successors.[5]

In recent decades historians of early modern Europe have shown increasing skepticism toward the notion of absolutism, some disregarding it entirely. Leaving it behind is not difficult, nor is it difficult for Russian historians to adopt an interpretation of autocracy that is more consistent with the values and reality of Russia in those centuries. Nevertheless, the issue of the tsar's power remains. It does seem that the state grew in size and importance and the ruler grew (if not without interruption) more powerful as well. If we are to assess these changes correctly, we need to understand the actual mechanisms of power, and that brings us back to succession to the throne. To understand the Russian state, we need to understand how its rulers transferred power from one generation to the next, a matter of evolving custom, not written law. Finally, in order to understand that transition we need to understand not just particular events, but how the Russian court and elite conceived the transfer of power. That conception in turn reflected the larger trends in the evolution of Russian culture. Until Peter's time, that understanding was part of a religious conception of the ruler and the state, one that focused on the moral personality of the monarch, not on sovereignty, law, or the

[5] Georgii Gurvich, *"Pravda voli monarshei" Feofana Prokopovicha i ee zapadnoevropeiskie istochniki*. Uchenye zapiski imperatorskogo Iur'evskogo universiteta 11 (Iur'ev: Tipografiia K. Mattisena, 1915). For the Prokopovich text, see A. Lentin, ed. and trans., *Peter the Great: His Law on the Imperial Succession in Russia 1722 – the Official Commentary (Pravda Voli Monarshei)* (Oxford: Headstart History, 1996) and *PSZ* VII, 602–643.

Aristotelian categories. In this area as in so many, Peter and his contemporaries made more than a revolution in state structure and military affairs. They also introduced into Russian culture a revolution of ideas, and in the area of political thought the succession problem was the trigger for that revolution. Hence the need to outline the major changes in Russian culture that affected the ideas of the monarch, succession, and the presentation of these ideas at court and sometimes outside of it.

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It is the argument of this book that absolutism is not a helpful concept in understanding the Russian state in the early modern era.[6] It was not the case that the tsar simply gave orders to a subject aristocracy and people. As Russian historians, in the West and Russia, have been demonstrating for decades, the boyar aristocracy and its leading clans remained at the center of power together with the Grand Prince/Tsar for several centuries.[7] Underneath that aristocracy the gradual consolidation of the lesser gentry and landholders into a nobility, and the growth of a modest but effective state administration, provided the state with a solidity that enabled it to survive social and political crises as well as the unpredictable fate of the ruling family. Russia's rulers spent much effort and time on securing succession, but they did not attempt to establish a system of automatic succession in the eldest son until 1797. Rather they strove to consolidate loyalty to the ruling family, the monarch himself, his wife, and all of his children. To secure a successor, they held to the practice of paternal designation, even though most custom would dictate that the

[6] Many Russian scholars no longer seem to need absolutism as a concept. See, for example, E. V. Anisimov, *Gosudarstvennye preobrazovaniia i samoderzhavie Petra Velikogo* (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 1997); D. A. Redin, *Administrativnye struktury i biurokratiia Urala v epokhu Petrovskikh reform* (Ekaterinburg: Volot, 2007). Others have used Marc Raeff's idea of the Polizeistaat to understand Peter's reforms: D. O. Serov, *Sudebnaia reforma Petra I: Istoriko-pravovoe issledovanie* (Moscow: Zerkalo-M, 2008); Marc Raeff, *The Well-Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change through Law in the Germanies and Russia 1600–1800* (New Haven, Connecticut and London: Yale University Press, 1983). Western historians who still use the term have nevertheless emphasized precisely that the ruler was not unlimited in fact: John LeDonne, *Absolutism and Ruling Class: The Formation of the Russian Political Order 1700–1825* (New York, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[7] See, for example, Nancy Shields Kollmann, *Kinship and Politics: The Making of the Muscovite Political System 1345–1547* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1987); Charles J. Halperin, *Ivan the Terrible: Free to Reward and Free to Punish* (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvani: Pittsburgh University Press, 2019); and the many works of A. A. Zimin and A. P. Pavlov. The elites of medieval Western Europe were also involved, formally and informally, with the ruler in decision-making long before the emergence of parliaments and assemblies of estates. As in Russia, the recording of these decisions in chronicles and documents reflected protocol as much as reality: Gerd Althoff, *Kontrolle der Macht: Formen und Regeln politischer Beratung im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: WBG, 2016).

eldest son was the principal heir of his father. The grand princes and tsars made their choice explicit by paternal benediction and by the inclusion of the heir in court ritual and government. All of these rituals evolved with the evolution of Russian culture in these centuries, but each new form or practice served the same goals.

The combination of all these practices was a compromise. The ruler explicitly designated his successor, usually his son, as a matter of his own will and desire. At the same time, this designation usually came on the ruler's deathbed. There is no information about the motives of the ruler in displaying the heir earlier during his reign, in political acts and ritual. In part this display accustomed the heir to the role of the monarch, if only as an observer, but it also accustomed the "public," the boyars, the court, and occasionally the people, to their next sovereign. The audience of these actions demonstrated their loyalty to the heir as well as to the ruler, as they did in the oaths of loyal service. The ruler was thereby ensuring succession in a world where he could generally count on the elite to support his family and his choice of heir, but not totally. Finally, the ruler had to think beyond his immediate successor. He needed to secure wives for all of his sons, all of them since he could not be sure which one would live to adulthood and be competent to rule. He also had to think about his daughters, unlikely as they were to rule, but who might produce sons who would rule in an exceptional case. Marriage decisions, domestic and foreign, also involved consultation with the elite. It is difficult to ignore these elements of negotiation in the process of succession. Negotiation with the elite about succession is in turn part of the larger issue of "advice" to the ruler, an important component of early modern Russian political culture.

When the monarch's family failed to produce an heir or political troubles meant a contested succession, the solution from 1598 to 1613 was to assemble the elite and people and choose a tsar. Effectively the same process, though in a much more disorderly manner, took place in 1682. These events might seem untypical or out of place, but they were not. Consultation of the population, mainly on foreign policy issues, was part of the political reality of Russia in the later sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth. Once elected, Tsars Boris Godunov and Michael Romanov strove to make clear their preferred successor, Boris without success and Michael without challenge. The reasons for success or failure are a story that involves elite politics. It also involved to some extent popular attitudes, but that is another story, one that makes sense only when the practices and concepts of succession in the ruling family have been clarified. It is that clarification of practices and concepts on the part of rulers and the political elite that is the aim of this work.

In short, the succession practices of the Russian state suggest that it operated by a combination of the authority of the monarch (his ability to decree), the informal consensus of the elite, repeated displays of the monarch's decision, and affirmation of its legitimacy from the elite and people. As the whole system was based on custom, not written law, there were occasional variants. Obviously the final word was normally with the Grand Prince/Tsar, who decided which of his descendants should succeed. At the same time, the explicit or implicit consent of the aristocratic elite seemed necessary to the tsar, as seen in the 1553 succession crisis and Peter's taking power in 1689. The rulers also repeatedly asked for oaths from the elite, ordinary gentry, and government servants to ratify this choice. The public demonstration of the tsar's choice of heir, especially after the 1660s, shows that the rulers thought it necessary to publicly display the choice to the elite and people. At the same time, the oaths and other evidence show that the object of loyalty was to be the entire ruling family, including the women, and not just the ruler and his chosen heir. All of these aspects of succession beyond the tsar's choice meant that the most fundamental acts of state were the result of a combination of forces and interests, not merely the autocratic choice of the ruler. The exact balance varied from case to case. It is not surprising that by custom the successor was most often the eldest son: this was the normal succession of property and land in early modern families, in Russia as elsewhere. Reality mandated the varied practices that we actually see, including on occasion bypassing the senior descent line and even electing the tsar.

All of these practices and concepts were intertwined with one another and larger developments in politics, society, and culture. It is this complex of issues around that transfer of power that is the subject of this book.

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