



## Secret Lives of the Tsars: Three Centuries of Autocracy, Debauchery, Betrayal, Murder, and Madness from Romanov Russia

By Michael Farquhar

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“An accessible, exciting narrative . . . Highly recommended for generalists interested in Russian history and those who enjoy the seamier side of past lives.”—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“An excellent condensed version of Russian history . . . a fine tale of history and scandal . . . sure to please general readers and monarchy buffs alike.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Tales from the nasty lives of global royalty . . . an easy-reading, lightweight history lesson.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Readers of this book may get a sense of why Russians are so tolerant of tyrants like Stalin and Putin. Given their history, it probably seems normal.”—*The Washington Post*

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"Farquhar brings all the delightful faults and quirks of the famous Russian dynasts to the forefront while providing an excellent condensed version of Russian history." --*Publishers Weekly*

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#### About the Author

**Michael Farquhar**, a former writer and editor at *The Washington Post*, is the bestselling author of the critically praised *Behind the Palace Doors*, as well as the national bestsellers *A Treasury of Royal Scandals*, *A Treasury of Great American Scandals*, *A Treasury of Deception*, and *A Treasury of Foolishly Forgotten Americans*. His work has been featured in a number of national publications, and he has appeared as a commentator on such programs as History's top-rated *Russia: Land of the Tsars* and *The French Revolution*.

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## Chapter 1

### Ivan V and Peter I (1682–1696): One Autocrat Too Many

A princess endowed with all the accomplishments of body and mind to perfection, had it not been for her boundless ambition and insatiable desire for governing.

—Peter I (“the Great”) on his half-sister Sophia

Tsar Alexis left three sons upon his death in 1676: two by his first wife, Maria Miloslavskaya, Feodor and Ivan; and one by his second wife, Natalya Naryshkina, the future Peter the Great. (See family tree.) The eldest son succeeded Alexis at age fourteen as Tsar Feodor III. Though keen of mind, he was not a promising sovereign given the numerous physical ailments (including what is now believed to have been scurvy) that left him weak and often immobilized. After a brief reign of six years, Feodor died without an heir. The next in line was the even less impressive Ivan, who was not only physically feeble but mentally disabled as well. Thus Ivan was bypassed in favor of his vigorous half-brother Peter. But that’s when Ivan’s big sister Sophia stepped in. A formidable woman at a time when most were humble and passive, Sophia helped orchestrate a bloody revolt that left Russia with two co-monarchs and Peter the Great with severe psychological scars that would remain with him for the rest of his life.

The petrified little tsar silently clutched his mother’s hand as the mass of murderous pikemen thronged beneath them, braying for blood. Then, amid a horrific roar, Prince Michael Dolgoruky was hoisted from a balcony above the frenzied crowd and violently cast down upon their sharpened weapons. He was instantly hacked to pieces. One by one, various boyars and other “traitors” were chopped to bits as well—their remains heaped onto a grisly pile that grew ever larger in Red Square. While young Tsar Peter watched the unfolding madness in stupefied terror (with the murder of his two uncles still yet to come), his older half-sister, Sophia, seemed to celebrate it. There was opportunity in the slaughter, and Sophia sensed it. Indeed, she emerged from the gore of the Kremlin massacre with autocratic powers no Russian woman had ever possessed before.

Sophia was never supposed to amount to anything—certainly not to become Russia’s sovereign in all but name. She was the sixth child of Tsar Alexis by his first wife, Maria Miloslavskaya, born at a time when Russian women—even royal women—were considered weak and inferior possessions of their husbands and fathers. “To tell the truth, the female sex is not at all venerated amongst the Muscovites as it is amongst the majority of the nations of Europe,” observed the Austrian envoy Augustin von Mayerberg. “In this country they are the slaves of men, who esteem them little. And the worst condition of all is that of the sisters and daughters of the Tsars.”

These royal princesses (or tsarevnas) were virtual prisoners behind palace walls, consigned to live in secluded apartments known as the terem. Their lot was to pray, do needlework, and wallow in boredom. Marriage was denied the tsarevnas because their precious royal blood made every Russian man unworthy of their hand—or even to look at them—while the heretical religions of foreign princes made matches with them impossible as well. Cut off from the world, without prospects, these perpetual spinsters found their only companionship in the dimly lit terem to be one another. “Not in one of the convents of the day was there so much strictness and restraint, so many fasts and prayers,” observed one commentator. It was a fate Sophia struggled against, and, remarkably, escaped.

“That strange alchemy which, for no apparent reason, lifts one child out of a large family and endows it with a special destiny had created Sophia,” wrote biographer Robert K. Massie. “She had the intelligence, the

ambition, the decisiveness which her feeble brothers and anonymous sisters so overwhelmingly lacked. It was almost as if her siblings had been drained of normal health, vitality and purpose in order to magnify these qualities in Sophia.”

Alone among her sisters, Sophia was granted the unusual privilege of being educated beside her brothers, and by all accounts she was a remarkably adept student. Her tutor, the eminent monk and scholar Simeon Polotsky, described her as “a maiden of great intelligence and the most delicate understanding, with an accomplished masculine mind.” Given her talents, there is some evidence to suggest that Sophia served as a valued counselor during the reign of her brother Feodor III. But when that frail, diseased tsar died childless in 1682, Sophia was faced with the most unwelcome prospect of losing whatever freedom she had attained outside the terem.

By tradition, the crown should have passed to her younger brother Ivan after Feodor’s death, but the fifteen-year-old boy suffered a number of maladies that some believed disqualified him from inheriting. As the Dutch ambassador Johann van Keller noted at the time, “Tsarevitch Ivan is acknowledged to be incapable of ruling on account of his feeble-mindedness and other mental and corporal handicaps.” That left the late Tsar Alexis’s more vigorous son, Peter, by his second marriage to Natalya Naryshkina—even if he was only nine. Patriarch Joachim, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, gathered an assembly of various classes from the vicinity of the Kremlin and asked who they thought should rule: Ivan or Peter.

The decision, nearly unanimous for Peter, devastated Sophia. She saw the power of her family, the Miloslavskys, slipping away in favor of her stepmother’s Naryshkin clan. And though the precise role she played in the bloody events that followed young Peter’s election as tsar remains murky, one thing is certain: She emerged triumphant.

By some accounts, Sophia was the prime instigator of a revolt by the streltsy—the pikemen and musketeers, fifty-five thousand strong, who guarded the Kremlin and who were sworn to defend the “true tsar.” Through lies and innuendo, she appealed to the most reactionary instincts of this hereditary force of Old Believers and other conservatives, described by Massie as “a kind of collective dumb animal, never quite sure who was its proper master, but ready to rush and bite anyone who challenged its own position.”

It was said that Sophia’s campaign against the new order began at the funeral of her brother Tsar Feodor, where, in defiance of all tradition, she made herself quite conspicuous, weeping and wailing as she followed the body. Afterward, she suggested something sinister had not only taken her late brother away, but also deprived her surviving brother Ivan of the throne.

“Look, people, how unexpectedly our brother Tsar Feodor was dispatched from this world by enemies and ill-wishers,” an anonymous Polish correspondent reported Sophia saying to a gathered crowd. “Be merciful to us orphans, who have neither mother nor father, nor our brother, the Tsar [Feodor]. Ivan our elder brother has not been chosen as tsar. If we have offended you or the boyars, release us alive to go to some foreign land and to Christian monarchs.”

Sophia has gained an enduring historical reputation as a monster who stirred up murderous rebellion—a legacy reinforced by one contemporary Frenchman’s unflattering (and unfounded) description of her as gigantic and hairy, with a bushel-sized head and a Machiavellian heart. Certainly the tsarevna was politically savvy, if not the ghastly ogress she was presented to be, but even without her coaxing, the streltsy were already ripe for revolt.

Discontent had been smoldering within a number of regiments due to various abuses by their colonels, some

of whom embezzled their pay or made them work at the officers' private estates. The soldiers sought redress as Feodor III was dying, but it was Peter's mother, Natalya, serving as regent for the recently elected boy tsar, who inherited the problem. Unsure how to proceed, the new government capitulated to the demands of the inflamed regiments and the colonels were severely punished—some being whipped, others banished. Now, having sensed its own strength, the ill-educated and superstitious streltsy were poised to strike at any perceived threat.

There was already grumbling among the ranks about the elevation of Peter as tsar over Ivan. "The streltsy kept indicating that the election of the new Tsar had been improperly conducted," reported Heinrich Butenant, commercial agent to the king of Denmark and one of the more reliable witnesses of this restless period. "They could not believe that the elder Prince, Ivan Alekseevich, was unfit to rule because of his poor eyesight and other accidents of fate." Furthermore, Butenant wrote, the streltsy "were most dissatisfied that the Naryshkins had become so powerful so quickly."

Indeed, the young tsar's relatives benefited tremendously from his accession and seemed to aggressively flaunt their status. Ivan Naryshkin, who, at the age of twenty-three, was elevated to the rank of boyar, gave particular offense with his arrogance. It was said, for example, that he had dared to try on the royal regalia, taken a seat on the throne, and grossly insulted Tsarevitch Ivan and the rest of the now-powerless Miloslavsky clan. Of what other evils were these upstart Naryshkins and their aristocratic allies capable?

"You yourselves can see what a heavy yoke the boyars have laid upon you and they have chosen God knows what kind of tsar," Prince Ivan Andrei Khovansky railed in a speech before the streltsy. "You'll see—not only won't they give you money and provisions, but you will have to do heavy labor as before and your children will be eternal slaves. What's worse, they will give you and us over to the bondage of a foreign foe, Moscow will be destroyed and the Orthodox faith eradicated."

The atmosphere in Moscow was almost electric with tension that spring of 1682. "The discontent of the streltsy continues," reported the Dutch ambassador, Johann van Keller. "All public affairs are at a standstill. Great calamities are feared and not without cause, for the might of the streltsy is great and no resistance can be opposed to them."

Their fury was about to become lethally focused. "It was to take but a small spark to ignite the wrath of the already restive streltsy against the 'traitors' in the Kremlin," wrote biographer Lindsey Hughes, "and Sophia and her party were to reap the benefits, quite possibly without having put in much preparatory spadework."

The explosion came on the morning of May 15—a day the monk Sylvester Medvedev reported as dawning in a "disturbed" fashion, as "the air became still, then a great storm brewed up, and dark clouds came over." A rumor was spread among the streltsy that the Tsarevitch Ivan—Russia's rightful ruler in the view of many—had been murdered by the usurping Naryshkin clan. Hearing this, the soldiers erupted in fury and prepared to attack. "We are going to the Kremlin to kill the traitors and murderers of the Tsar's family!" they shouted. A monstrous bloodletting was about to begin.

The enraged regiments poured into the Kremlin before the gates of the great citadel could be closed, charged up the hill into Cathedral Square, and amassed before the Red Staircase, which led from the square into the government complex known as the Palace of Facets. There the rebellious streltsy—"milling in with loud voices and brazen uncouthness and insubordination," as one contemporary reported—demanded satisfaction. "Where is the Tsarevitch Ivan?" they shouted. "Give us the Naryshkins and the other traitors! Death to the traitors!"



Confronted with an armed mob screaming for blood, the Tsarina Natalya had no choice but to produce her stepson Ivan in order to prove he was still alive. It had to have been a terrifying ordeal, but the regent bravely appeared at the top of the Red Staircase with Peter and Ivan on either side of her, each holding her hand. Seeing this, the mutinous crowd was stunned into silence. Natalya then addressed them: “Here is the Lord Tsar Peter Alexeevich. And here is the Lord Tsarevitch Ivan Alexeevich. Thanks be to God, they are well and have not suffered at the hands of traitors. There are no traitors at the palace. You have been deceived.”

Some of the streltsy were unconvinced and climbed the staircase to have a closer look. “Are you really Ivan?” they asked the half-blind and befuddled boy, who answered affirmatively. “No one is mistreating me,” he said, “and I have no complaints against anyone.” With that, the fury of the soldiers seemed to subside. Yet it was merely a lull.

Artamon Matveev, the friend and minister of the late Tsar Alexis (and caretaker of his wife, Natalya, before her marriage), was also a respected former commander of the streltsy. He managed to further placate the soldiers by gently admonishing them for their misguided rebellion, urging their dispersal, and reminding them of their duty to the tsar. But almost as soon as Matveev finished speaking and retreated back inside the palace, Prince Michael Dolgoruky, a commander of the streltsy, appeared before the simmering regiments and fiercely upbraided them for their outrageous behavior. It was a spectacularly ill-timed rebuke, for which Dolgoruky paid dearly at the business end of the streltsy’s pikes. Having now tasted blood, the beast was unstoppable in its search for more.

With their fury reignited, the streltsy stormed into the palace and spotted Matveev talking with the regent Natalya, who was still holding the hands of Ivan and Peter. The old man who had just managed to calm the agitated mob now fell victim to it. As the royal family looked on with horror, their confidant was ripped away from them, taken out front, and tossed over the stairway to be butchered the same way Dolgoruky had been. And the hunt continued. Rampaging through the palace, thrusting their pikes into any potential hiding place, the maddened streltsy searched for what appeared to be a preselected list of enemies.

Natalya and her son Peter were spared the streltsy’s violent retribution, though certainly not the terror that accompanied it. Other members of their family weren’t so fortunate. One of the regent’s brothers, Afanasy Naryshkin, was slaughtered after a court dwarf led a pack of soldiers to his hiding place behind the altar of the Church of the Resurrection. Another, the despised Ivan, was tortured for hours before he, too, was torn to pieces.

With the death of these hated Naryshkins, the bloodlust of the streltsy had at last been satiated. But not their preening sense of self-importance and instinct to survive. In addition to their demands for enormous pay arrears, as well as amnesty for the revolt, they insisted a triumphal column be erected in Red Square celebrating their recent deeds—with the names of their victims attached to it on bronze plates. The streltsy also sought to correct what they perceived to be a gross mishandling of the royal succession, when Tsarevitch Ivan was bypassed in favor of his younger half-brother Peter. Threatening further violence, they demanded that the throne be shared by both boys, with Ivan serving as the senior tsar.

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