

## Sophia Overthrown

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power in that era was enough to make of her a historic figure. Unfortunately, Sophia's womanhood was not only her distinction, it was also her undoing. When the crisis came, Muscovites were still unwilling to follow a woman in opposition to a crowned tsar.

Peter put Sophia in Novodevichy, and the gates of the convent closed permanently behind her. But in the century that followed, the role of royal women in Russia changed. Four female sovereigns succeeded Peter on the throne. An immense distance lay between the secluded creatures of the seventeenth-century terem and these spirited eighteenth-century empresses. And the greater part of the journey was made by a single woman, the Regent Sophia. Cut from the same cloth as these empresses, with the same determination and drive to rule, it was she who showed the way.

Peter himself, long after her deposing, described Sophia to a foreigner as "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." In the forty-two years of his reign, only one Russian stood up to challenge his right to the throne: Sophia. Twice, in 1682 and 1689, she pitted her strength against his. In the third and final domestic challenge to Peter's omnipotence, the Streltsy uprising in 1698, the one opponent whom Peter feared was Sophia. She had then been locked in a convent for nine years, but Peter instantly assumed that she was behind the uprising. In his mind, she was the only person strong enough to dream of overthrowing him.

That Sophia possessed such qualities-that she could frighten Peter, that she had the audacity to challenge him and the strength of personality to worry him even from inside convent walls-should not be surprising. She was, after all, his sister.