

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women Podcast. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by historian, author, and royal commentator Dr. Carolyn Harris, who teaches history at the University of Toronto and is here to tell us about the fascinating women surrounding Peter the Great, who ruled Russia from 1682 until his death in 1725, first as tsar and later as emperor. So why don't we do what therapists do and start with the mother? [Listen to Carolyn's previous episode on Queens and Revolution](#), or [read the transcript](#).

CH: When we think about Peter the Great's reign, often we think of the big achievements of his adult life, creating the Russian navy, fighting the Great Northern War, building St. Petersburg beginning in 1703. It's rare that biographers spend time on his childhood when he was effectively raised by a single mother and had six older half-sisters, one of whom was his regent when he came to the throne at the age of 10, and one younger sister as well. He grew up in a predominantly female household, and that may well have influenced his views on women's roles in society. As we see that later in his reign, as he introduced Western court culture in St. Petersburg in particular, and in Moscow, there was much more of a public role for women than there had been in previous reigns in the 16th and 17th century. So it's possible that the women in his family helped to shape his views on women in court culture more widely. His mother was Natalya Kirillovna Naryshkin, and she came from a minor noble family in Russia. In the 16th and 17th centuries, Russian rulers chose their brides by holding bride shows. There's an excellent book on this by Russell Martin called *A Bride for the Tsar*, about these events that took place at the Kremlin where the unmarried sisters and daughters of the nobility were summoned, and gradually the pool was narrowed. There was a dinner, there was then a final six candidates, and then finally the ring was presented to the winner, and this sounds a little like a reality TV show in many ways, and like many reality TV shows, there was backbiting and intriguing behind the scenes, as the winner of this bride show not only becomes the tsarina, but all of her family receive positions at court. So her relatives would have it made if a young woman was chosen from their family in this role, and often the women who were chosen came from the more minor nobility. They were not necessarily Golitsyns or Sheremetevs or the families that were part of the tsar's inner circle, all the way from Peter the Great's time through to the Russian Revolution of 1917. Often these were minor noble families, so these bride shows served as a means of social mobility, but also created very difficult court culture.

So for Natalya, she and her brothers were raised in the household of her godfather, Artamon Matveyev, and so she had a bit of an unusual upbringing for a Russian noblewoman of the 17th century. At this time, it was a status symbol in elite Russian circles for elite women to be secluded from the outside world. Peasant women, of course, labored in the fields with their spouses and their families. Merchants' wives, of course, had to work alongside their husbands, but it was a status symbol that you were a member of the nobility, that your wife and daughters and mother could be seen as little as possible. There was a whole parallel female social life of women visiting one another that was very different from the male social life. So elite men and women socialized separately, but this was not the case for Natalya. Artamon Matveyev was very conversant with Western circles. There was a thriving foreign quarter in Moscow in the mid 17th century, where there were royalist refugees from the English Civil Wars, German refugees from the Thirty Years War. Later in the 1680s, French Huguenots would arrive. This foreign quarter was supposed to be separate from the rest of Muscovite society to ensure that Catholics and Protestants weren't spreading their religious views to the Eastern Orthodox Russians. But there were cases of intermarriage, and Artamon Matveyev, Natalya's godfather, married a Scottish woman, a Eudoxie Hamilton, and so in the Matveyev household, the men and the women all sat down to dinner together, and this was a comparatively Westernized environment. And it would have very much come as a change for Tsar Alexei, who at the time he met Natalya was a 41-year-old widower. His first wife, Maria Miloslavskaya, from the Miloslavsky family, who had positions at court at that time, she had died in childbirth, giving birth to their 13th child. They had six surviving daughters and two sons, Fyodor and Ivan. Fyodor may well have suffered from cerebral palsy. Ivan certainly had a visual and speech impediment, and one historian speculates he might have had Down syndrome. It's very difficult to tell centuries later, but either way, there was a lot of pressure on Tsar Alexei to marry again in his 40s. Initially, he showed little inclination.

He'd been married to Maria since he came to the throne as a teenager. She had been there for his entire adult life. The presence of 13 children indicates that this was a close marriage to some degree. But spending time with his close advisor, Artamon Matveyev, he seems to have gotten to know the Matveyev household, and so he may well have met Natalya before there was a formal bride show, as when the bride show took place, it seems to have been very clear who the winner was going to be. Whereas previously the field had been a bit more wide open and there was more potential for someone unknown to come to the fore and perhaps have their prospects undercut by another family who wanted to come to the fore. Maria Miloslavskaya had been Tsar Alexei's second choice, but rumors had been spread about his first choice that she was unable to bear children in order to ensure that Maria, whose sister was married to one of the tsar's advisors, would be the winner in the bride show. But with Natalya, she seems to have been very carefully guarded through this process. There was no way for her position to be undercut.

And so at the age of 19, she marries 42-year-old Tsar Alexei, and having grown up in a westernized household, comparatively, not compared to what would come in the next generation with Peter the Great, but as someone who was used to having more freedom than other elite women of the time, she liked to travel around the Moscow environs. These tours seem comparatively sedate. She liked to visit all the neighboring convents nearby. But her traveling in the same carriage as her husband, when normally men and women socialized separately, that was considered notable. She liked to look out of the carriage and see the people and be seen by them. And most notably, she was interested in theater and sets up the first court theater at Tsar Alexei's court, bringing in actors from the foreign quarter to perform. And many people thought either Tsar Alexei was having his second youth, or perhaps he was having a midlife crisis, because during his first marriage, he had not shown an interest in western cultural pursuits. He'd been very interested in western military innovations, and on foreign expertise that would help him in his wars, but he had presided over a burning of western musical instruments, because his first wife associated that with Catholic and Protestant practices, whereas in the Orthodox Church, there were a cappella choirs that performed. So musical instruments were seen as being very western. So he'd gone from, in his first marriage, being very disinterested, to say the least, in western culture, and perhaps hostile to it in some ways, and being very much known for his piety, to this second marriage, where foreign actors are being invited into the palace to form a theater troupe. And so this was seen as Natalya's influence.

So this marriage takes place in 1671. She's 19, the widower Tsar Alexei is 42, and she gives birth to a healthy baby boy, the future Peter the Great, in 1672, and this really secured her position, as well as, by all accounts, being this very beautiful, graceful young woman who enjoyed court theatricals, and for there to be this lighter atmosphere at court than the very heavy piety that had been there in Alexei's first marriage. She was now the mother of a healthy son, and the children kept arriving. Another daughter, Natalya, was born the next year. Another daughter, Feodora, who died in infancy, and if Tsar Alexei had lived, it's likely the children would have kept arriving year after year, but Tsar Alexei dies in 1676 when Peter was just four years old, and there's a lot of speculation. Would Peter the Great's life and reign have been different if he had known his father? If his father, who was interested in Western military innovations, but not always the cultural innovations, had been there, would Peter have had a different upbringing? But instead, Peter spends his early childhood from the age of 4 to the age of 10 at the court of his elder half-brother, who becomes Fyodor III. Now, Fyodor III was very well-educated. He'd received a classical education, but as I mentioned previously, he may have suffered from cerebral palsy. He walked with a cane. He had difficulty with the physicality of a lot of Russian Orthodox church services. And so Fyodor had periods where he was dealing with ill health, but he seems to have been kindly disposed towards Peter. He was Peter's godfather, as well as his older half-brother. He arranged for there to be tutors for the young Peter, so things are relatively stable until Peter turns 10. Fyodor passes away. Fyodor's own wife and infant son had predeceased him.

So the question arose, who would be the next tsar? Would it be Ivan V, who had these various disabilities? But if he were in power, then the Miloslavsky family have all those positions at court. Or would it be the young Peter? And then the Naryshkin family, Peter's mother's family, they get to have those key positions at court, and both families had their own network of relatives. Something that Peter would do throughout his reign would

be to try to break the influence of these networks of relatives who were always jockeying for position at court. And ultimately, what happened is Peter's mother is pushed out. When we talk about Peter's half-sister, there's a violent uprising by the Streltsy, the musketeer regiments, in 1682. So Peter and his brother Ivan are crowned as co-tsars, but it's not Natalya who's the regent. A lot of members of her family, her brothers, are killed in the uprising that happens in 1682. It's Peter's older half-sister, Sophia, who emerges as the regent. And Peter, his mother, and his younger sister are pushed out to some degree. They leave Moscow. They go and live at Preobrazhenskoe, a country palace outside of Moscow. And after that, Peter and his younger sister, Natalya, are essentially self-educated. He spends a lot of time in the foreign quarter learning about shipbuilding and about the sciences. And his younger sister, Natalya, shares her mother's interest in the theater and takes up playwriting. So the two youngest children here in the wider imperial family in Russia are essentially having this free-range adolescence as it is Sophia who is the regent at court. And so Peter is left to his own devices. The uprising of 1682 seems to have had an effect on Natalya. She doesn't seem to have been that fun-loving person later in her life. She was very overprotective of her son. She didn't like him running around with foreigners, building boats. She wanted him at home. She feared for his safety and was very concerned that he might be eliminated by Sophia's faction. So she arranges his marriage to Evdokia Lopukhina. The Lopukhins were close to the Naryshkins in terms of the family dynamics at that time. This was a faction that was building so that Peter could seize power in 1689. And it's interesting that although Peter's mother becomes very overprotective, very focused on Peter overthrowing his sister and reigning in his own right, Peter wrote very affectionately to his mother throughout his life. He was very patient with all of those letters telling him to come home from boat-building, to spend time with his wife and his son when Peter was very much wrapped up in his own interests. And when Natalya died in 1694, Peter was quite devastated by that. And there's correspondence with his friends where he indicates he wishes his mother could have lived a longer life. So although it's clear that Natalya becomes more fearful and overprotective as she grows older because of what had happened to her family members in 1682, that Peter, being raised by a single mother, he was very close to his mother and she was a very important person in his life and was always somebody who was there on his side at a time when court politics meant that it was difficult to know who to trust.

AT: Yeah, it does very much have that ring of, it's not paranoia if they're actually out to get you. (CH: Yes.) And so speaking of the people who are out to get him, tell us more about his half-sister Sophia, because that seems like a really interesting family dynamic as well as a political dynamic. So how much of this was personal versus how much of it was political?

CH: Yes, Sophia is one of the most interesting characters in Russian history and her regency from 1682 to 1689 is a very significant period in terms of Russian foreign policy. And one can argue the consequences are still playing out to the present day in terms of her actions in Ukraine, adding Kyiv to the Russian empire at that time and very much viewing Ukraine as part of the patrimony that she thought that she should have control over. So it's very interesting to see that Sophia's regency continues to have a lot of consequences to the present day. She was the third of the six surviving daughters of Tsar Alexei and his first wife, Maria Miloslavskaya. It's interesting that Alexei, although he was engaged with foreign powers to a degree, he was constantly at war with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth to try to get control of Kyiv. The Ukraine then as now a battleground between Russia and other countries in Europe. So Alexei was engaged to a degree with foreign powers. He wasn't quite as cut off from the West as he's sometimes portrayed as, but he makes no effort to arrange dynastic marriages for his daughters. Ostensibly it was because there were no suitable orthodox Christian princely spouses and they could not marry beneath them within Russia, because the wife takes the title of her husband. But there seems to have been a more practical consideration as well, that in a court where those who married into the imperial family expected a great deal of precedence and positions at court, that for the tsar to have tried to incorporate six sons-in-law, they all would have shown up with their own relatives expecting preference. So it seems that Tsar Alexei thought that by keeping his daughters and his sisters unmarried he was reducing problems that his sons might encounter.

So it was a difficult life in some ways for the women of Tsar Alexei's family. They spent their time embroidering ecclesiastical vestments and raising their brothers as children and otherwise living in some ways like nuns, though their quarters were extremely luxurious. They weren't expected to live in an ascetic way and to practice self-denial. They had all the fine clothes, fine food, lots of servants in attendance but it was expected that they would not marry. Now Tsar Alexei introduces a new innovation in that he brought in a foreign tutor, Simeon Polotsky, a monk who he'd met in Lithuania during these endless wars with the Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth. And Simeon Polotsky was brought to the Russian court not only to teach Tsar Alexei's sons as much as he could, but also his daughters as well. So Sophia received this classical education that Peter the Great would not receive because of the upheavals of his adolescence. And in fact Peter the Great's daughter Elizabeth would reminisce when she was at her own lessons that her father would say, "oh, be grateful for this education as I didn't get to have that." So Peter was very conscious that his children would receive a classical education and his older sister had received that education but Peter did not have that. So Sophia studied with Simeon Polotsky. We don't know quite if she was able to speak Latin but she seems to have spoken fluent Polish. She was well read. She may have composed verses herself.

And then we're not sure about the personal dynamics. It's assumed she was hostile to her father's second marriage. Losing her mother would have been very difficult and then a stepmother who's within five years of age as herself comes in, sets up a court theater, the musical instruments that Sophia's mother had disapproved of, they're back in this theater. So we simply don't know how Sophia reacted to this that suddenly there's this more fun loving environment. It's seeming as though her father who'd been more austere is so much more relaxed with his second family. There's a lot of unanswered questions about what this was like for Sophia, that suddenly there's a new wife. There's a new son rather than the brothers she'd been educated with. She was quite close to her brother, Fyodor. There was another brother, Alexei, who had passed away, who she'd been educated with as well. And when Fyodor III, her full brother, comes to the throne in 1676 he has periods of ill health and that enables Sophia to be able to engage with affairs of state in a way that really wouldn't have been possible if Fyodor III was exercising power from the council chamber. But because his ministers often had to come to him in his bedchamber where it would have been fair that his sister would have been there looking after him during those periods of ill health, the personal and the political start to come together.

So Sophia is able to make some political contacts during her brother's reign. And one of the most important contacts is Vasily Golitsyn, who would go on to be her foreign minister, her first minister, as foreign envoys described him, and there's been a lot of speculation that he may have been her lover as well. There's a couple of letters in cipher where she describes him as "my light" and "I wish I could embrace you" but whether she actually did embrace him as something else altogether. It's a little like Elizabeth I and Robert Dudley where clearly there was a close association and Sophia had warm feelings towards Golitsyn, but also being a woman stepping out into the public sphere her reputation had to be unimpeachable. She got rid of the court theater that had been there during the later years of her father's reign and even her tutor's printing press, which brought some western books into circulation. She shut that down as well, emphasized she was following the patriarch of the church's instruction. So Sophia put on this very clear public image of piety and devotion to her family. So if she was having an affair with Golitsyn, it would have had to be very discreet as she was very conscious that as she was transcending the boundaries of what women were supposed to do in this society, her reputation had to be unimpeachable.

So she was quite close to her brother Fyodor and then his death, what happens in 1682, the prospect of Peter becoming tsar meant that she would be sidelined. Peter's regent would be his mother and the Naryshkin relatives would be in. And some of them were apparently quite tactless at Fyodor III's funeral about, now they had arrived. And that Sophia found this very off-putting, that it just it looked like her stepmother and her stepmother's relatives were taking over. At the same time there's a lot of discontent in the Streltsy regiments, the musketeers of that time. They were poorly paid, many of whom were old believers following the religious rituals that have been outlawed by Tsar Alexei. And they were concerned about foreign influence coming in through Artamon Matveyev and all sorts of rumors spread that Ivan V, one of the co-tsars, Peter's half-brother,

was being treated badly that the Naryshkins were taking over and enriching themselves. So these musketeer regiments march on the Kremlin and Peter's mother has a very courageous moment where she appeared in public holding the hand of her stepson and her son to show, "we're all here, we're fine, nobody is mistreating Ivan." But some sort of a scuffle breaks out at the Kremlin that one of the Streltsy commanders very rudely orders them back to their barracks and accuses them of overstepping. And somehow this expands to a wider massacre that took the lives of Natalya's godfather and mentor Artamon Matveyev, her brother Ivan. Her father is forced to become a monk. Many other members of the Naryshkin faction are murdered during the Streltsy uprising of 1682. And the question arises, did Sophia incite this? Foreign envoys had all sorts of theories that she was sending her chambermaid out with messages to Golitsyn to pass on to the Streltsy about when to rise up. Others claim that she was shouting from a window, ordering the the Streltsy into action. We simply don't know whether she orchestrated this entire uprising or, when an uprising happened as sometimes happens when there are concerns regarding the succession, that she was determined to be the person who was in charge and presented herself as a conciliatory figure.

She would be the regent for the two tsars who would be crowned jointly, her full brother and her half brother. It's very interesting that Sophia in the early years of her regency keeps a low profile. There's a double throne where Ivan and Peter sat on this throne where there was a little sort of gap in the back behind the throne so that Sophia or one of her associates could quite literally give the boys instructions about what they were saying to foreign leaders. Peter would be present for major ceremonies, but as I mentioned previously, he was generally out in the countryside with his mother and his younger sister. So Sophia is very much a power behind the throne in these early years of her regency and that changes with the Treaty of Moscow in 1685, where she is able to negotiate with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth that they will cede Kyiv to the Russian Empire in exchange for a very large cash payment and then the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and Russia would then become allies and invade Crimea. It's very striking how Sophia's policies in the 1680s would be recognizable in Russia today, that she was trying to legitimize her rule with a victorious war. Once she gets control of Kyiv, suddenly foreign ambassadors are being invited to kiss her hand. They're referring to her as the queen. Her signature is appearing on documents. She had a great deal of confidence.

This is at the same time where Peter is now quite an energetic adolescent his own mother's encouraging him to seize power but Peter was not only tied up with his own interests in boat-building but he knew as long as Sophia was delivering military victories, he was not going to be able to overthrow her. That if she had the Streltsy regiments, the musketeers on her side, they are getting all of the loot and the power from Sophia's victories, that Peter knew that the moment wasn't right, that right after Sophia's delivered Kyiv to the Russian Empire - this is not the time to try to overthrow Sophia. He had to wait until she miscalculated and that happens on the Crimean campaign. She sends Vasily Golitsyn to lead the troops in the Crimea and Vasily is unsuccessful. There's a lot of reasons for that - the supply chain, the alliance with the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, which has been the traditional enemy, breaking down. But Vasily does not deliver Crimea he does not deliver a big success there, but Sophia throws the victory parades as though he did. And Peter refuses to play ball.

Previously he'd always turned up at these ceremonies approving everything that Sophia did, but now he was refusing to do so. And with Sophia having these defeats, he is able to get the support that he needs. He built up his own regiment, the Preobrazhenskoe regiment that would remain the personal guard of the tsars through to the revolution. And he's able to push Sophia out. He keeps his disabled half brother Ivan as his co-ruler. He explains to Ivan "there's a surviving letter," that "Sophia has not respected our interests," that "we will rule together and I will honor you as though you are my father." So he treats his half-brother with a great deal of conciliatory action and it seems that Peter and Ivan were quite close. Because of Ivan's disabilities he was never a threat to Peter and Ivan's own wife, Praskovia Saltykova, came from a very wealthy family, was in favor of Peter's reforms and acted as first lady of the court when Peter was between wives. So it seems that Ivan and particularly Ivan's very active and energetic wife were not a threat to Peter in the way Sophia was. So Peter removes his sister Sophia to a convent. She doesn't have to take the vows, she can live there in some luxury. Peter is trying to make this look like a smooth transition of power - he has come of age, he doesn't need

a regent, Sophia's gone into honorable retirement. And she had had that public image of piety, so this could be made to look as though she is now devoting her life to the church. Vasily Golitsyn is sent into exile, she's sent to a convent but this is not the last we hear of Sophia. Peter seizes power in 1689 but later in 1698 he goes abroad for this extended grand embassy and the Streltsy regiments look to Sophia, who by then Peter, who's married to Evdokia Lopukhina, they have a young son, Alexei. Perhaps Sophia thought if Peter never returns from being abroad, she could go back to being regent for this little boy, for Peter's son and be back in power once more. So there's another Streltsy revolt. Peter cut short his touring in order to come home and put this down. He quite brutally breaks the Streltsy regiments, physically. There's accounts of Peter wielding the axe at some of these executions. It's as if all of that pent-up fury for being a helpless 10-year-old and seeing his mother's godfather and brother being massacred by the Streltsy, that Peter as an adult simply went on the rampage. And it's very curious here that he doesn't physically punish Sophia. This is a tsar who would go on to sentence his own son to death. Clearly he didn't exempt his family from loyalty to himself and could be quite brutal towards people who were quite close to him. And yet in Sophia's case, even though in his travels he'd learned about Elizabeth I and Mary Queen of Scots and he compared him and Sophia to those two figures, he insists that Sophia take the veil and is now enclosed as a nun. So she's effectively politically sidelined. But she lives until 1704 and it's interesting to see that she is not executed even though she's the figurehead in this uprising. And there's been speculation that where Peter tended to be extremely harsh, it was in cases of weakness and he viewed his own son as a weak figure, whereas Sophia in many ways was a female version of Peter. And he seems to have respected her, even as they were on opposite sides of what was both a political and a family conflict. And if we look back to the 1682 uprising it would have been very easy for 10-year-old Peter to have been accidentally or otherwise killed in the midst of that Streltsy revolt. So Sophia had spared his life back in 1682 and he would do the same in 1698.

Peter in his later years, according to some foreign envoys, expressed some regret that from childhood that he and Sophia were opposed to one another. He did admire some of her accomplishments particularly the you know absorbing Kyiv into the Russian empire. She also negotiated a treaty with China but where the border was between the Russian and Chinese empires and that treaty, the Treaty of Nerchinsk, is still quoted today in Russian-Chinese relations in terms of exactly where the border was placed. So Peter seems to have admired some of Sophia's accomplishments, even though they were at times opposed to his own interests. And so she was able to have degree of a comfortable retirement even after trying to keep him from the throne, rebelling against him. Undoubtedly Peter's mother Natalya probably wanted harsher treatment for Sophia but on some strange level Peter seems to have respected her, that she was a worthy opponent in some of these conflicts. Whereas we see him really coming down on various figures who he perceived as weak or who projected an image of humility but were actually plotting against him. But somebody who came out and plotted against him openly he seems to have oddly respected that. So there's a lot of very unusual personal dynamics here between Peter and his half-sister. But certainly when we look at later in Peter's reign when, because of his treatment of his son, there was a shortage of male heirs, certainly female succession wouldn't have been an idea that was foreign to him because Sophia had been an effective ruler for seven years. So it's interesting, we look at Peter the Great's reign and it's preceded by the regency of his sister and then it's succeeded by the age of empresses when so many female members of Peter's family would end up wielding power.

AT: And so just to go back a bit, the same year that he ousts Sophia as regent, Peter also marries his first wife and she did not have an easy time of it from what I'm seeing.

CH: No, Peter's mother Natalya held the bride show, this is the last bride show in Russian history, in order to choose a bride for her son. And this bride show resulted in Evdokia Lopukhina being chosen as Peter's wife. Peter was 17. Evdokia was 20. He seems to have been rather bored by the whole procedure. He wanted to get back to boat-building and his mother was arranging this marriage for him. But Natalya saw this as very important - if he was married, that sent a sign that he was an adult, that he didn't need a regent anymore. His half brother Fyodor had been ostensibly reigning on his own behalf from the age of 14 and here was

17-year-old Peter with a regent. So the marriage was very significant in that way. We see instantly there's a personality clash. Peter had spent a lot of his adolescence in the foreign quarter. He was fascinated by all things foreign. Evdokia had had a very traditional upbringing. She was raised to be a very conventional, pious Muscovite elite woman and we see that in her letters to Peter when he was off boat-building, that she writes, "your humble slave, I kiss your feet, please send me news of your health." It's very much the conventions of the time of how she thought a woman in her position who'd been raised from the minor nobility was supposed to address the tsar of all the Russia. And unfortunately for Evdokia, Peter really disliked groveling humility. He was on the receiving end of it a lot because he was the tsar of Russia but even among his own advisors and those who were petitioning him, he would say that he wanted to see less humility and more zeal in service towards myself and the state. He really found groveling humility off-putting. And particularly in relations with women we look at his his letters to his second wife, there's a lot of bantering, there's a lot of inside jokes. He seems to have enjoyed being around women who he could talk to and have this kind of joking relationship with. And he discovered the women of the foreign quarter and had a mistress there, Anna Mons, a vintner's daughter. So Evdokia's piety, her humility, her modesty, everything that she had been raised to present herself in this way as the ideal consort to the tsar, Peter seems to have found that off-putting.

Now popular culture portrayals of Peter the Great such as the 1986 TV miniseries that has Vanessa Redgrave as Sophia imagines there being a problem from the wedding night, that Peter wants to consummate his marriage and Evdokia is praying for hours and not getting to bed. So the pop culture depictions imagine them having a problem from the beginning, but it doesn't seem to have been a physical issue. Evdokia was described as a great beauty. They had two sons one of whom, Alexei, would have this deadly conflict with his father, and the other, Alexander, died in infancy. It doesn't seem to have been a physical issue, it seems to have been a clash in personalities. And gradually we get a sense of Evdokia becoming frustrated that she is doing everything right in her view, following all the religious rituals. She's given birth to a son, she is modest and pious and yet Peter's spending time with Anna Mons in the foreign quarter. So there is an account of Peter coming back from the foreign quarter and bringing his wife some presents, trying to smooth things over and Evdokia just yelling at him, throwing the presents back at him, she doesn't want to hear about his foreign harlot, she's had it. And this would have come as great shock to Peter, who probably thought he had this very submissive wife and he found that dull but otherwise unoffensive. But as the marriage progressed, Evdokia becomes more and more assertive that she deserves to be treated much better than she is.

So they have one surviving son Alexei but Peter leaves his first wife with his mother and younger sister a lot of the time. He spends little time with her beyond conceiving their sons and then he goes on a foreign tour and this is where we have the big Streltsy rebellion where Sophia is the figurehead there. When he returns, he puts down that rebellion and he tries to end his marriage. He wants to send Evdokia to a convent, not one in Moscow but one out in Suzdal, far away. And Evdokia, who had been so submissive early in her marriage, apparently had a four-hour argument with her husband. She would not be separated from her 8-year-old son, she would not step down from this position. It's a little like Catherine of Aragon and Henry VIII, this very clear sense of her own dignity. She had done everything right in her view. She'd never heard of an empress or tsarina who gave birth to sons being put aside. But this was outrageous and her fear was that Peter had found a princess on his foreign travels and that some Catholic or Protestant was going to come to raise her son and it wasn't happening. And eventually after four hours of seems that the tsar and tsarina having a shouting match, Peter called a postal carriage and the guards dragged Evdokia to the carriage and she's sent off to Suzdal where she lived in some obscurity. Some of the women of Peter's family, both his younger sister and his half-sisters, objected to how Evdokia was being treated. One of the effects of Peter unloading his wife on the female members of his family is they had become quite good friends with her by this time and objected to the way she was being treated, separated from her son. We see at least one of Peter's half-sisters, Marfa acts as a kind of conduit to bring her news of her son. So she wasn't quite as isolated as perhaps Peter had hoped. She still had her family networks. Her son is handed over to Peter's younger sister Natalya to be raised by her, Natalya who was uneasy with the breakdown of this marriage. And then Peter in many ways puts his first wife out of his mind and rather than marrying a princess he ends up marrying his second wife who came from quite

humble origins. But ultimately when Peter is in conflict later in his reign in 1718 with his then-grown son Alexei he looks at those networks of his surviving half-sisters, of the Lopukhins, the traditionalists at court and wants to see how they are connected to Evdokia. And so envoys are sent to Suzdal and they find that Evdokia had left the convent. She was dressing in secular garb, she'd met a nice army officer. She was living her life and Peter was outraged. He considered this an indignity that the wife he put aside couldn't simply move on and have an affair with a commoner, that was unacceptable. The army officer, Stepan Glebov, is impaled. He was very brutally treated. Some of the fellow nuns who had who had basically allowed Evdokia to live a more secular life are knouted and whipped. And so Evdokia after that is quite enclosed in a nunnery, but she outlived Peter and she outlives Peter's second wife.

She lives long enough that in 1727, her grandson, as before Peter had sentenced his son Alexei to death, Alexei had been married and had two children. So Evdokia's grandson Peter II who becomes tsar at the age of 11 in 1727, actually travels to the convent deciding he's going to liberate his grandmother. And Evdokia by then, she reacted badly to seeing her grandson in western garb. Perhaps that was triggering on some level of the misery of her first marriage they Peter's foreign mistress and the way she hadn't been allowed to behave the same way after they had gone their separate ways. So Peter II brings his grandmother to a convent in Moscow where she's able to live in more comfort but she refuses to join what is now quite a westernized court. But she lives into the reign of Peter's niece, the empress Anna, who treated her with a great deal of deference. So Evdokia manages to outlive a lot of the key figures in Peter the Great's reign. But it was quite an unhappy life. Her only surviving son Alexei is sentenced to death by his own father Peter the Great and dies in prison. She had possibly two sons Alexander and Paul who die in infancy. Later on, her lover is impaled, she's forced into seclusion. So it was a long life but it was quite an unhappy one. But we see evidence just by the way she tries to live her own life after the breakdown of her first marriage and confronting Peter about his mistress that because of her letters following these conventions describing herself as Peter's humble slave, she's been viewed as a bit of a doormat for a very long time. But there's evidence that underneath all of these conventions of how she thought she needed to behave, there was a strong personality there who tried to insist on her own rights. And sadly that did not end well for her or for those who were closely associated with her.

AT: Now before we get into Peter's second wife, who I think is perhaps better known, shall we say, than his first wife (CH: Yes.) was there anything else you wanted to tell us about his sisters? Because we talked about Sophia, but as you mentioned there were quite a few half-sisters from his father's first marriage as well as his sister Natalya, so was there anything else you wanted to tell us about any of these ladies?

CH: Well there's a dramatic difference in terms of Peter's relations with his full sister versus his half-sisters. He was very close to his younger sister Natalya. There are letters back and forth that had the inside jokes. the bantering. They seem to have been really close to one another. And the younger Natalya was very supportive of Peter's westernizing reforms. She shared her mother's interest in the theater and she wrote plays and the moral of a lot of these plays was how obedient the people should be to Peter and not rise up to him. So she very much recognized the power of culture in the theater to act as a form of political propaganda. Whether she was consciously doing that or not she saw the power of the arts, that this westernization program that Peter introduced, that it couldn't simply be military, that there was a place for the theater, for the ballet, for introducing a lot of these cultural currents. So she opened the first theater in Saint Petersburg. It didn't long outlast her passing in 1716. And she also seems to have been a bit of an intercessory figure when Peter wasn't getting along with other members of his family. She tried to intercede for Evdokia, for Peter's first wife, although they were clearly different personalities. Natalya went along with Peter's western innovations whereas Evdokia was hostile. That these two women had basically been living together all of this time when Peter was traveling abroad, so clearly there there was a bond there and they'd both been quite closely involved in raising young Alexei. So we see Natalya tried to intercede for Evdokia and then later she was quite closely involved in the upbringing of Alexei. And Alexei, who would marry Charlotte Christine of Wolfenbüttel, a marriage to a German princess arranged by his father. Alexei has two children, I've mentioned Peter II who tries to liberate his

grandmother from the convent, but there was also a little girl who was named Natalya. So it's clear Alexei had fond memories of his aunt. She dies in 1716 and it's interesting, the complete breakdown of relations between Peter and his son happens in 1718. Perhaps if Natalya lived longer, there might have been some chance to try to intercede on her nephew's behalf, try to persuade Peter that Alexei wasn't as much of a threat or a head for the traditional faction at court as Peter had become convinced of. So she acts as a kind of intercessory figure. She's one of the first women to appear in public in Peter's reign. The foreign envoys note how previously women socialized and men socialized but that a sort of curtain had come down and there was Natalya with her ladies-in-waiting. Some of her ladies-in-waiting would become mistresses of Peter at various times and others became the wives of his closest friends. Her lady-in-waiting Darya Arsenyeva, for instance became a very good friend of Peter's second wife and then the wife of Peter's close friend Alexander Menshikov. So there was a kind of circle of women around Natalya, many of whom she probably met when they were there for that bride show where Evdokia was chosen. So Natalya's friends and associates ended up marrying a lot of Peter's associates or some were involved with Peter. And so we see there being a sort of court there.

It's very different in terms of Peter's relations with his half-sisters. He very closely associated them with Sophia. Marfa had been running letters back and forth to the Streltsy from Sophia while Peter was away on his travels in 1698 and she is forced to become a nun as well. Another of his half-sisters, Maria, he later accuses of colluding with his son against him. And it's interesting, Peter's religious reforms, while he saw a place for the clergy who perform baptisms and marriages and funerals, he tries to reduce the number of monasteries and convents. He seems to have viewed convents as where sedition happened, where there seemed to be women opposed to him who were plotting against him and that may have been because of Sophia managing to become the figurehead of a revolt from her convent in 1698. And her sisters, some of whom became nuns as well, also being able to use these these convents as places where they could meet with their associates. So it's interesting to see that Peter becomes very hostile to monasteries and convents. He found his older half-sisters could be very difficult to deal with when it came to his reforms. He expected the whole family to move to St Petersburg in 1703. Now his sister-in-law Praskovia agreed to that. His other sister-in-law Marfa, who was Fyodor III's widow, also was moving to St Petersburg. Marfa's brother Fyodor Apraxin was a close friend of Peter's. Also Peter's younger sister, but the older half-sisters often pled ill health or inability to travel. So we see Peter basically writing to his younger sister, trying to get her to organize the women of the imperial family and get them to St Petersburg as the older ones really didn't want to be a part of this westernized court that Peter was establishing there. But Peter very clearly believed that, if it wasn't evident that he had control over his family, it would look as though he didn't have control over the state. So we see a lot of Peter trying to manage the women in his family and to get them all on the same page with his reforms. And some of the younger ones go along with what he wants, either out of their own self-interest or being genuinely curious about this newly westernized court that he's setting up. And some of the older ones were, they found ways of passively-aggressively or aggressively-aggressively defying their younger brother, whether it was colluding with Sophia, with his son or simply pleading ill health or other commitments, that they weren't going to move to St Petersburg where they would be very closely monitored.

The last of Peter's half-sisters Maria, she lives until 1723 so none of these sisters outlives him. But certainly he associated that whole faction of older half-sisters with Sophia and viewed them as being in her in her camp, whereas his younger sister Natalya the playwright was in his camp. So it's interesting to see how the conflicts between those two families the Miloslavskys and the Naryshkins, the families of Tsar Alexei's first and second wives, it plays out in the next generation in terms of how their various children and in-laws view one another.

AT: I just love this idea that he's using the convents as basically a warehouse for troublesome women (CH: Yes.) and then he acts all like shocked Pikachu face that drama is brewing in the convents. What did you think was gonna happen?

CH: Yeah, but it's very interesting that Peter is the last Russian leader to divorce while in office until Vladimir Putin. And Peter saw the convent as somewhere to unload troublesome half-sisters, his troublesome first wife,

that he saw this as a place where where he could place difficult women and never hear from them again. And in fact he does end up facing resistance from some of the women in his family who he tried to discard in this way. Peter was not the first Russian ruler to view the convents as somewhere where troublesome women could be placed. Ivan the Terrible, who'd been married at least seven times, perhaps eight, some of the wives who he'd tired of were placed in convents. And we see during the time of troubles between the Rurik dynasty and the Romanov dynasty when the Romanovs under Peter's grandfather, Michael Romanov, come to power in 1613, we see that during that, the different factions fighting each other during the time of troubles. When a faction lost the political conflict, often the women were sent off to convents. So Michael Romanov's own mother, Xenia, she was the nun Martha by the time he was crowned tsar because his parents at one point had been on the wrong side of the political intrigues. So they had been forced to become a monk and nun. So it's interesting, once Michael comes to power, his mother, the nun Martha, in 1613 is a very powerful figure. His father becomes patriarch of the church. So neither of Michael Romanov's parents could formally wield power in the secular realm because they've been forced to be a monk and nun. But they could wield power through the church.

So Peter should have known even just looking at his own great-grandmother, Michael Romanov's mother, that just because a member of the the ruling family had been made a nun, that didn't mean her political influence or her networks of power necessarily disappeared. That we see many cases in 16th and 17th century Russian history of women being forced into convents, but that's not the last that we hear of them. And they find ways to exert power in other ways. Convents have always been places where female networks are established, as we see Peter's efforts to not only place half-sisters, his first wife, in a convent. It meant that there were a network of women who knew one another in these convents and their associates and families as well. Russian Orthodox convents at this time, the emphasis was on enclosure and prayer rather than undertaking social work outside the convent. So perhaps Peter thought that the comparatively more enclosed rule of Russian Orthodox convents meant that he could neutralize some of the more troublesome women in his life. But that was not necessarily the case, particularly with the social hierarchy at the time. If a member of the ruling family was placed in a convent, the nuns there who were of a lower social status would defer to her and deliver any letters that she wanted delivered, that the social hierarchy still existed with behind the walls of these convents. So women of the ruling family could still keep in touch with their networks secretly or more openly from there.

AT: And so something that I think we're also reflecting here in Peter's personal life is this transition that you were discussing about moving away from a very insular Russia into a more westernized version. And I think that's really telling in the context of his first wife and his second wife because my understanding is that Evdokia was the last Russian-born wife of a Russian monarch.

CH: Yes. Peter wanted to shift the foreign relations at court from there being these marriages to minor Russian noble women to dynastic marriages and marriages to foreigners. And he wanted his daughters and his son and his nieces to marry foreign royalty, not simply because of all the diplomatic connections that could be made at a time when Peter was fighting the great northern war from 1700 to 1721 and then he's at war with the Ottoman Empire as well. He needed allies but also he saw that when a foreign match took place, that the princess or the prince arrived on their own. They didn't bring all their in-laws with them in order to change the balance of power at the Russian court. And Peter had all that childhood experience of basically the relatives of his father's first wife turning on the relatives of his own mother, his father's second wife and this conflict turning deadly. And so Peter really wanted to break that network of all of these interconnected relatives forming factions at court. It's one of the reasons he builds St Petersburg. He gets out of Moscow, which was the hotbed of court intrigue. And also Peter rather like Henry VIII elevating figures like Thomas Wolsey or Thomas Cromwell, who were from comparatively common origins, Peter the Great, while he did have some friends among the traditional aristocracy, Artamon Matveyev's son had managed to survive what the uprisings of 1682 and was a friend of Peter's. Fyodor III's brother-in-law Fyodor Apraxin was another friend of Peter's. He had some aristocratic friends, but he also wanted there to be people close to him who owed everything to him, who

didn't have outside networks. And this perhaps explains why he doesn't marry a princess himself who would have her own diplomatic contacts and be able to act as his equal in some ways. And we discuss Peter's travels in more detail with their cases of foreign princesses critiquing Peter's table manners and otherwise the degree to which he was able to behave on state occasions in western Europe. So Peter didn't want any of that in his personal life. Certainly Evdokia thought he was going to marry a princess, and that's why she was being put aside. But instead Peter marries his second wife, Marta Skavronska who would go on to take the name Catherine. She's not to be confused with Catherine the Great, that's the wife of Peter's grandson. But Marta Skavronska, her life has been described by the French philosopher Voltaire as being more interesting than Peter's because Marta Skavronska really emerged from the bottom layer of society. Then she becomes Peter's mistress, his consort, his empress and then later his successor and becomes the first sovereign ruler of Russia who's female and crowned. Sophia, despite her best efforts had never been crowned. So there's this remarkable Cinderella story when we look at Peter's second marriage. And many European commentators found it

difficult to understand particularly after the Battle of Poltava in Ukraine, where Peter had had a big victory over the Swedes and over the Ukrainian Cossacks who sided with the Swedes, wanting independence from Russian control and Peter had oppressed the Ukraine at that time.

After this big victory in 1709 it looked as though Peter could marry a princess but while he was interested in his son marrying a princess and his daughters marrying princes he basically wanted a wife who owed everything to him and so Marta Skavronska has a very interesting transformation from peasant woman to empress.

AT: Well it's also worth noting that it was almost a decade between marriages, so whether that's because he was, let's say pushed into his first marriage with someone that he did not particularly like, I feel like I'm understating things there. (CH: Yes.) But you know it makes sense that he would say "I'm just gonna not be married for like a decade" before he decided to marry Marta. Like it seems like it was a very, "this is someone that I want to be married," to which seems kind of diametrically opposite from his first marriage.

CH: Yes. Peter went through a period where he had a son, he had a mistress in the foreign quarter and his sister-in-law Praskovia, the wife of his late brother, acted as the first lady at court. And so she was the one receiving the wives of prominent families and then once women are appearing in public more often that she's acting in this role and so Peter seems to have viewed her as a kind of honorary sister who was on his team. And so he had Praskovia to undertake the ceremonial roles of an empress. He had Anna Mons in the foreign quarter for the personal relationship. He had a son who was being first raised by his younger sister and then by his friend Menshikov. And Alexei was very bitter about that, he felt someone low-born was being placed in charge of him and that helped contribute to the breakdown of relations with his father. So there's a long period where Peter doesn't seem to have seen any great need to remarry. Perhaps at one point he was thinking of marrying a princess if he had a big enough victory or was successful enough that he would be able to make a dynastic marriage of this kind. But then he meets Marta Skavronska and she had had a very difficult upbringing. We think she was born around 1683 so she's about 11 years younger than Peter and she's thought to have been either Estonian or Lithuanian. If you visit Tallinn, you can see the Kadriorg Palace that Peter built for her there just outside Tallinn. And that is seen as evidence that she was likely Estonian and that perhaps she was from that part of the world and that's why Peter built this very beautiful palace for her that's now the art museum in Tallinn and it's well worth visiting.

Marta lost her parents at a young age. They may have been runaway serfs. Her father was said to have been a gravedigger, her mother a washer woman and she was put into domestic service in what is now Latvia. So she goes to Marienburg and is a maid of all work in the home of Pastor Johann Glück. Now he's a very interesting figure. He's the first to translate the bible into Latvian. So it's interesting that Marta was at least washing the dishes and growing up in an environment where there was a great deal of learning. But she appears to have been illiterate. She was there to do the household chores. She learns her catechism but she doesn't seem to have been taught how to read and write, which is quite sad we look at Pastor Glück's career. He did set up

schools for poor children, but not for his maid of all work, that she was busy watching his younger children and cleaning the house and otherwise not being able to access some of these intellectual currents that would have been around her in the Glück household. She gets caught up in the Great Northern War. Russia invades. She marries a Swedish soldier, Johannes Rabbe, and they are together for something like a week before he goes off to fight the Russians, never comes back. The Russians seize Marienburg. Pastor Glück, because he's a skilled translator, he gets sent to St Petersburg to be put to work translating with his family. And Marta the maid is picked up by the Russian army and there are accounts of her being presented to one of the officers, a Captain Bauer, in her under clothes. And there are accounts of that kind that make it seem as though she was becoming a kind of merry camp follower but you can read that in a different way, that she's being subjected to sexual violence by an invading army. And later in life Marta became very skilled at reading Peter's moods and knowing when he needed to be comforted, when he needed to be left alone and that suggests someone whose very survival came to be based on being able to read the moods of the men around her.

At first she's with Captain Bauer, then she becomes a laundress in the camp of a General Sheremetev. He's described by some foreign envoys as the politest man in Russia but we don't know if that politeness extended to maid servants and laundresses, who he basically owned. And then Peter the Great's friend Alexander Menshikov, who also came from a peasant background, basically buys Marta from General Sheremetev. Marta's set-up is going to be a lady-in-waiting to Menshikov's fiancée, Darya Arseneva, who is herself a lady-in-waiting to Peter's sister. And it's through these networks that Marta ends up meeting Peter. And I think it's another sign of how awful things must have been in that military camp that she was forced into during the Great Northern War that she would be grateful to Menshikov and his wife for the rest of her life. She would intercede again and again when Menshikov was in conflict with Peter and Menshikov in turn as generalissimo of the Russian army would arrange for her own succession. They were two peasants in an elite world who'd risen well above their status and they seemed to have looked out for one another throughout their careers. But it's clear that she was so grateful to Menshikov for getting her out of that situation where she was a laundress and probably a lot of other things in this Russian military camp.

Initially she becomes Peter's mistress and they begin to have children. And it's quite sad, they have 12 children and only two survive to adulthood. There's two daughters, Anna and Elizabeth. There's been speculation that either Peter or perhaps Marta because of her treatment in that military camp may have had venereal disease and that may have contributed to the very high infant mortality rate. Keeping in mind, Peter the Great was a contemporary of Queen Anne in England, who lost 17 pregnancies, so these appalling infant mortality rates did exist in elite circles across Europe. So they only had the two daughters and having all these children seems to have brought them closer together. And it's interesting that Peter writes these very affectionate notes to little Anushka and Lizenka. He had such a awful relationship with his son, but with his two daughters there seems to have been a great deal of warmth there. And also his mistress, later his second wife, she was willing to accommodate herself to whatever it was that Peter wanted without being groveling and submissive about it. She seems to have been very good at making it seem as though whatever he wanted she wanted as well. Once again this may have been due to those experiences during the Great Northern War where her life would have depended on making sure that the men who she was passed from one to another were happy with her or something even worse might happen. So in her relations with Peter, she lived with him in the building site of St Petersburg in basically a two-room wooden log cabin where she was making the meals and darning his socks. And Peter seems to have enjoyed living as though he was anyone else. Later when she becomes his wife and commissions a summer palace, it's clear that she actually prefers the finer things in life having grown up in poverty. But she was willing to accommodate herself to traveling with him on his military campaigns, living with him in this environment, in the building of St Petersburg. Peter credited her with bribing someone who wanted to capture him on the military campaigns with her jewelry, that she seems to have been a very resourceful person, having survived a lot of awful circumstances, first as the maid of all the work and then being captured by the Russian army and being in the households of these various officers. That she seems to have been very resourceful and very focused on ensuring that her daughters were well looked-after, that they would have foreign tutors. She was very much in favor of her elder daughter marrying the duke of Holstein. She wanted her

daughters to be married to princes and have all the comforts in life that she would not have experienced at an early age. She seems to have tried to intercede to some degree with Peter's son as she had no way of knowing that conflict was going to turn deadly. For all she knew, Peter would be succeeded by Alexei and Alexei would be the one deciding how she and her daughters would live after that. So she seems to have really tried to get along with Peter's whole extended family. Foreign observers said that it was very clear even after the formal wedding takes place later in 1712, there'd been a secret wedding a few years earlier. Their daughters had been little flower girls at these weddings. That even after the formal wedding took place, foreign envoys said it was clear that she was of low birth, that she did things like wear all of her jewelry at once, that it was like an actress dressing up or a traveling player dressing up as an empress. Someone born to the role would be a little more subtle in terms of how she presented herself. So we see a great deal of snobbery, especially when she accompanied Peter on foreign tours. But even some of the snobbish commentators were willing to concede that she was a very kind, conciliatory person, that her marriage seemed to be a very happy one.

There was conflict right at the end of her marriage to Peter however, as one of her chamberlains, William Mons, was ostensibly accused of embezzling money from her treasury and that she had allowed this. She tended to be very generous with the people close to her. She went and looked up her siblings who were living peasant lives and looked after them. That once she did well in life, she wanted others to do well as well. But William Mons, who was actually the brother of Peter's former mistress Anna Mons - it's a small world at the Russian court at this time. William's accused of embezzlement. Marta, who by now is Catherine Alexeivna, she converted to the Russian Orthodox Church and taken the name Catherine. I have been using her birth name Marta to avoid confusions with Catherine the Great. But she tried to intercede with her chamberlain, which led to speculation they were having an affair. It seems very unlikely that someone with such keen survival instincts as the future Catherine I would have been unfaithful to Peter the Great considering what the consequences were. But William Mons is executed. There was a lot of speculation that Peter might put his wife aside, but it seems that their daughters helped keep them together during those very difficult last months when Peter was behaving more erratically.

Their daughter Anna becomes engaged to the duke of Holstein and Peter was trying to line up his daughter Elizabeth with Louis XV of France. ultimately because of Elizabeth's mother's "obscure origins" as the French described it, that marriage did not take place. But Peter's daughter Elizabeth was taught to dance and how to speak French fluently in the hopes that she might one day get to be the queen of France. So it's interesting that both Peter and his second wife had these very turbulent childhoods and adolescences but when it came to their two daughters that they very much wanted Anna and Elizabeth not to experience that same turmoil. And it's striking considering how awful Peter was to his son Alexei. He's responsible for Alexei's death in 1718, but there's a lot of affection when it came to his daughters from his second marriage. He doesn't seem to have viewed them as a political threat the way he viewed his son. Peter dies in 1725 and it looks as though the last male Romanov, Peter's grandson, Alexei's son might come to the throne but Menshikov organizes a coup. And so Peter's second wife comes to the throne as Catherine I and it's interesting that she actually slowed down building works in St Petersburg. She was very concerned about all the serf labor, all this forced peasant labor in St Petersburg. She opened a summer garden there where she decreed people of all classes might enjoy the garden. So there are some hints that she never quite forgot her ancestry and tried when she had a little bit of independence in her life to try to alleviate conditions for some of the people who were worse off in society. But of course she never thought of abolishing serfdom because she relied on the military and the nobility in order to be in power and to ensure that her daughters were looked after. So Catherine, having spent years of matching Peter drink for drink and accompanying him on his various tours, she sadly doesn't live beyond her 40s and dies in 1727. But it's a very extraordinary biography of somebody who starts out as the daughter of runaway serfs and ends as the first sovereign empress of all the Russias. Often pop culture depictions of Peter the Great's second marriage depict it in terms of a physical attraction, but they were together for more than two decades. They had 12 children of whom two survive. There clearly was more to this than that, that she was very good at reading his moods, of providing the emotional support that perhaps he

was not receiving in in any other context. So this became a very enduring partnership so historians see evidence that Peter clearly loved her a great deal. Whether she loved him or whether she always just made the best of whatever situation that she was placed in, that's more of a matter of debate. But certainly she loved her daughters dearly and wanted to make sure that they would be well looked after.

AT: Now I do want to come back to their daughters because those are very interesting adulthoods that they had. But first just from a chronological standpoint, we've got Marta then Catherine was empress of Russia less than two years and then she was succeeded by Evdokia's son's son that we've already talked about. And unfortunately he died only a few years later when he was just 14.

CH: On his wedding day when he was 14, yes. It's before the ceremony could take place.

AT: Okay that sounds like a whole other story. There is so much drama here.

CH: Yes, yes, we have all these domestic accidents in this fractious extended family that have lasting impacts on Russian history.

AT: All right so the child dies of smallpox before he can really become a ruler and then we have Peter's niece Anna, who ascends the throne five years after Peter's death. So this is a very short period of time where we've had quite a few rulers. And one of the ways that Anna is able to come to the throne is thanks to the support of Peter's first wife.

CH: Yes, it's very interesting to see that Anna got along very well with Peter's first wife Evdokia. But more to the point, she was viewed erroneously it turned out, as somebody who would be tractable and would take the advice of some of the senior noblemen in Russia at that time. Now these nobles should have known, seen the women in Peter the Great's family, that none of them are shrinking violets. They all have very strong personalities. Anna, Peter's niece, she was the daughter of Peter's disabled half brother Ivan V and Praskovia Saltykova. They had five daughters of whom three survived to adulthood. Anna was the middle surviving daughter and she was the first member of Peter's family to receive a dynastic marriage. She was married to the Latvian duke of Courland and they had a big wedding in St Petersburg. It was one of the first big St Petersburg galas at the Menshikov palace as Peter's own palace wasn't complete at that time. So he threw his niece's wedding at his friend's palace and the teenage bridegroom was matching his new uncle-in-law drink for drink and he barely survives the wedding reception. He's dead two weeks later and so Anna is sent off to Latvia as a widow, is basically a placeholder for her uncle's interests.

She doesn't get another husband from when she's 18 to when she's 38. She's living in Latvia on her own. She ends up taking a lover, Ernst Biron, and there was speculation that his children with his wife were actually her children being raised by his wife. So for years she asked, could she have another husband? And then when she doesn't get another husband that she ends up in this very unusual relationship where she may well have had secret children that her lover's wife was raising as though this is their children. Certainly she lavished those children with toys when they were young and lots of status when they grew older. Anna at 38 with the death of Peter II, the last of the male Romanovs, the senior nobility basically get together to be like, "who can come to the throne?" It's going to be a woman - Peter has three nieces and two daughters - but who's someone they can manage? And they figure Anna, the widow of 20 years who's been rusticated in Latvia all this time, she'll be so grateful to be invited back to St Petersburg that she will do as she's told. So she has a series of limits imposed on her rule. She's not to raise taxes or declare war or marry or appoint an heir without the support of the senior members of the nobility. This document's sometimes described as the Russian Magna Carta. And if Anna had stuck with that interestingly we might have seen the autocracy gradually develop into a constitutional monarchy but Anna simply signed anything it took for her to be back in St Petersburg. She succeeds the throne in 1730 and then she gets the support of the minor gentry in the military when she's there,

and Peter's first wife, who is still alive and is viewed as a very important link with the past even though she's been a nun for some decades by this time. And Anna accuses the senior nobles, the Golitsyns, the Sheremetevs, of coming together to limit her power so that they can form their own little oligarchy that is going to oppress the minor gentry and the military. So she tears up those conditions on her rule and she sends a lot of senior members of the nobility to Siberia or publicly humiliates them. And in this we can see the effect of a youth spent at Peter the Great's court. This is how he treated his nobles if they defied him. They were humiliated or exiled or executed. A lot of foreign commentators though found it distasteful that a woman was acting like this, that she liked to publicly humiliate nobles who defied her, that the sort of behavior that was seen as eccentric but within the bounds of what an autocrat could do in Peter's case, a female relative of his introducing all of these elaborate punishments and humiliations that that was seen as extremely off-putting. So Anna, who reigned from 1730 to 1740, became known as a bit of a tyrant. And she brought in a lot of her Latvian and German associates as well. So it was seen that she was bringing in her own cabal of foreigners and they were edging out Russians in power.

There have been some more revisionist takes on Anna's reign noting that she was very interested in the arts. She basically brings the ballet to Russia. That would have a lasting impact on Russian culture. And she was interested in the sciences. She sends Vitus Bering on his second mission to Alaska. And so this is where we see the Russian colonization of Alaska beginning. Bering's first mission had happened during the reign of Catherine I, Peter's widow and then he had returned as he had not managed to get far enough into what is now the Bering Strait to establish whether Russia and North America were connected or disconnected. So Anna sends him on a second mission and she sends him there with the German scientist Steller and we may have heard of Steller sea lions, Steller jays. So there's a lot of scientific work that was taking place during her reign. During an unusually cold winter in the late 1730s, she had an ice palace built so that the Academy of Sciences could perform experiments about the various properties of ice. Now that ice palace however becomes best known for how she used that to humiliate one of the Golitsyn family. She marries him much below his station to apparently an unsightly serving maid and they had to spend their wedding night in the ice palace. The serving maid traded her diamond ring for a fur coat and wrapped them both up. So they survived this night in the ice palace. But this became seen as one more example of Anna being tyrannical and perhaps slightly unhinged. But the origins of that ice palace was the Academy of Sciences.

So Anna has a very mixed reputation. She could be very harsh towards her nobles, particularly those she perceived as wanting to limit her power. Her rejection of the Russian Magna Carta meant that this was not a moment where a constitutional monarchy could develop. But she had some cultural and scientific patronage that indicate that she wasn't simply motivated by blind tyranny, that she did have some other interests at that time. So Anna's reign has been re-evaluated in a few ways that, is she being viewed more harshly because she was a woman humiliating her nobles whereas Peter loved to play practical jokes on his nobles and force them to get drunk and otherwise just keep them on their toes, that he was the one in charge. But when his niece behaved that way that was viewed in a poor light by foreign envoys and there are more and more at the Russian court by Anna's reign. The further we go in the 18th century, the more outside accounts we have of the women in the wider extended family as they are quite visible public figures at this time.

AT: There was another similar conversation that I had with a guest about Queen Mary in England who of course became known as Bloody Mary. And we were talking about how she didn't actually kill that many people and she didn't originate this idea of religious persecution in England and she's the daughter of a guy who was running around beheading his wives. And I feel like there is a very similar context here where she gets tagged as "Bloody Mary."

CH: I think that comes out of views of kingship versus queenship, that kings were supposed to act decisively and a good queen was supposed to be an intercessor, stepping in to ensure merciful treatment for those who were being persecuted by the king. And then the king could step back without losing face. It

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could be a favor to his wife or to his sister and Peter the Great's younger sister Natalya seems to have operated in that intercessory role. And so I think it was considered off-putting when Anna was trying to be a female version of Peter and any noble who defied her is going to be publicly humiliated or sent to Siberia. So I think that there were expectations that women like Peter's second wife or his younger sister were supposed to be intercessory and those who tried to reign exactly as he did were not viewed in as positive a light. So the toolbox for a male monarch versus a female monarch or consort were perceived as being different and this affects their reputation.

AT: But it's also that assumption that she was going to be a gentle peacemaker type, like that's why they put her on the throne in the first place.

CH: Yeah, there was this assumption that she would be no trouble at all because she'll just be grateful to be home. She'd spent years writing all these letters to Peter and then to Peter's widow, asking if she could come home or at least if she could have another husband. And it seems by the time she came home, she was determined to wield power in her own right and not be a figurehead for what she perceived as an oligarchy of nobles. We might perceive that as the origins of a house of lords that could become a constitutional monarchy but she perceived herself as, why should she not have all the powers that her uncle had enjoyed?

AT: So Anna is empress until 1740 and then we see the return in our narrative of Peter's daughter Elizabeth or Elizaveta.

CH: Yes, Lizenka, as Peter often called her in his letters. She was very much the apple of his eye who he was raising to be the future queen of France. Elizabeth has a very interesting upbringing in that she has Russian nannies and becomes very devoutly Orthodox and very versed in Russian folklore, but she also has a French governess raising her for that future role as queen of France that Peter was hoping for. And there's a lot of disappointment when Louis XV instead marries a Polish princess, Maria Leszczyńska. It really looked as though the field was open. There weren't a lot of eligible princesses but because Elizabeth's mother had been born into the peasantry she wasn't considered elite enough for Versailles. So apparently when Louis XV saw a portrait of her, he had real regrets that he hadn't married Elizabeth. She's described as this great beauty by foreign envoys, who were often critical of what some of the women looked like because traditional Muscovite fashions were these flowing caftan dresses. So foreign envoys who were used to seeing a sort of corseted silhouette often thought that Peter's mother and sisters looked rather bulky in the costumes of that time. And then when the corsets and farthingales come into fashion later in Peter's reign, there was the question of the women not having the proper hairdressers or not being properly coiffed. But with Elizabeth, almost unanimously she's described as a great beauty, a graceful dancer.

It was assumed that she was going to make a great marriage. When her older sister Anna married the duke of Holstein, the duke of Holstein produced a relative, the prince of Lübeck, who was considered a possibility. And he passed away of smallpox, so Elizaveta lost a fiancé there. And then when her cousin Empress Anna comes to the throne, any prince who paid court to Elizabeth was seen as being hostile to Anna. So Elizabeth is very much isolated during Anna's reign. But she acted very deferential to her cousin, but there were various moments that caused tension between them. One was apparently a Chinese envoy at court and Empress Anna made the mistake of asking him, "who is the most beautiful woman here?" probably expecting as the empress obviously he's going to say this flattering thing. And he turned and bowed to Elizabeth. And so there were a few moments at court where all of the fuss about Elizabeth's youth and beauty seems to have been very infuriating for her older cousin who wanted to keep the succession within her own family. Anna was raising her own niece, also named Anna and who's married to a German prince, and they have a son who is briefly the future Ivan VI. And then Ivan VI's accession as an infant, that's seen as that his great-aunt Anna's German connections and Latvian connections will continue to be in power. So Elizabeth's able to present herself as authentically Russian, that she had grown up in Russia, she'd spent her whole life there, she wasn't married to

a foreign prince. She manages to turn never having contracted a marriage to her advantage and so she manages to stage a military coup where she overthrows the infant Ivan VI and comes to the throne in 1741. She never married. She seems to have been concerned that that would lessen her own power. By now there were clear precedents for an empress coming to the throne, but there wasn't a clear precedent for a prince consort or a grand duke consort. So she spent much of her life with a Ukrainian chorister Alexander Razumovsky or Alexei Razumovsky, who's nicknamed "the emperor of the night," who seems to have been her long-standing partner. They actually visited Ukraine together and she took a lot of interest in Ukrainian fashion and foods just because of this very long-standing relationship. She had other lovers as well. Once again, when Peter behaved that way that was acceptable, but his daughter Elizabeth having a complicated personal life, that was viewed in a negative light. But she followed in her father's footsteps in many ways by having a long-standing relationship with somebody who was further down the social scale. It was very similar to the relationship between her parents except she never put Alexei Razumovsky forward as her consort. She was this interesting bundle of contradictions in that Elizabeth beautified St Petersburg. She brought in architects who were Italian and German and the city comes to resemble how it is today during her reign. She clearly recognized talent in other women. Her late sister, also named Anna - there's a lot of Annas in this story - had died giving birth to a little boy who would become the future Peter III. And Elizabeth brings Peter from Germany, from Holstein to be her heir and she doesn't find him very impressive and thinks what he needs is a good wife. And she chooses Sophia van Anhalt-Zerbst, another German princess who would go on to be Catherine the Great. And it's very interesting that once again in pop culture portrayals, Catherine the Great's marriage is portrayed as being quite short. But in fact she spent 18 years as the neglected wife of the future Peter III but having a kind of apprenticeship observing empress Elizabeth in power.

Here was a woman ruling and Catherine would become very controlled in terms of her public image, whereas Elizabeth was somebody who would dance all night, dance the minuets and then the next day she would be barefoot on a pilgrimage to an Orthodox convent. So in many ways Elizabeth managed to be sort of traditionally Russian in how she presented herself to the world but also very western. And Catherine the Great, having been born a German princess was better at sort of marrying those different aspects of her public image to one another. Catherine the Great would have also observed Elizabeth's interactions with other European rulers. We have another powerful woman who's significant here, the Empress Maria Theresa and the Hapsburg empire. And Elizabeth ended up supporting Maria Theresa later during the Hapsburg empire, later during the Seven Years War. And when Elizabeth dies during the seven years war Peter the third who idealized Frederick the Great calls off a successful Russian military campaign and that leads to him being overthrown in a military coup by his wife who becomes Catherine the Great.

So Elizabeth is quite a significant figure. She's completely overshadowed by her niece-in-law Catherine the Great, but I think in many ways Elizabeth would have served as a model for Catherine, both of how to behave but of also some of the pitfalls for a female ruler, how female rulers tended to have their behavior scrutinized to a greater degree. Catherine the Great's personal life would also be greatly scrutinized, but there have been tandem biographies written of Elizabeth and Catherine and they deserve to be analyzed together, as Catherine the Great's sometimes viewed as this exceptional female ruler but she was in fact the last of a long line of the 18th century age of empresses of Catherine I, Anna, Elizabeth, who all came before her. Now Catherine the Great's own son would pass a succession law that made it almost impossible for a woman to succeed to the Russian throne. So we haven't seen a female leader in Russia since then but Peter the Great, who's sometimes viewed as though he's this colossus who stands above everyone else, he'd come to the throne after the regency of his half-sister and then his death would see this 18th century age of empresses in which his widow, his niece, his daughter and then his granddaughter-in-law would all try to build on his legacy of Russia engaging with the west and the development of St Petersburg as an imperial capital

AT: Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.