

To Each Their Grievance Is Bitter and Unbearable: Petitions, Autocracy, and the Rule of Law in Eighteenth Century Russia

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ABSTRACT

Over the course of the eighteenth century, Russian rulers released dozens of decrees about petitions. First, the decrees regulated the format of petitions, emphasizing their formulaic nature and moving them away from the personal appeals with supplication and abasement that were present in earlier centuries. These decrees recognized that petitions were essential to the administrative functioning of the imperial Russian state but saw them as akin to forms or applications. Second, the decrees stated firmly that petitioners should not approach the ruler directly. In part, these decrees reflect the rulers' irritation at being endlessly bothered by personal requests, but Russia's rulers also gave a more serious justification for the ban on personal appeals: they had established the rule of law, which meant that their subjects did not need to bother them personally and instead should clearly know other authorities—courts, governors—to address for aid. While efforts to change the format of petitions largely succeeded, efforts to curtail petitions directly to the ruler largely failed. That failure likely reflects several factors: inefficiencies in the judicial or administrative system, contradictory laws that still made space for petitions because they were useful, and because they held the promise of getting help quickly

Keywords :

the eighteenth century, petitions, emphasizing, abasement, administrative, inefficiencies

1.Introduction

In December 1718, the Russian Emperor Peter I (the Great) released a decree that outlined his plan for a new system of Colleges to govern his realm. By the end of his reign in 1725, he had established twelve Colleges (of Justice, of Foreign Affairs, etc.) to replace the dozens of chancelleries that had led to the empire seeming simultaneously over-administered (in terms of the number of chancelleries) and under-administered (in terms of actual administrative personnel).² Part of a wide-reaching revision of the imperial administrative apparatus beginning with the establishment of the Senate as a supreme judicial organ in 1711, the Colleges were intended to establish clear hierarchies of bureaucratic authority. The December 1718 decree did exactly that, laying out a clear hierarchy, in this case of courts, for people seeking redress for what they believed to be injustice. First, people should go to the courts that were to be established in every province. If they disagreed with the court's decision, they could appeal to the College of Justice, which had been founded for exactly that reason. If they believed the College's decision was incorrect, they could then appeal to the Senate. If the Senate felt an issue required the emperor's personal attention, it would consult him. Once the Senate decided, the matter was closed. As William Pomeranz has put it, this kind of "rationalization of justice" was "a final element of Peter's legal modernization program.

Although it contributed to the establishment of this formal, rational, and modernized system, the decree also reads as something very different: as a notably emotional complaint by an emperor who had grown frustrated with people who bothered him with endless petitions. "Petitioners constantly assail His Tsarist Majesty about their injuries, everywhere, in every place, not giving him peace," the decree lamented. Although Peter recognized that "from [the petitioners'] side it should be easy to judge that to each their grievance is bitter and unbearable," from his side, it was not easy but instead a significant burden. How could he possibly address them all, given that he was also busy with "so many military and other burdensome duties, as is known to everyone"? And even if he were not busy with these other important affairs, "is it even possible for one person to watch over so many? In truth it would take not a human nor even an Angel."⁴ Getting control over the process of petitioning was important to Peter; this decree was one of at least thirteen decrees from his reign that either explicitly forbade petitioners from handing him petitions or that guided petitions to their proper recipients (as well as at least as many others laying out proper formats for petitions). Nor was he the only Russian ruler to be bothered by petitions, for throughout the eighteenth century, Russian rulers repeated similar injunctions against excessive petitioning over and over again.

Petitions had long been an integral part of how the Russian political and administrative system worked, just as they were in other early modern European monarchies. According to Samuel Collins, physician to Peter the Great's father in the middle of the seventeenth century, "all things are transacted by way of Petition, which is roll'd up like a Wafer, and the Petitioner holds it up before the Boyar [noble], who if in a good humour puts forth his hand to receive it, and either reads it presently, or gives it to his Diac [clerk], who commonly must be brib'd for a Remembrancer." Along with complaints and denunciations, they were a mechanism of rule, the format by which individual subjects of the Empire interacted with authorities. They are everywhere in the archives, written to people at every level of the bureaucracy, asking for redress after personal insult, for charitable aid, for an extra-legal solution to a problem. They moved up and down and across the hierarchy of the bureaucracy, sent from one office to another for investigation. They could lead to responses that set precedents for everyone in the Empire because the problem they highlighted was recognized as a general one, or they could be resolved on an individual basis, tailored to specific circumstances and understood as a way to sidestep the proper order of things.⁸ As historians have noted, in seventeenth-century Russia, petitions were part of the way the "government performed an ongoing drama

of consultation”; by the eighteenth century, petitions “became a standard mode of communication between the population, the nobility/aristocracy and the Crown.”

Petitions also symbolized two other things. First, they served to bolster and emphasize the authority of the autocrat over a hierarchical society. In the seventeenth century, petitioners called themselves “slaves” of the tsar, and the act of petitioning was to *chelom biti* or *bit chelom*—“strike [the ground] with one’s forehead”—in a sign of what foreigners took to be pure abasement before an overwhelming autocratic power. In addition, because individuals (or collectives) petitioned not simply by name, nor as members of broad imperial society, but rather as merchants or nobles or peasants from a particular place or belonging to a particular owner, petitions also served to affirm the stratified and segmented legal social structures that supported autocracy in Muscovy and later the Russian empire. Second, in contrast, petitions allowed individual subjects of the tsar agency in their interactions with that autocratic power. Petitioners in the seventeenth century emphasized the tsar’s obligations as much as or more than their own abasement. As Elena Bogdanova notes in her discussion of what she calls the “complaint mechanism,” they “functioned as an extremely important way of restoration of justice, available to the majority of people through the centuries.”

The Russian Empire’s eighteenth-century rulers released dozens of decrees about petitions, trying to grapple with these roles and symbolic uses. In them, they recognized that petitions were part of the governance structure of the Empire and gave extensive guidance as to how they should be used in ways that came to be standard in practice. In addition, they tried to restrain extra-judicial or extra-administrative petitions addressed to the ruler personally in part by emphasizing the idea that they were not despots but rather monarchs, sole rulers but over a lawful realm. Decrees on petitions tied them not to charismatic authority but rather to effective state functioning, to hierarchies of command, and to the rule of law. This effort, however, essentially failed, for reasons to do with the actual functioning of the Russian state and the usefulness of the petition for rulers and the ruled alike.

Petitions as Administrative Practice

First and foremost, petitions were simply a part of everyday administrative practice dating back centuries. The originating document of modern Russian Imperial law, the *Ulozhenie* (Law Code) of 1649, made it clear that petitions were integral to the functioning of Muscovite administrative structures.¹⁴ Petitioning was required: to report dishonor in the presence of the tsar (Ch. 3, no. 1); to get a travel document to travel to another country (Ch. 6, no. 1); for servicemen to ask their superiors for permission to go on leave to deal with important matters (for example, if one’s home had been destroyed or one’s enslaved people had fled) (Ch. 7, no. 13); for servicemen to ask the tsar for permission to retire due to old age or infirmity, which they would be allowed to do if they sent a relative in their place or paid a fee (Ch. 7, no. 17); for permission to build a toll road or bridge (the spot needed to be investigated to see if it was necessary/useful before any construction; anything built without permission was to be destroyed) (Ch. 9, no. 16). In addition, petitions underlay chapter 10, on judicial process, where petitions were essential to how cases were brought, how evidence was submitted, and how trials took place. They also were the basis of the service land system, the system of slavery, and to a slightly lesser extent, the hereditary land system (chapters 16–17, 20). Petitions addressed “to the sovereign” but actually submitted to the relevant chancellery governed how lands were allotted and runaway serfs recovered.

In the eighteenth century, petitions continued to play a central role in the functioning of the imperial administration even as decrees made significant changes to their form. Above all, the changes emphasized a move away from petitioning as a ritual act of obeisance (“striking one’s forehead” on the ground) to an administrative procedure involving a document (*chelobit’ia* and later *proshenie*, from the verb to request)

that was supposed to follow certain rules. There was still space for oral petitions or denunciations, but within limits and only when oral statements were recorded on paper. A late seventeenth-century decree noted that oral complaints and petitions must be written down in books to be properly considered. Later, the General Regulations of 1720 laid out specific instructions for the functioning of the Colleges. It noted that should someone come in with an oral denunciation or petition, the President of the College should listen and question him. If his issue was deemed credible and important, it should be written down in the protocol and acted upon as if it had been a written petition.

Despite these few exceptions, decrees starting in Peter's reign made it clear that petitions were, above all, documents that were to follow a particular format. First, petitions were to be submitted not on the scrolls described by Collins but instead on sheets of paper marked with a stamp or watermark and, therefore, subject to a fee. This was important because of new regulations on archiving. A decree of March 1702 made clear one of the reasons they should be submitted on paper rather than scrolls: they were then to be bound into books, not glued end-to-end into long scrolls, for easier future reference.¹⁸ There were a few cases in which plain (not stamped) paper (but still not scrolls) was acceptable. For example, according to a decree from 1723, certain petitions requesting salaries or pensions could be submitted on plain paper. Later, when new laws rescinded that exception, it caused problems because, at times, the petitions were seeking amounts that were less than the cost of the paper itself. As a result, the earlier rules were allowed to stand for such cases. Also, in 1764, Catherine II (r. 1762–96) decreed that court peasants were freed from paying fees for petitions filed against one another, and were furthermore allowed to use plain paper, rather than stamped, for much the same reason—the amounts sought were usually less than the cost of the stamped paper.

There were other regulations that similarly sought to standardize petitions as documents. Petitions were to be properly dated and signed with the petitioner's entire name, “and no one should write a half-name.” Anonymous petitions were absolutely not accepted—in fact, should a petition be submitted anonymously, it was to be burned in front of witnesses. At the very end of the century, another change came in with a similar punishment. Petitions on behalf of a group were no longer allowed—they had to come from one person, signed by only one person. If a petition from more than one person was received, “such will not only be burned but the signatories will find themselves punished according to the law.” (This was a decree of Emperor Paul (r. 1796–1801), one of many repealed soon after his assassination.)

Decrees also recognized that many (and perhaps most) petitions were written not by the petitioner him or herself but by a scribe. A decree of 1714 noted that scribes who wrote improper petitions were to be punished along with the improper petitioner; to keep track, scribes were instructed to write their names on petitions along with the name of the petitioner. Additional warnings to scribes to follow proper formats and procedures followed, in some cases even calling out specific people for improper actions. Nor were scribes the only extra actors in the petitioning process who had to answer to the law. Illiterate petitioners deputized a trusted delegate to sign for them; decrees stated firmly that those signatures, too, were oaths confirming that the petition was truthful and written according to the law.

There were a number of ways petitions could be seen as improper. Above all, decrees made it very clear that false or frivolous petitions or those filled with “extraneous” (*lishnii*) information were a serious offense. According to the *Ulozhenie*, a person who falsely petitioned the sovereign against boyars, generals, or judges, claiming that they accepted bribes, was to be severely punished if it was found that they falsified their petition deliberately. A decade or so later, a decree added to the punishment for lying in a petition: if it turned out that a petitioner had lied, he was to be sent to Siberian towns for exile along with his wife and children forever. Early in the dual reign of Ivan V and Peter I, another decree stated that if anyone were to petition their majesties about a case that had already been decided, they were not to hide the original

decision—if they did, they were sentenced to the death penalty. Later, Peter I released several decrees warning against false or extraneous petitions. In December 1718, he gave an additional admonition to be truthful in petitions—if an investigation showed that a petitioner had lied, he would be found liable for four times any monetary claims he made. In 1720, the new Naval Code stated that anyone who petitioned against someone else falsely was subject to whatever punishment the person petitioned against would have suffered.

Later regulations added other things to avoid, such as impolite, intemperate, or slanderous language or phrasing. According to two decrees from late in Peter I's reign, petitioners were to be careful about their language—they could use rude words to describe an offense (that is, if they were reporting a theft, they could refer to the thief as a thief), but not as insults. A later 1753 decree referred to this case in its decision about a more recent one. In the 1753 case, two men had petitioned against one another, the first calling the second a “known thief and mother-damned son,” the second calling the first a thief and a murderer. In the course of the trial, however, the fact that one was a thief and cursed by his mother and that the other was a thief and a murderer “was not at all proved.” That meant that these were insults, not statements of fact, and, therefore, both men were to be imprisoned for a month for the slander. In 1764, the Senate confirmed these instructions (in so doing noting that some offices had been accepting petitions with obscenities despite the earlier ban).

Decrees also tried to regularize the structure of petitions, denunciations, and complaints. In 1723, a decree summarized existing regulations for trials. Petitions (or denunciations) should be written according to a specific format: laying out the issue in clear points (punkty), with only one topic per point, and then with a clear statement of what the petitioner was hoping to achieve. This was clearly an important new organizational idea. A few years later, a new decree about the duties of the Senate noted that court officers who passed on petitions to the Senate ought to rewrite those petitions in point form.³⁹ A decade later, a Senate decree complained that “supplicants write petitions on various matters and submit them to judicial and other places, not in line with the above mentioned 1723 decree, and do not use points, but mix up one matter with another, out of which comes not a little confusion and difficulty.”

Petitioners were reminded to be more orderly in their presentation. So: truth, specificity, and order were the demands of the day.

Finally, decrees came to regularize how individual rulers were to be addressed in petitions (including in petitions to courts or administrative authorities that were made in the name of the ruler) in ways that reflect understandings of their rule. In 1680, Fedor Alekseevich (r. 1676–82) banned a phrase that had come into fashion likening his mercy to God's. Although there is no stated reason for the ban, it was almost certainly seen as blasphemous. Then, in 1702, a decree set out the exact form for petitions addressed to the tsar, including both his proper titles and the appropriate laudatory phrases to be included. This set a new practice. From this point forward, one of the very first decrees released upon the accession of a new monarch to the throne was always their proper “formula.” Most of these formulas laud the mercy and justness of the ruler, but Peter II's (r. 1727–30) reign returned an older phrase to signatures. Petitioners were to sign themselves as “most abased slave,” a stark suggestion of despotism rather than monarchy, perhaps to bolster the authority of the 11-year-old new ruler. Anna (r. 1730–40) eliminated that signature, and it never returned.

Empress Elizaveta Petrovna (r. 1741–61) most clearly laid out the format for petitions addressed to her name:

Most Luminous, Most Supreme, Great Sovereign, Empress Elizaveta Petrovna, All-Russian Autocrat, Most Merciful Sovereign. So and so petitions [bit chelom] on such and such, and as to my petition [proshenie], these points follow. (And write point after point.) And at the end of the points at the beginning of the request write so: And so that by Your Most High Imperial Highness's decree it is ordered (and write your request).

And at the end: Most Merciful Sovereign! I ask Your Imperial Majesty to deliver a decision on my petition [chelobit'e].

This format then remained standard until 1786—Peter III (r. 1761–62) and Catherine II repeated it exactly (substituting in their own names, of course). Then, the Senate confirmed a new policy when it came to petitions: it forbade using the word slave and the phrase bit chelom. Now petitioners were to submit not a chelobit'ia but a proshenie [request], and to refer to themselves as subjects. Though Catherine's son Paul rescinded many of Catherine's reforms, this new language remained. This change in wording was an important one, emphasizing petitioning as a regular form of request rather than a form of abasement before an all-powerful autocrat.

These many regulations appear to have been more or less successful, as eighteenth-century administrative archives are filled with petitions that more or less follow them. Most begin with a third-person statement identifying the petitioner in a specific order that translates awkwardly: "petitions the soldier Vasil'i Andreev Bogdanov's wife Aksinia Sidorova," or "petitions from Kashin district, the estate of the Troitskii Kaliazin monastery, village Pirogovo, peasant Andrei Petrov" or "petitions General Field Marshal and cavalier Stepan Fedorovich Apraksin's widow Agrafena Leont'evna's former household serf Maksim Romanov Sheshuev." The statement begins with the verb "petitions" and ends with the petitioner's name; in between, additional identifiers go from broadest (district, husband's status, owner's status) to narrowest (village or the relationship of the petitioner to the holder of status). In some cases, the petitioner states that they will follow the rules of how to structure a petition: "points [punkty] follow." They are signed either by the petitioner him or herself, or by someone else if the petitioner was illiterate.

Petitions to lower-level administrative bodies are often formulaic, giving the bare minimum of facts required to process a request. They are usually organized in a single paragraph or in separate numbered paragraphs. Petitions to a higher authority often had more involved stories to tell, though increasingly they too seem mostly to try to focus on the facts. They also often give legal reasons for why a request should be fulfilled. Sometimes it is a generic reason: "by the strength of Your Majesty's decrees" or "by the strength of the laws of the sainted and eternally remembered sovereign emperor Peter the Great and sovereign empress Elizaveta Petrovna and Your Imperial Highness." In other cases, a petitioner might cite a specific decree: "by the strength of your Imperial Majesty's decree of the past March 7, 1746," or even citing the Ulozhenie almost a century after its release.⁵⁴ Even into the 1760s, a few petitioners continued to use the language of abasement, referring to themselves as "slave" (ia rab vash), but for the most part, that language is absent even well before the Senate banned the use of the word. In short, by the end of the century, petitions were as much a basic fact of life as they were at the start, but now regularized into standardized formats treated as such. Petitioning the Ruler

New decrees and regulations were successful in altering the format of administrative petitions over the course of the eighteenth century, but they were singularly unsuccessful in limiting petitions made to the ruler him or herself. This was important because, dating back to the Ulozhenie, petitions to the ruler were intended to be made only if all other formal, regular channels of justice were exhausted. In its very first chapter, the Ulozhenie reminded subjects that no one was to approach the tsar with a petition while he was in church—and if anyone dared to do so, he was to be thrown in jail for the offense. In addition, another decree made it clear that petitioning the sovereign personally was to be a last resort: even if an individual had reason to petition the sovereign, that petition ought to be submitted through the proper chancellery. Only if the chancellery did not hear the case should anyone go directly to the sovereign. Anyone who skipped that first step was to be beaten with bastinadoes or imprisoned for one week. The Ulozhenie was clear about this: petitions to the tsar were a last resort.

As dozens of decrees over the next century and a half make clear, many people ignored this provision, and personally addressing the tsar or later emperor or empress remained a regular practice. Furthermore, many decrees addressing the problem appear to reflect the rulers' growing irritation, frustration, even anger at the number of people complaining or asking them for help. In the first years of his reign, for example, Peter I simply noted that his subjects should only rarely petition "the Great Sovereign Himself" and instead should turn to chancelleries. Almost two decades later, his language had become more intemperate. A 1718 decree about petitions of denunciation began with a statement that everyone ought to know the rules about how to submit them, as instructions to submit them via the proper authorities had been "previously confirmed by many of His Imperial Majesty's decrees and published in printed sheets for the people." And yet, people continued to submit denunciations "on trifling matters" to the tsar himself. No more, this decree affirmed. Henceforth, "if someone in defiance of this ukase dares to submit such a letter to His Imperial Majesty::: he will be severely punished." Still, petitioners came. Despite "many of His Majesty's Personal decrees," they were still "daring" to petition him personally, bypassing the Senate and Colleges. Again, he demanded they stop lest they be "fined without mercy." In April 1722, yet another decree told people not to bother Peter personally, this time threatening them with *katorga*—hard labor.⁶²

After Peter, virtually every eighteenth-century ruler made repeated statements restricting petitions that expressed frustration that grew with experience. Several stated at the beginning of their reigns that they would

accept petitions personally in certain restricted contexts. According to one decree, "when by the will of God" Catherine I (r. 1725–27) "was pleased to accept the scepter of the Russian Throne, then with charity toward Her subjects, and particularly toward poor widows and orphans and similar woeful ones, Her Imperial Majesty was pleased to accept petitions herself." However, that mercy and charity soon went wrong because "many petitioners, bypassing the proper courts, are giving petitions to Her Imperial Majesty about not only important but also the most trivial of their affairs, and [do so] in every place, burdening her with no peace, and some wish for an award not for their own merit, declaring in their requests that the Most Merciful Sovereign, His Imperial Majesty [her late husband Peter I], promised to award them, and so rashly write as if His Majesty was in their debt." Others made similarly baseless and problematic requests—to free people who were currently serving sentences of hard labor, for example. Her Majesty was "truly burdened and bothered by such petitioners," and so the ban on personal petitions was reinstated.

Similarly, at the start of her reign, Elizaveta Petrovna allowed petitions to be handed to her "not all the time and in all places, but weekly on Tuesdays ::: so that We Ourselves might see in person the true need of Our subjects, or right their wrongs." Again, she found herself overwhelmed both in terms of number and in terms of triviality:

instead of that we saw that in the petitions submitted to Us, petitioners almost all have issues that should be dealt with by the courts set up for that, and by not waiting for those decisions, they burden us to no purpose::: others willfully not wanting to be in their natural or decreed position, like slaves leaving their masters and asking to enter military service (so-called volunteering, which was abandoned by Our Predecessors in decrees), also deacons and other people of various ranks who ask to join various of Our services, leaving their [prior] place without the permission of their bosses; or retired soldiers and the wives and daughters of soldiers who died in service, who are at will and healthy, but who do not want to support themselves with their own labor, and who ask for rewards, and have the sin of parasitism: Her Tuesday receiving day was no more.

Other than these few initial exceptions, eighteenth-century rulers generally repeated injunctions against approaching them personally. Only months after coming to the throne, Anna released a manifesto reminding people not to trouble her with petitions under threat of loss of rank or other punishments.⁶⁵ Clearly, people ignored this, as less than two years later, another decree stated that on Sundays and holidays and during corteges (i.e., when she was out and about), no one should ask her for help or hand her any kind of petition. Furthermore, everyone in St. Petersburg was to be informed of this rule and sign a document to say they had heard about it so that no one could henceforth claim ignorance. Princess Anna Leopoldovna, the regent for her son the infant emperor Ivan VI (r. 1740–41), also complained about people burdening her with petitions and requests for villages in several decrees. All previous provisions against the practice were still in force, she declared. After her initial flirtation with accepting petitions on Tuesdays, Elizaveta also returned to a strict ban on personal petitions. Nearly a decade into her reign, a senate decree noted that there had already been many decrees banning the practice in the reigns of Peter, Anna, and Elizaveta—and yet people continued to present her with petitions. The Senate repeated: no more petitions directly to the sovereign. It emphasized the fact that even if a petitioner was in the right, the act of submitting the petition was still wrong and made the petitioner liable to public punishment and a sentence of hard labor.

In 1759, another decree—made by the Senate in response to a personal one—repeated the problem. There had been many, many laws about petitioning the sovereign, warning that anyone who dared to do so would be punished with loss of rank, or public punishment and hard labor. And yet, “despite this, often, and especially near exits and when out and about, where there is neither time nor the ability for proper consideration, many people of all ranks dare to submit petitions to Her Imperial Majesty, which are quite often completely empty and trivial.” Her Imperial Majesty decreed that yet another statement should be published and posted for all to see. Only those in truly dire situations should seek her personal attention, and even then, only through the proper channels, not by handing things to her personally.

And still people came. In March 1762, before he was overthrown, Emperor Peter III (r. 1761–62) released yet another decree, “most strongly confirming” that all the many, many existing decrees stating that petitions had to be properly signed and properly submitted, not handed to him personally, were still in force. Four months later, within days of seizing the throne, Catherine II repeated his decree almost word for word. Over the next year decrees from the Senate and the War College repeated injunctions against petitioning outside the chain of command or bureaucratic hierarchy. Then, in June 1763, Catherine released a personal decree. “Although more than once Our decrees have been publicized to the people, stating that no one dare burden Us with the submission of petitions bypassing the Courts or authorities established by Us, appropriate severity has not been used; and therefore many people, despite this strict prohibition, dare even now to burden Us with their petitions and requests.” Henceforth, she stated, the published punishments would be carried out, and whoever was in charge of the people who unlawfully petitioned was to be punished, too. Only three days later Catherine followed up with a further explanation: “This Our Most Merciful order [was made] so that in this way every petitioner may easily find his petition and his case, in whose hands it is located, and therefore may more easily receive its resolution.”

Once again, these injunctions failed to stop the flow of petitions, for in 1765, the Senate released a decree laying out new punishments for those who dared to petition the Empress inappropriately. People who held a position on the Table of Ranks were fined one-third of their yearly salary for a first offense, imprisoned for a month for a second, lost their rank for a year for a third, and lost their rank forever for a fourth. Wives of men who held a place on the Table of Ranks were fined one-third of their husband’s yearly salary for a first offense, placed under house arrest for a month for a second, imprisoned for a third, and restricted to live on their estate and not visit the capital for a fourth. Nobles without an official rank, both men and women, were fined a specific amount for a first offense and held to the same punishments as wives of

bureaucrats for second and third offenses. For a fourth offense, noblewomen were restricted to their estates, while noblemen were sent into the military as a common soldier. For those without noble ranks, the punishments were harsher: for a first offense, hard labor for a month; for a second, hard labor for a year plus public punishment; and for a third offense, a public flogging followed by exile to hard labor in Nerchinsk, Siberia, forever.

Over the next year or two, several more Senate decrees singled out individuals who had failed to heed these warnings. When court councilor Savva Berezin tried to resolve a case involving property by appealing to higher authority without having exhausted lower courts, he “exposed himself to the death penalty,” but the Senate, “moved by Her Imperial Majesty’s usual philanthropy and constant charity toward all her true subjects,” was willing to let it pass. Still, “for improperly burdening Her Imperial Majesty,” he was arrested and placed in prison for a week on bread and water.⁷⁶ A few months later, when Catherine visited the Senate, a retired captain named Dementii Nepeitsyn “dared to give a petition into Her Majesty’s own hands,” despite all the many decrees against it. He was therefore subject to a fine (for a first offense) but because he dared to do this in front of the Senate, he was also to be placed under arrest for seven days. In yet another case, a Moscow merchant named Ivan Diagilev had dared “more than once” to bother Catherine with petitions on completely trivial matters. Although he had petitioned so many times that he ought to be subject to permanent exile, his first crime was forgiven. As a result, he was to be only (!) publicly whipped as an example to others.⁷⁸ Even this failed to stop the practice of petitioning. In 1775, the General Procurator of the Senate noted that despite all the many decrees forbidding the act, people still stood around on the streets of St. Petersburg waiting for her to leave the palace so they could hand Catherine petitions. The Senate ordered that the city police chief should have such would-be petitioners rounded up and brought to the Senate to be dealt with according to the laws. Finally, the last monarch of the eighteenth century, Paul, had the same frustrations as those who came before him. In May 1799, he released much the same kind of decree as his eighteenth-century predecessors. He had come to the throne at the end of 1796 intending to listen to his subjects, and there were ways of ensuring that even the “voice of the weak” could make it to his ear when needed. “But to Our sorrow,” he had discovered “impudence and ignorance,” that tried his patience with “countless, trivial, trifling” requests that were “incompatible with order and law.” Previous laws from the reigns of Peter and Catherine II were still in force, he reminded people. Only the very most important issues should be brought to his personal attention.

This is also the larger context in which Catherine’s Senate released a decree often cited as one piece of evidence for the worsening state of serfdom under her regime. According to most accounts of her reign, this decree, released on August 22, 1767, denied peasants the right to petition against their landowners. Although several historians long ago pointed out that this is a “vast over-simplification of historical reality,” this image has stuck. According to Catherine’s own memoirs, she had received many petitioners in the first years of her reign, but things came to a head when she found her path blocked by kneeling petitioners as she was headed into church. In her telling, several Senators told her she was to blame for excessive lenience in accepting petitions and that there were existing restrictions on such acts. In response, she decided to revive those existing laws.⁸⁴

Reading through the decree, it clearly has several aims. First, it cites the 1765 decree that laid out punishments for petitioning out of order, and notes that that decree drew on dozens of earlier similar statements. Second, it specifically referenced a ban on slaves and peasants claiming treason on the part of their owners without evidence contained in the *Ulozhenie*. In other words, in these first two points, the decree emphasized that it was maintaining existing laws, not establishing new ones. Furthermore, it went on to note that the specific case at hand had been caused by “evil-minded” people who were going around claiming that the state had levied new taxes and collecting the money for their own use. The “poor peasants

who do not know the law” had thereby been forced out of their proper obedience—because they were ignorant, they “blindly followed” such rumors. As a result, another element of the law stated that peasants should no longer believe such rumors but instead trust in their lords, and that anyone who tried to rile them up with false rumors should be arrested and tried.

Throughout these decrees, rulers not only referenced similar earlier decrees that served as precedent but also made a larger point that emphasized the rule of law more broadly. The Senate’s listing of harsh punishments for those who dared to petition Catherine II directly even when their concern did not warrant it was made, it stated, both to ward off such “audacity” and “due to its duty to maintain the laws.” That meant emphasizing that the tsarist bureaucracy could be trusted to make decisions according to the law and therefore the hierarchy of authority within the bureaucracy should be respected. This is why Peter’s most impassioned defense against excessive petitioning—the 1718 decree in which he stated that “not even an angel” could deal with every individual petitioner that came to him—is also a decree commonly cited as establishing the colleges. Not only did it make an impassioned statement against petitioning the ruler but also it explained exactly how a person ought to appeal a decision and why the new collegial system should be trusted by all (because it did away with the potential problem of a single man in charge disrupting its operations). Because the new system of Colleges and the Senate had the emperor’s trust, everyone ought to trust it. As the decree stated, given this fact, “whoever dares to petition His Highness about [a Senate decision] will be sentenced to death” because they doubted the emperor’s own trust in the system he had created.

Other laws made clear other hierarchies for complaint. According to a 1714 decree that still allowed space for petitioning the monarch, that space was very, very limited. Someone with a complaint against a chancellery or government body was to petition its kommandant; if the problem was the kommandant himself, petition the provincial governor; if the governor was the problem, petition the Senate; if the Senate was the problem, then and only then should an individual subject of the realm petition the tsar.⁸⁷ Later that same year, another decree repeated the requirement that petitions should proceed up the levels of authority, adding in new levels—only if a petition had failed at seven previous levels should it make its way to Peter himself (the decree did allow that if a petition to a lower authority remained unresolved for six months it could be submitted to the next level on the list). Similarly, Anna’s early manifesto forbidding people from approaching her to petition went along with a clear statement of who to turn to with problems with court decisions: first voevodas, next governors, then the College of Justice, and then the Senate.⁸⁹

The Persistence of the Personal

Why did eighteenth-century injunctions against petitioning the ruler fail so miserably? It could be simple ignorance of the law. The law was not codified in the eighteenth century, and certainly Russia’s eighteenth-century rulers were well aware that making a law was not the same thing as having people follow it. That is not a sufficient reason, however, because the laws regarding formatting did take hold, and individual petitioners often claimed legal bases for their requests, or at least understood that they needed to seek justice in the name of the ruler’s laws.

The first and most obvious reason for the failure of these decrees is that the modernized legal and administrative systems that were supposed to replace personal petitions did not necessarily work properly through much of the eighteenth century. For all that Peter the Great declared his trust in the new courts and administrative structures in his decrees, many regions never fully developed them, and over the next decades waves of reforms and changes further confused the situation. Furthermore, even when there was a court or administrative system in place, it might well not work effectively (or without corruption). Laws recognized this fact and sought to discipline not only the act of petitioning but also the reception of petitions.

Early in his reign, Peter I linked instructions against petitioning the sovereign to promises that if chancelleries handled petitions badly, the sovereign would investigate and punish them for it. In 1701, orders given to the new military governor of

Vladimir province included a formal statement that he should accept petitions submitted in the name of the tsar, should investigate them, and should follow up with the petitioners. In two decrees from early in her regency, Anna Leopoldovna made it clear that red tape and administrative delay were not acceptable. She knew that “poor and impoverished people” were being unduly burdened by delay and finding themselves in “extreme devastation and ruin” as a result of their petitions remaining undecided. This needed to be addressed. In 1753, the Senate instructed administrative offices not only to return things promptly but also to give answers or rationales for decisions in their responses.

Failures in administrative practice were linked to a second reason for the persistence of petitions to the ruler: decrees both banned them and made space for them because they were useful to the state’s desire for information. In February 1722, Peter created a new institution to handle petitions in part to take the burden of petitions off his own shoulders and in part to ensure that information kept flowing to the center. According to the decree, he had long worked for the benefit of his people, and “through his many and difficult labors had founded Provinces, Chancelleries, and then Colleges.” These were intended to ensure that his people had the benefit of courts that would “quickly and properly decide” their cases, but even Peter had to admit that the courts could stifle matters with bureaucracy and, at times, even make improper decisions. For all that petitioners were ignoring the laws against bypassing courts and instead “giving [him] no peace,” some of them had a point. As a result, Peter established a new position: reketmeister, or master of requests. The reketmeister would henceforth accept petitions that required Peter’s attention as long as they were written in the proper format and met certain criteria. Over the next several decades, his successors played with the position, changing its reporting structure, once eliminating it, but generally reaffirming its role in sifting through petitions to identify those few that truly deserved the sovereign’s attention.

Catherine II did something slightly different. In the very same decree in which she affirmed that existing punishments for improperly petitioning should be carried out, she still left space for decrees to reach her attention. She named three state secretaries who should receive any requests that truly could not be dealt with via official channels. A few days later, she clarified her decree and at the same time gave yet another way for people to get her attention. Petitions should still be written and submitted via her state secretaries, but anything that truly should only be seen by her could be submitted under seal and with the phrase “for Your hands only” written on the envelope. Soon thereafter, Catherine gave the state secretaries specific instructions for handling “petitions from all those who have need to bother Ourselves with something.” They made it clear that some issues could indeed be brought to her attention. Anything marked for her hands only should be given to her immediately—and if she happened not to be in town, such documents were to be placed under an additional seal and sent to her immediately. Otherwise, the state secretaries were to get an oral explanation of the case along with the written petition and decide whether it concerned a matter that required Catherine’s personal attention. If it did, the state secretary who heard the request was to write up a report and deliver it to Catherine and then follow up on whatever her decision was to make it so. If Catherine wrote something with her own hand on a report, her words were to be repeated exactly to the petitioner.

Many of the decrees about the office of the reketmeister noted explicitly that they were intended to improve the way the government worked. People were told to petition the reketmeister if they had a real complaint about a bad decision by members of the College of Justice, for example. The regent Anna also made it

clear that one of the reasons she had reestablished a personal reketmeister was that she knew administrative practice did not always work. That was why it was still possible to turn to her (through the proper channel of the reketmeister, only) for help should a properly written and submitted petition remain unresolved for no good, lawful, reason. When Catherine II gave new instructions to her state secretaries in charge of handling petitions addressed to her, she included clear instructions for how they ought to handle those that turned out not to need her personal attention. The state secretary was to write down which office it ought to go to and hand it back to the petitioner. If the petitioner later returned to say that the other office would not hear his petition, the state secretary was to write directly to the other office and inform Catherine about it. Officials were also instructed to be sure to explain either their decision or why a petition was returned without one.

These decrees giving options for submitting extra-administrative or extralegal petitions also emphasized the rule of law—in other words, they saw the two as working together. When Peter first allowed petitions to the person of the ruler via the reketmeister, he noted that it was, above all, intended to help those with a true understanding of the new judicial system. The new officer of his court was not there to accept just any petition but only those that either showed knowledge of the laws or that could uncover problems with the administration that might then be fixed. If people could prove that their cases had been unduly delayed through bureaucratic red tape, or if they believed a case had been decided wrongly and had specific decrees to cite to back up their position, they could submit a petition. If they were just trying to add more evidence after a decision, that, however, was not acceptable, and indeed punishable.

The idea that petitioners needed to show that they had explored all other legal options and had a clear reason based in law to make their request held firm. In 1761, the Senate released another decision based on a couple of specific cases and emphasized that petitions would be refused or returned without a decision if the reason a petitioner had gone to the Senate instead of another authority was not clear. Soon thereafter, Catherine's state secretaries were told to return petitions that did not need her personal attention to the petitioners, having first written down clearly which office they were to go to so that the petitioner knew exactly where to go. Should the petitioner return without having gone there, they were to be turned away. Toward the end of Paul's reign, a short personal decree reminded people of earlier rules about the need to give full legal reasoning in their petitions. All this emphasized the ways that petitions, even those to the ruler, could be a part of the larger legal system, not placed in opposition to it.

Of course, a final reason petitions to the ruler persisted is one that is difficult to prove through the archives: they persisted because, as Peter put it, "to each [petitioner] his grievance is bitter and unbearable," and petitions held the promise of getting help when there seemed no other to be had. Early in Catherine II's reign, the Senate released a decree that again hinted at this reason. "From the very beginnings of the Ulozhenie and in the decrees published over the following years" there had been many, many decrees about going through proper procedures, this new statement began,

but despite all this, the Governing Senate sees that many ignorant and insolent people, not having petitioned anywhere, and on such subjects that in no way belong to Her Most High Imperial Majesty's concern, pass by all Judicial Administration and pass by the Senate and submit these trivial and completely unfounded petitions to Her Majesty. It may happen that such petitioners flatter themselves that whatever their petitions are about, when Her Majesty accepts them, then they will be freed from the fines and punishments, and the matter will be resolved in their favor, because their petitions are filled with pitiable things. But such an opinion is completely obscene, for Her Imperial Majesty, so merciful and generous to all of Her subjects, so wise and insightful, pours out equal justice and mercy to all according to their station.

The Senate couched this in terms of the petitioners' ignorance and insolence, but another reading of the practice might just as easily focus on the pitiable things in their petitions, on their distress and hope for a just solution, however they defined justice. This idea—that the ruler could be addressed directly and asked to intervene—runs through much of the discussion of the Russian Empire as an “Old Regime” or pre-modern state. As Roger Bartlett put it, the values associated with a culture of petitions “were personal, patriarchal, hierarchical and authoritarian.” It is the basis of the idea of the “good tsar” who would gladly help his subjects if only he knew of their mistreatment by bureaucrats or by landlords. As these decrees suggest, however, this “naive monarchism,” as it is sometimes called, was neither naive nor held only by Russia's peasant masses—it was a logical response to a system that incorporated personal appeals into its structures.

Of course, too, none of this was particularly or peculiarly Russian, at least in the eighteenth century. Petitions were a method of interaction with monarchs or emperors throughout the European world that Peter I was so intent on joining. Catherine the Great reportedly thought Joseph II was mad to accept petitions himself. What may be slightly less typical is the persistence of this mode of interaction not only throughout the eighteenth century but also through at least the end of the imperial regime in 1917 and arguably up to today. Petitions remained the format for virtually every interaction subjects of the emperors had with any administrative body, from requests for residence documents to opening a business to bringing suit against someone. A series of nineteenth-century institutions also came to handle petitions made directly to the ruler himself, signaling the persistence of subjects' desire to address the emperor personally and the emperors' (perhaps resigned) willingness to accept them. Use of those institutions was even rising in the early twentieth century. In 1899 His Imperial Majesty's Chancellery for the Receipt of Petitions received 32,336 petitions or complaints; in 1908, it received 65,357 of them. They continued to play roles throughout the twentieth century. Historians of the Soviet era have drawn on thousands of petitions, complaints, and denunciations (as the lines between the three are loose). Perhaps most troublingly, too, petitions' link with personal authority has remained a powerful element of their appeal to those who rule as much as to those who are ruled even into the twenty-first century. What, after all, are Vladimir Putin's annual televised shows of answering citizens' requests and questions other than a peculiarly public way of demonstrating his personal authority beyond the capabilities of any other?

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