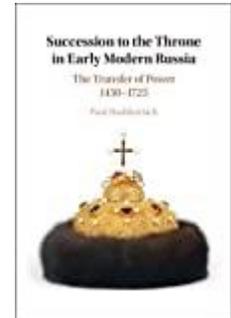


**Paul Bushkovitch.** *Succession to the Throne in Early Modern Russia: The Transfer of Power 1450–1725.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 400 pp. \$120.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-47934-9.



**Reviewed by** Carolyn Harris (University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies)

**Published on** H-Russia (November, 2021)

**Commissioned by** Oleksa Drachewych (Western University)

*Succession to the Throne in Early Modern Russia* provides an important new perspective on Russian ruling families and the transfer of power from the expansion of the territory of the grand princes of Moscow in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to the Time of Troubles and rise of the Romanov dynasty in the seventeenth century to the death of Emperor Peter I “the Great” in the eighteenth century. This significant and turbulent period in Russian history has been described in previous histories as a period of “autocracy” and “absolutism,” where power passed through primogeniture instead of the earlier practice of collateral succession, until the main line of a ruling dynasty came to an end and another dynasty came to power. Through analysis of a broad range of primary sources in a variety of languages, Paul Bushkovitch describes how power and succession were far more complicated during this period. Bushkovitch discusses how Nicholas I combined post-1789 ideas of monarchy with “the older Russian term *samoderzhavie* (autocracy) to create the appearance of continuity and tradition,” but “the

problem is that later generations of historians projected the ‘absolutist’ formulation of autocracy back into the early modern era” (p. 8). Early modern Russian rulers wielded power within the framework of court culture, relations with the nobility, the church and sometimes a wider public, and the examples of royal rule and succession set by other kingdoms. Peter the Great’s plans for the succession were part of a longer history of individual rulers shaping the succession in an environment where primogeniture was not the only option for selecting the next person in line to the throne.

Bushkovitch begins with an opening chapter placing the early modern Russian succession in the context of other European royal houses of the period, noting the influence of Poland and the Holy Roman Empire, which were both elective monarchies. This introductory chapter also examines how concepts of absolutism and autocracy became part of the historiography of this period in Russian history even though the nature of the ruler’s power was more complicated. Bushkovitch

notes that when it came to the royal succession, “there was no written law on this matter, and the only guide was custom” (p. 32). The second chapter examines designation and heredity from 1450 to 1533, a period when the grand princes of Moscow greatly expanded their territory and established new diplomatic links with western European powers. Chapter 3 analyzes the question of succession during the reigns of Ivan IV, “the Terrible,” and his son, Feodor I, from 1533 to 1598, a period that ended with the accession of “an elected autocrat,” Boris Godunov, instead of examining royal genealogies to find the closest living relative to the centuries old Riurikovich dynasty (p. 120). In chapter 4, which discusses the Time of Troubles and the first decades of the Romanov dynasty, Bushkovitch examines how “the succession to the Russian throne had almost come full circle” because “there was no more talk of choosing the tsar, either by God or by the people assembled in a sobor” (p. 181). Instead, succession was determined by the blessing of the heir by the previous tsar. In both chapter 5 and chapter 6, which examine the reign of Tsar Aleksei I and the events that preceded the succession of his youngest son, Peter, there is extensive material concerning the training and presentation of the heir, including the tutors chosen, program of study, and the ceremonies intended to ensure an orderly succession. The last two chapters examine the reign of Peter the Great and the context for his decision to formalize the law of succession to allow the ruler to “choose anyone whom he pleased to inherit the throne, not just the eldest son” (p. 327). The conflict between Peter and his eldest son, Aleksei, which turned deadly, is well known and often emerges as one of the central themes in biographies of Peter the Great.[1] Bushkovitch, however, discusses instances of Peter taking steps to cement Aleksei’s position as heir early in his reign and examines the different paths that the succession might have taken had circumstances been different.

The role of women in the transfer of power in early modern Russia emerges as an important theme in the book. While a few individual women from this period in Russian history have been the subject of full-length biographies, such as Peter I’s elder half-sister, the regent Sophia Alekseevna, others are discussed more briefly in histories of women in Russian history, the reign of Ivan IV, the Time of Troubles, and the Romanov dynasty.[2] Bushkovitch writes, “The women of any ruling family, even if their political role was small (which it usually was not), are essential in any analysis. They did more than give birth to children” (p. 11). Women, important to the transfer of power and dynastic change in early modern Russia, analyzed in the text include Irina Godunova, the widow of Ivan IV’s younger son Feodor I who briefly held power upon her husband’s death and was succeeded by her brother Boris Godunov, as well as the nun Marfa, the mother of the first Romanov ruler, Michael I, who was one of her son’s key advisers and chose Princess Mariia Dolgorukaia to be her daughter-in-law.

Throughout the text, Bushkovitch critically examines the source material concerning the lives of Russia’s rulers, concluding that certain events and relationships recounted in numerous popular histories of the Russia may not have taken place at all. A key example is Ivan IV’s murder of his eldest son, Ivan Ivanovich, in 1581, a tragic moment immortalized in Ilya Repin’s nineteenth-century painting *Ivan the Terrible and His Son Ivan*. Bushkovitch observes that “there is actually no evidence for the story that Ivan killed his son other than [Jesuit envoy Antonio] Possevino and later rumours,” noting that Possevino provided a different account in his private correspondence with the Vatican (p. 102). More than a century later, to highlight another example, Peter I’s second wife was received into the Russian Orthodox Church as Ekaterina Alekseevna, and although Peter’s son Aleksei from his first marriage is often described

as Ekaterina's godfather, Bushkovitch notes, "this legend has no foundation in fact" (p. 262n).

*The Succession to the Throne in Early Modern Russia* draws upon a wide range of sources in numerous languages. The book is essential reading for both scholars of the early modern Russian state and general readers interested in learning more about the lives, families, and reigns of Russia's rulers from the Grand Princes of Moscow to Emperor Peter the Great.

#### Notes

[1]. Lindsey Hughes devotes part 7 of her short biography *Peter the Great: A Biography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002) to "Fathers and Sons" and the Pulitzer Prize-winning popular biography by Robert K. Massie, *Peter the Great: His Life and World* (New York: Random House, 1981), devotes much of part 4 to "The Education of the Heir," "A Paternal Ultimatum," "The Flight of the Tsarevich," and "The Future on Trial."

[2]. Examples include Natalia Pushkareva, *Women in Russian History from the Tenth to the Twentieth Centuries*, trans. and ed. Eve Levin (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1997); Barbara Evans Clements, *A History of Women in Russia from Earliest Times to the Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012); and Lindsey Hughes, *Sophia, Regent of Russia (1657-1704)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia>

**Citation:** Carolyn Harris. Review of Bushkovitch, Paul. *Succession to the Throne in Early Modern Russia: The Transfer of Power 1450–1725*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. November, 2021.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=56488>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.