For over a century the compilations of grievances and remedies that the Russian nobility (dvorianstvo) originally drafted on the eve of the 1767 Legislative Commission have been one of the standard sources for detailed information about eighteenth-century society. In contrast to much of the documentation for this period, these instructions (nakazy) have been readily accessible to students in the Collection (Sbornik) of the Imperial Russian Historical Society. While the projects of Catherine II frequently seem to be based on an idealistic view of conditions in her empire, the instructions sought to convey an unvarnished portrait of the countryside, one that would enable the Commission to draft the most suitable code of laws. Although it no longer appears probable that the resulting instructions “educated” a naive empress as to the crude realities of Russian life, turning her away from reform in the process, the historian can well appreciate their versimilitude.

1. Following Catherine II’s announcement that the Legislative Commission would take place (Polnoe sobranie zakonov rossiiskoi imperii s 1649 goda [hereafter PSZ] 1st series, [St. Petersburg: 1830], XVII, No. 12801, 14 Dec. 1766), assemblies of the nobility were held in each district to elect a deputy and to prepare an instruction. The latter document, drafted by no more than five noblemen, was both to guide the deputy and to inform the central government of the changes the nobles would like to see effected. The most thorough study of the procedures that took place prior to the Legislative Commission is A. Florovskii, “Sostav zakonodatel’ noi komissii,” Zapiski imperatorskago novorossiiskago universiteta, istoriko-filologicheskago fakulteta, 10, Odessa 1915. The first volume of the Collection (Sbornik imperatorskago russkogo istoricheskago obschestva hereafter SIRIO) to include the nobles’ instructions (4) appeared in 1869.

2. Paul Miliukov claimed that Catherine’s outlook was altered in this fashion (“Voices of the Land and the Autocrat,” in Catherine the Great: A Profile, ed. Marc Raeff (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), as did V. Grigor’ev (Reforma mestnago upravleniia pri Ekatereine II, uchrezhdennia o guberniakh 7 noyabria 1775 [St. Petersburg: Russkaia skoropechatnia, 1910], ch. 2). Although A. Lappo-Danielevskii did not ascribe lofty aims to Catherine, his study of her attitude toward serfdom emphasized the role of the instructions. These documents, he contended, convinced her how difficult it would be to alter the status quo in any degree (“The Serf Question in an age of Enlightenment,” Catherine the Great). The division of Catherine’s reign into a liberal and conservative segment has been criticized by A. Kizevetter, who maintains that her policies of the 1760s were cut from the same cloth as those of the following decades (“The Legislator in her Debut,” Catherine the Great). David Ransel’s recent monograph, however, returns to the view
As extensive as the shortcomings described by these instructions appear, the changes that they advocated were clearly limited. A quick reading is sufficient to reveal the degree to which the proposals put before the Legislative Commission by the nobility answered little more than the needs of a single estate, rather than those of the whole society. Still, we would be left with an inexact notion of the nobles’ perspective if we did not also recognize further, limitations in their understanding of reform. Both the form and the content of the instructions reflected a traditional conception of Russian autocracy, and emphasized those favors that the ruler could provide for her subjects. So central was this pursuit of monarchial largess that the ostensible purpose for which the instructions were written—the preparation of a new legal code—assumed secondary importance. Rather than temper their ruler’s caprice by statute, the noblemen lavished tribute upon her, hoping that she might smile upon them. An understanding of the tradition of supplication and how it came to be incorporated in the instructions is a first step in judging their overall significance.

Despite the exalted status of eighteenth-century Russian sovereigns, their subjects believed them to be relatively accessible. Much of the popular notion of monarchical benevolence grew out of the feeling that the tsars could be readily apprised of the needs of the populace. Once the particulars of a case were known they might well intervene to rectify matters. Since each appeal to the monarch was judged on the basis of its own merits, the rulers of Russia that the Legislative Commission altered Catherine’s politics. In his opinion the deep social antagonisms expressed during its sessions so alarmed the empress that she decided to break with the Panin faction, rather than run the risk of alienating the middle and lesser nobles (The Politics of Catherinian Russia [New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1975], p. 194). Soviet scholars have generally denied that the Enlightenment figured large in Catherine’s actual policies. N. Druzhinin has written one of the more favorable studies, describing the empress’ approach as a mixture of feudal politics and bourgeois economics. Still, he asserts that Catherine “capitulated” when faced with the opposition of the serfowners and abandoned any plan of social reform (“Prosveshchennyi absolutizm v Rossi,” Absolutizm v Rossii XVII-XVIII vv., Sbornik statei k semidesiatiletiiu so dnia rozhdeniia i sorokapatiletiiu nauchnoi deiatel’nosti B. B. Kafengauza [Moscow: Nauka, 1964], p. 44). A far more hostile interpretation of the reign and its impact on the enserfed peasantry in particular is to be found in M. Beliaevskii, Krest’ianskii vopros v Rossii nakanune vosstaniiia E. I. Pugacheva (Moscow: Izd-vo Mosk. Univ., 1965), ch. 7. A further Soviet view of this period is the subject of a review by R. Bartlett in the Study Group on Eighteenth-Century Russia Newsletter, No. 2 (Sept. 1974).

3. Although the debates that took place at the sessions of the Legislative Commission are not the subject of this paper, the deputies spent much of their time heaping praise on Catherine. The Empress was not flattered by their attention, but felt it wasted time that could be better spent in making laws (K. A. Papmehl, Freedom of Expression in Eighteenth-Century Russia [The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971], pp. 64-65).