The Rise and Fall of the Northern System: Court Politics and Foreign Policy in the First Half of Catherine II's Reign

By the latter half of the eighteenth century the Russian administrative structure was well on the way to bureaucratization. But there was one institution in the central administration which resisted this trend, the College of Foreign Affairs. In line with eighteenth-century practice, Catherine II considered the creation of foreign policy to be the monarch's own prerogative. Since she could not hope to oversee every aspect of its execution, which was intimately bound up with its execution, she selected as her aides in this important area men whose loyalties coincided with her own, and who could be entrusted to carry out her decisions. This explains the selection of Nikita Ivanovich Panin, director of the College of Foreign Affairs.

Panin brought with him an approach to foreign policy which harmonized with the empress's intentions. With the passage of time, and Panin became entrenched in office, he formed around himself a coterie of friends and relations who shared his sympathies for a pro-expansionist set of alliances termed the Northern System. Based on a close union with Prussia, the Northern System also found favor with the heir to the throne, Grand Duke Paul. So long as Catherine II was satisfied with the Prussian alliance she had no cause to be dissatisfied with the Panin faction. Once, however, she made the decision to pursue an expansionist foreign policy in conjunction with the Habsburg Empire, she was faced with the delicate task of removing from positions of influence those who rejected the new orientation. This task was complicated because the Panin faction might well actively oppose the change, using the Grand Duke as its bastion of support. The decision relating to the fate of the Northern System hence led to internal as well as a foreign policy crisis. It is the intention of this paper to chart the course of the rise and fall of Panin's Northern system in all its ramifications.

I

The diplomatic reversal of 1755-1756 had serious implications for Russian foreign policy. The empress and her Chancellor, Aleksei
Petrovich Bestuzhev-Riumin, had grown accustomed to thinking Austria and Great Britain as mutually friendly powers, and Prussia and France as mutually hostile. But by the diplomatic reversal Austria abandoned its alliance with Britain for the sake of one traditional enemy France, while Britain turned away from Austria toward Prussia. As a result, when the Seven Years War broke out in 1756 Russia found itself with treaties with both the Austrians; the British. Elizabeth chose to take sides with Austria against Prussia which she feared and hated as an expansionist power; but Russia: Britain never declared war upon one another. To make matters more complex, Russia during the course of the war was in the anomalous position of supporting France, a power traditionally considered most dangerous competitor for influence among its neighbors Sweden, Poland and the Ottoman Porte.

His position undermined by the apostasy of Great Britain, Chance: Bestuzhev was tried in 1759 on charges of treason and sent into ex His duties were assumed by Vice-Chancellor Mikhail Ilarionov Vorontsov, a francophile, and the struggle with Prussia was pursued with more determination than ever. Just as Prussia seemed to be the verge of collapse, however, the Empress died. Her pro-Pruss nephew Peter III promptly ceased all operations against his i Frederick II, and made preparations for a Prussian-Russian military alliance. No sooner had Peter accomplished this than he was depo by his wife Catherine. News of the overthrow raised hopes in Viet and Paris, where it was thought Russia would revert back to its an Prussian policy. This did not prove to be the case. Catherine destroyed everyone's hopes by concluding that Russia could expect con concrete benefits from re-entry into the war; her decision was aid by the fact that the Russian troops had not been paid for mon Convinced of Russia's desperate need for peace, the new Empress to herself out of the war entirely, and announced her readiness to act arbiter in European affairs.1

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1. Сборник императорского русского исторического общества, 148 тт. (С 1867-1916). XLVIII, 551. [Hereafter referred to as СИРИО] Remarkably enough since 1917 not a single Soviet monograph on Russia's foreign policy under Cather II has appeared. The closest we have are military histories covering the two Tur war and numerous works on the Russian reaction to the French Revolut Fortunately, pre-Soviet historians devoted more attention to the period. S Solov'yev, in his История России с древнейших времен, в пятнадцати кни (М., 1959-1966), includes large amounts of diplomatic material, although m of it is undigested. Внешняя политика России в начале царствования Екатери (СПб., 1896) by N. D. Chechulin is generally considered the standard work the foreign policy of the early years of Catherine's reign. An attempt to pr that Panin was the master-mind behind Russian foreign policy, that he had fores the uneven course it would take, and had even planned long in advance partition of Poland, the panegyric was subjected to heavy, and at times bi