

Pugachev's Rebellion, 1773–1775

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Under the rule of Catherine the Great, Russia was rapidly modernizing as the Russian elite embraced western technological advances, fashions, food, and art, at great financial cost to the entire country. Landowners increased the tax burdens on their serfs to counterbalance their expensive standard of living. Peasants in turn engaged in mass protests and rebellions through escaping, rioting, and engaging in insurrections against the aristocracy. From 1762 to 1772, some 160 popular uprisings were recorded in the Russian empire, but the profligate ruling classes were not prepared for the fierce rise in peasant discontent that ignited Pugachev's Rebellion from 1773 to 1775. The peasant uprising was sparked by a rumor that Peter III, the grandson of Peter the Great, had escaped assassination in 1763 and was living in hiding among the Cossacks on the Yaik River, renamed the Ural River in the aftermath of the rebellion.

The rumor alleged that Catherine II sought revenge against Peter III who was seeking to emancipate peasants from serfdom. In reality, Emilian Pugachev, a Cossack born in the village of Zimoveyskaya where, a century earlier, Stepan Razin was born, was the self-proclaimed Tsar Peter. After joining the military at age 17, Pugachev fought in the Prussian and Russo-Turkish Wars of the 1760s and was promoted to the lower officer rank of *khорунжий*. Soon after, Pugachev deserted the Russian military, spending several years wandering along the Don, Yaik, and Volga rivers and associating with "Old Believers" from the early Russian Orthodox Church who were said to have advised him to embrace the legend of Peter III, who was revered for his religious tolerance. Although Pugachev, an athletic, dark-faced man with a black beard, bore little physical resemblance to Peter III, Cossacks, Old Believers, serfs, and factory workers were drawn to his charismatic leadership. He gained personal popularity among non-Russian populations of the Volga steppes, who enlisted in his rebel army in large numbers. Pugachev's rebel army was comprised mostly of Tatars, Bashkirs, and Kalmyks who suffered economic deprivation and resented Catherine



Claiming to be Tsar Peter III, Emilian Ivanovich Pugachev (1742–75) led the last Cossack rebellion in Russia in 1773. In what is considered by historians as the most significant peasant rebellion in Russian history, Pugachev encouraged peasants to join the revolt by promising to free serfs from their lords and redistribute the land. This engraving of him in prison is from an unknown eighteenth-century artist. (akg-images)

II's demand for mandatory conversion to Christianity. Pugachev opposed the order and, promising religious freedom, gained even greater popularity.

Pugachev's initial insurgency encountered no resistance among residents on the banks of the Yaik River, and townspeople greeted the rebels by ringing bells. At the beginning of 1773, Pugachev's army besieged Orenburg, the major population center on the Volga River in southern Russia. In October 1773 when news of the rebellion reached Saint Petersburg, Catherine appointed Major General Vasily Kar to intervene on behalf of Imperial Russia. However, Kar, primarily seeking to disperse the insurgents rather than engage them in battle, critically underestimated the size and tenacity of Pugachev's forces. As a result, Pugachev soundly defeated General Kar's expedition, and the rebellion gained

unparalleled power, posing a significant threat to the stability of the Russian throne.

While Pugachev's Rebel Army consolidated power near Orenburg through March 1774, the Russian government made serious preparations to launch a new attack. The Russians dispatched an army under the command of General Alexander Bibikov, who forced Pugachev's armed detachments to lift the siege on Orenburg and retreat from the city. However, the Russian troops could not quell the uprising, which was already spilling over into nearby provinces. Following military losses, Pugachev's army rapidly recovered and by July 1774 approached Kazan, a large town at the confluence of the Volga and Kazanka rivers. The insurgents took the town after a fierce clash, but six hours later Colonel Ivan Ivanovich Mikhelson pushed them out with a large cavalry squadron of hussars. The defeat forced Pugachev to flee with a handful of Cossacks to the right bank of the Volga as Mikhelson pursued the remnants of his army with indefatigable tenacity. But it was not until late August 1774 that government troops cornered Pugachev's rebels near Tsraitsin in the Ukraine, inflicting a decisive final defeat on the rebel insurrection. While Pugachev escaped capture, he was arrested by Cossacks and turned over to the Russian authorities. On January 10, 1775, he was executed in Moscow before a large assembly of Russians.

To wipe out the memory of the rebellion, in 1775 Catherine the Great ordered Pugachev's birthplace Zimoveyskaya to be renamed Potemkinskaya, and the Yaik River henceforth was identified as the Ural River.

SEE ALSO: Bulavin's Rebellion, 1707–1708; Decembrists to the Rise of Russian Marxism; Razin's Rebellion, 1670–1671

References and Suggested Readings

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