By the end of January 1725 female rule had become a fait accompli, a new reality for Russian politics and political culture to which the court, church, state, and society had to adjust – and adjust immediately – if the realm were to avoid turmoil. Female rule ultimately became commonplace during the eighteenth century, with empresses reigning in Russia for all but about five years between 1725 and 1796. But that subsequent normalisation of crowned female heads in no way diminishes the abrupt discontinuity constituted by the ascension of Peter the Great’s widow, Catherine I.

Russian Chronicles recorded only one prior female monarch, the ninth-century Princess Ol’ga, the grandmother of Vladimir and the famously first convert to Christianity. In the intervening centuries Russia had seen two female regencies, Elena Glinskaia, the mother of the young Ivan IV, and Sof’ia Alekseevna, Peter the Great’s half-sister. But, their power notwithstanding, neither reigned in any formal sense, neither underwent a coronation, and neither had received the unction (pomazanie) that signified divine sanction and blessing. Sof’ia was forced from power in 1689 by Peter himself, and she came to be interpreted at court as the embodiment of the folly of female political authority, a symbolic basis for assailing the mere possibility of bringing women to power. That is, until the 1720s. Only Marina Mniszek, consort of both the first and second false Dmitriis, had undergone a coronation ceremony, and it went without saying that no one wanted to follow in those footsteps.

How, then, was female rule to be explained during the first half of the century? How was it reconciled to tradition, to faith, and to the sensibilities of tsarist subjects who had never imagined an alternative to kingship, that is, male rulership? In particular, how did the realm’s primary
ideologists, the leading clerical authorities of Peter’s final years, manage to make female rule seem divinely sanctioned, consistent with the stated belief that the ruler was chosen by God, and consistent with the Christian precedents set forth across generations? What images, whether from Biblical or secular histories did they mobilise, what arguments or authoritative texts did they bring to bear in order to make this abrupt change appear unproblematic?

Peter’s death on 28 January had hardly come as a surprise, but it nevertheless discomfited the remnants of Peter’s inner circle, the embodiments of his reforms and those with the most to lose if the reforms were undone. Their very survival, as well as the future of the still fragile Petrine order, depended on a quick and reasonably peaceful succession, which would need to be manufactured without any template or accepted precedence. By the new rules, the monarch alone would choose his successor. But Peter had not done so, and prior to his death no one had claimed to know his intention. The questions these insiders faced were, first, who would be their choice, and, second, how best to announce the resolution to make it conform to the law and public sensibilities.

Our only accounts of the fraught discussions that brought Catherine I to power come from the diplomatic rumour mill, dubious anecdotes collected decades after the fact, and official explanations intended for public consumption. It may be that in the weeks or days leading up to Peter’s death the most prominent loyalists had caucused and resolved the matter privately. Equally plausible is the scenario described later in Feofan Prokopovich’s official account that suggested that the consensus was reached quickly, but only after Peter died. In any case, the list of choices was short, and none would have been especially appealing. Other than Catherine, there were Peter’s daughters and his grandson, Peter Alekseevich, whose elevation risked returning his grandmother Evdokiia, Peter the Great’s first wife who had long since been banished to a distant convent, and her anti-Petrine associates to positions of influence. Otherwise, no male candidates loomed on the horizon. Neither of the two sons from Peter’s marriage with Catherine had survived beyond early childhood. His half brother Ivan V, long since deceased, had two daughters, Anna and Ekaterina, and his sisters had not produced any available sons. In a practical sense, Peter’s men had only two choices: anointing Peter Alekseevich with Catherine as regent, or accepting some form of female rule.

In the end they chose Catherine, presumably as the safest and least disruptive option, and the one that afforded Peter’s men their best chance of holding on to their collective authority. How, then, were they