Preface

We might wonder whether the world in an absentminded way had not known all the time that Russia was the real culprit, though failing to focus attention on this side of the problem—failing to see that the story needed to be told around Russia. The key to the riddle lies in something which Russia did, not merely as the associate or auxiliary of Maria Theresa, but of her own motion and on her own account. It is just the evidence of the Russian documents which is necessary, therefore, to enable us to see what the narrative is like when it is viewed so to speak from its own centre, and is reconstructed in its proper bearings.¹

Historical treatments of the Seven Years' War have focused primarily on the mutually dependent relationships among Austria, France, Great Britain, and Prussia. Little attention has been devoted to Russia's influence in shaping the incipient stages of this major European conflict. Consequently, Russia's role has been greatly understated and seriously misunderstood. Whereas no attempt has been made to retell the whole story of the coming of the Seven Years' War, certain events must be recapitulated to bring into focus the real position of Russia and the manner in which other countries chose to weigh and contemplate her power. The addition of new source materials necessitated, after an intensive examination of all the evidence, a new appraisal of Russia's relations with Austria, France, Great Britain, and Prussia. Not since the time of Peter the Great had Russia so fully and deliberately participated in European affairs as during this period.

A close examination of Russia’s involvement in the Seven Years’ War illuminates several crucial aspects in the formulation of her foreign policy and in the conduct of court politics. Empress Elizabeth considered Russia’s participation in the war so important that she drastically reformed the administrative and decision-making apparatus because she feared it could not meet the challenges of war. Her chief advisers disagreed with each other on how and who should implement her diplomacy. Their divisive views on diplomacy merely sharpened the conflict in the power struggle which had already begun at the court. The outcome of this controversy led to a distinctive reorientation in Russian foreign policy and to a change in those responsible for directing it. Empress Elizabeth, who had been sickly for some time, suddenly fell critically ill and her death was expected at any moment. Grand Duke Peter and Grand Duchess Catherine, who had until then remained off stage, quickly stepped into leading roles. At that juncture the question of succession to the imperial throne produced sharply conflicting political configurations which could have changed again the foreign policy of Russia.

No attempt has been made to examine Russian military history beyond its relationship to court politics and foreign policy. An intensive study of the state of the military at that time would require a knowledge and understanding of fields that lie outside the present study.

All dates used are adjusted to the New Style calendar. All proper names in the text are spelled in their native language (the Russian being transliterated), except a few for which there are other firmly established forms in English, for example, Michael for Mikhail.