quite unexpected readings, one detects something less than a sure grasp of what is admittedly a complex, much disputed period. One misses, above all, a firm sense of the actual Russian setting—physical, cultural, social, historical—in which Peter the Great operated and in which he is fairly judged. But such, undoubtedly, was nearly impossible to convey in this book, already rich in imagination, nuance, and allusion to the point of indigestibility.

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THE POLITICS OF CATHERINIAN RUSSIA: THE PANIN PARTY. By *David L. Ransel.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975. x, 327 pp. $17.50.

This book is about court politics. The term brings to mind: titillating gossip about the empress and her lovers, a confusing series of names as "outs" replace "ins," and, finally, a feeling that despite frequent changes in personalities nothing of real significance has happened. So much of the literature about Catherine II and her reign has had these qualities that we have come to expect it. Professor Ransel, however, has done something else by trying to find out how things really worked. We have the same panorama of intrigue and shifting positions of the major characters but, for the first time, we get a serious attempt to explain not only what happened but what it meant.

The author's assertion that, in the absence of a "legal administrative system and corporately organized social estates," the government was dominated by "familial and personal patronage networks" is by no means startling. We all know that is the way it must have been. What Ransel does is to give that abstract notion flesh and blood by tracing over a period of twenty years the rise and fall of the familial network that centered on Nikita Panin. By showing how things worked at court, Ransel is frequently able to say why individuals took certain positions on specific issues. His answers, consequently, differ from the received wisdom in several instances, the most important being the notion of Panin as the representative of the "gentry opposition" to the centralizing monarchy.

For Ransel, Panin's Imperial Council project was an attempt to assure that he would continue to be consulted by the empress when it appeared that rival factions were in the ascendancy. When his "party" was sure of the empress's favor, Panin no longer favored proposals to institutionalize the function of advising the sovereign, because he could not count on controlling such a body. As Ransel suggests, the analysis goes a long way toward explaining why, despite numerous proposals for political "reform," the political system remained essentially unchanged for so long.

The limited power of the eighteenth-century "absolute" monarch in Russia is another of the issues lucidly explained in the book. Catherine could manipulate the competing factions, but for many years she did not dare to permit one to completely eliminate the other. The Orlovs could hint that the Panin party was preparing to place Paul on the throne, but Catherine could not disband the guards regiments, the presumed instruments of such an attempt, nor was she in a position to judge whether or not there was any truth to the allegations made against Panin, long her most valued adviser.

A brief review cannot do justice to the sophistication and detail of Ransel's

argument. Furthermore, the book is a delight to read, never obscure or jargon-filled. Despite the rich detail and documentation, the argument is always clear and the forest never lost in the trees. It is a major contribution to the study of eighteenth-century Russia.

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CATHERINE THE GREAT: ART, SEX, POLITICS. By *Herbert T. Altenhoff*. New York: Vantage Press, 1975. xx, 114 pp. $4.50.

The sole reason for reviewing this book is to warn scholars and librarians not to waste their money. The work was published, it would seem, mainly to purvey some miserably reproduced photographs of pornographically decorated furniture. The author, a *Wehrmacht* veteran of the Russian campaign, maintains that he took these pictures "in Catherine's Chambers" in the former Tsarskoe Selo during "a dangerous excursion into enemy territory." No substantiation is offered; the pictures might have been clipped from any porno pulp. The prose is unintentionally hilarious: awkward, ungrammatical, ponderous, naïve, and repetitive. One cannot begin to enumerate the hundreds of errors. The only conceivable scholarly use of this book might be as an object of psychoanalytic study: a twentieth-century example of the old salacious treatment of "naughty Catherine."

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A SIBERIAN JOURNEY: THE JOURNAL OF HANS JAKOB FRIES, 1774–1776. Edited and translated by *Walther Kirchner*. London: Frank Cass, 1974. xii, 183 pp. Illus. £5.50.

To understand Russia one must know its component parts, particularly Siberia. Information on this vast and varied region is often fragmentary and exceedingly rare, thus any new source is welcome. The account of Jakob Fries, a young Swiss surgeon in Russian service who accompanied a recruiting officer as far as Kiakhta in the 1770s, is lively reading and more informative about Siberian society than most works of its time. First published by Professor Kirchner in the original German in 1955, it has now been translated into English, with additional notes, a bibliography, and an index.

Professor Kirchner's introduction is of equal if not greater value. Beginning with Peter the Great's reign, he discusses the works of a pleiad of distinguished naturalists, including Messerschmidt, Müller, Gmelin, Krasheninnikov, Steller, the envoys Izmailov and Lange, the voyager Waxell, the Swedish war prisoner Strahlenberg, and many others. This was the great age of Siberian research. From 1775 to 1825 the reports, including that of Fries, are more touristic, lacking the purpose and much of the novelty of earlier ones. Each, however, contributes additional facts.

The scope of the introduction seems a bit contrived: purporting to be concerned with travel accounts, it includes scientific field studies; supposedly concerned mainly with foreigners, it includes Russians; and it excludes the seven-