

Women : Born to Rule

It is inexplicable that there should be such antipathy to the concept of women in an executive government role when the data shows that they do a far better job. Rather than review the performance of duly elected leaders, Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi, and Golda Meir for example, all of whom had to overcome prejudice throughout their career and have thus demonstrated outstanding abilities and strength of character, it is better to draw comparisons where there is a level playing field. There have been a large number of executive leaders, albeit unelected, in the various monarchies throughout the world. First we should define our terms. In most instances, Hawaii during the 17th century would be one exception, where there is a male available then he will be King. It is true that his wife bears the title of Queen, but we should only consider the Queens Regnant, those who are ruling in their own right. If, and when, they marry, their husbands are deemed the Consort and carry few if any executive powers. Although historical female monarchs are still overwhelmingly in the minority the sample is large enough to draw viable conclusions.

In 2000 years England, or some portion thereof, has had a dozen queens. The first, Queen Boudicia (the spelling is open to question), led the only major revolt against the Romans, no man rose to the occasion. The two Queens prior to the Norman invasion left little record while Lady Jane Grey was illegal and only reigned for nine days (for which she is often referred to as the Nine Day Queen.) Matilda, ascending to the throne in 1141, was promptly usurped by a noble and spent what should have been her entire reign fighting a civil war. The fact that her son, Henry II, succeeded her would indicate that she won. Which brings us to the Elizabethan age, the first monarch to have an era named after them as opposed to a dynastic nomenclature such as the Normans or Plantagenets. Her half-sister Mary did precede her but all her energies were absorbed in trying to reinstate Catholicism and she only lasted for 5 years. Elizabeth, on the other hand, heralded in a period of prosperity, was especially adept at statecraft, offering her hand as an inducement to any number of treaties and alliances, while supporting the great burgeoning of the arts culminating in William Shakespeare.

A century later Mary co-reigned with her husband William, followed shortly thereafter by Anne, just before and just after the dawn of the 18th century. Neither reigns were outstanding, though it should be noted that this was the period when England cemented her mercantile superiority with the newly formed East India Company, Stock Exchange and Lloyds Insurance. There was then a 120 year female interregnum, during which the colonies were lost while the Chief Executive, George III, was mistaking a large oak tree for the Empress of Austria.

Victoria emulated her predecessor Elizabeth in having the era named after her, indeed the architecture, morals and literature as well as much else. This was a period when Britain reached its apogee, a vast empire, in fact Matilda and Victoria were the only two monarchs to have the title Empress bestowed upon them rather than inheriting it, three quarters of the world's trade in some commodities and goods, and an influence totally incommensurate with such a tiny nation.

France, on the other hand, had no Queens Regnant, possibly realizing they made an excellent scapegoat, Marie Antoinette for example. They did, however, produce Eleanor of Aquitaine, a great heiress and wife, successively, to the King of France and the King of England. An exceptionally strong-willed woman, her children ruled great chunks of Europe including England, France, Sicily, Brittany, Saxony and Castille, primarily through her efforts.

Russia is a different matter. Upon the death of Peter the Great in 1725, his widow became Catherine I and continued what had been a most extraordinary life. Born Martha Scowronska she was the daughter of Latvian peasants, possibly runaway serfs. Soon orphaned she lived with an aunt who was worried about the effect of her beauty on her sons. Placed in service she quickly moved up the social ladder, marrying a Swedish dragoon, which state lasted for 8 days until the Russians over-ran the Swedish position, and eventually becoming a servant/confidant to Prince Menshikov, a close friend of Peter the Great. The Tsar saw her, fell in love and, after a conversion to Orthodoxy, she married him. The fairy-tale continued upon his death when she became the first female ruler of Imperial Russia. A just ruler, she continued Peter's modernizing policies and sponsored scientific inquiry. Apparently she was successful for she ushered in nearly a century of rule by Tsarinas.

Anna, another widow, this time to Peter II, was left in power in the hopes that she would be malleable and allow the nobility more power (well, she was a woman wasn't she.) Contrary to expectations she ruled autocratically, being the first to set up the secret police, ultimately to morph into the KGB. The daughter of Catherine and Peter the Great, Elizabeth, led Russia into two wars spanning 15 years of her 21 year reign. By the time of her death Russia had nearly doubled in size. Finally there was Catherine the Great, great at statecraft, intrigue and expansion. By the time she died in 1796 the Empire sprawled from the remaining slivers of Poland to the wastes of Siberia and south to the Black Sea. She revamped the administration and dragged the country into a more Western-style society. Beset by scandals, it was under her that Russia became a Great Power, only to have much of her innovation and direction undone through the following century.

The numerical supremacy of male rulers is true in most monarchies, but when women did ascend to the throne in their own right they were more often great monarchs. Isabella of Castille and Leon, apart from funding Columbus, unified Spain and formed an Empire. Christina of Sweden ruled for 10 balmy and prosperous years, but then she was thought to be a boy at birth and was, on her father's instructions, brought up as a Prince. Margaret I of Denmark became Queen of that country in 1375, then Queen of Norway in 1388 and added Queen of Sweden the following year for the triple crown. And so the list goes on, from the Empress Dowagers of China, rulers in all but name, through Cleopatra, the Queen of Sheba and Helen the Tough of Bosnia, their sole Queen Regnant. Both Jadwiga of Poland and Irene of the Byzantine Empire took on the masculine title, to prove equality; *Rex Poloniae*, King of Poland for Jadwiga and Basilius or Emperor in the case of Irene. Time and time again, where women have had the chance to rule they have more than proven their mettle. An interesting addendum to this is the way in recent times, amongst constitutional monarchies, the male preponderance is reversed, the U.K., the Netherlands (only Queens since 1890), and Denmark, all 'enlightened societies' and all ruled by Queens; contrast this with the European kings who have been deposed in the past century and I rest my case.

Sources: [Queen Regnants throughout the times](#)

Massie, Robert K. *Peter the Great*. Random House; New Jersey, 1980

[English Monarchs - A complete history of the Kings and Queens of England](#)

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