



## PETER THE GREAT

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper in depth talks about one of the most important leaders of Russia Peter the Great who not only modernized Russia but gave the country its present shape and meaning. The aesthetic value of Moscow and St. Petersburg can be attributed to Peter. The paper further outlines his early life and the course of important events on his life that shaped modern Russia. Before Putin and Stalin Russia has produced Peter who happen to be a mass leader till date. He can be compared to Indian figures like Akbar. One can see Russia in its present form through the eyes of history that was shaped by Peter. The paper examines the economic, education, military and foreign policy of Peter and gives insight of how Europe has had a great influence on Russia.*

### INTRODUCTION

Moscow in the 1670's was a city of wood. Rising from a hill 125 feet above the Moscow River, the towers, cupolas and battlements of the Kremlin dominated the city. In Russian, the word 'kreml' means 'fortress' and the Moscow Kremlin was a mighty citadel. In normal times, the Kremlin had two masters, one temporal, the other spiritual: the tsar and the patriarch. From infancy, Russians had been taught to regard their ruler as god-like creature. Their proverbs embodied this view: "Only God and the tsars know," "One sun shines in heaven and the Russian tsar on earth," "The sovereign is the father, the earth the mother,"<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Russians considered their tsar to be a God like figure and thus consolidated the theory of the Divine Rights.

Beneath the Tsar stood the nobility, divided into almost a dozen ranks. The greatest noblemen held the highest rank, that of a *boyar*. There was a small middle class of merchants, artisans and other town people followed by the huge base of the pyramid – the peasants and the serfs who made the overwhelming mass of the Russian society. The actual daily work of administering the tsar’s government was in the hands of thirty and forty departments known as *Prikazy*.

Winston Churchill emphatically stated that ‘*Russia is a riddle rapt in a mystery inside an enigma.*’ Russian history is a riddle. Russia was ruled by Romanov dynasty for 300 years . Russia was never a single land, Russian people never a single race, it was a nation of many nations. Russian blood was a mixture of Slav, Tatar, Balt and others. The most distinguishing feature of Russia was and is its Rivers that connected vast masses of land and people. A significant challenge was to unite this magnanimous land and its diverse populace.

Much before Stalin and Lenin Russia was the land ruled by Ivan the Terrible and of course Peter the Great. One of Russia’s greatest statesmen Peter the Great – the Tsar and the First Emperor of Russia - was a man of unwavering willpower, extraordinary energy and supreme vision. Having inherited a vast but backward state, he propelled Russia to the rank of a major European power while his extraordinary personality and wide scale reforms have been a source of inspiration for many. He was a towering personality and the city of St. Petersburg hold testimony till date to his strong personality cult and the spellbound contribution made to the Russian society and history. One must acknowledge his contribution to westernise the Russian society and its archaic culture and also exploring waters in order to connect to the other regions of the world . The legacy of this important figure has left an indelible impression on the Russian history in particular and world history in general.

## **CHILDHOOD & EDUCATION**

Tsar Alexis was married twice, the first time to Maria Miloslavsky, by whom he had thirteen children , and the second time to Natalia Naryshkin. Peter, who was born in the Kremlin on May 30<sup>th</sup> ,1672, at one o’clock in the morning, was the first child of this second marriage. Natalia Naryshkin, having been brought up by the Western-minded Matveev<sup>2</sup>, was herself a westernising influence at court. A doting mother, a proud father and a pleased Matveev

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<sup>2</sup> Artemon Matveev was Tsar Alexis’ close friend and adviser. Matveev was much influenced by Western European ideas, habits and customs.

competed to lavish gifts on the child , and Peter’s nursery soon overflowed with elaborate models and toys. Music boxes and a small, elegant clavichord with copper strings were brought from Germany. But Peter’s favourite toys and his earliest games were military. Toy soldiers and forts, model pikes, swords, arquebuses and pistols were his favourite toys. Next to his bed, Peter kept his most precious toys, given to him by Matveev , who had brought it from a foreigner : a model of boat.

Tsar Alexis died when Peter was four years old, and Theodore, Maria Miloslavsky’s son, succeeded to the throne. Because of Alexis’ two marriages, his death saw the beginning of a struggle for power between two unscrupulous families whose hatred for each other was proverbial. As a result Natalia’s family and supporters were given a back stage, her supporters dismissed from their positions, her most powerful adherent Artemon Matveev was banished to Pustozersk<sup>3</sup> and Natalia herself withdrew from active politics.

Peter’s education began when he was five years old. Tsar Theodore, who was Peter’s godfather and also his elder half-brother, had frequently said to his step mother Natalia ‘Madam, it is high time our godson started his lessons’. In the words of Kotoshikhin<sup>4</sup>, it was always the ‘gentle, literate folk, who weren’t likely to make nuisances of themselves’ who were chosen from the Departmental Clerks to teach the Tsarevitches. Nikita Zotov was given the onus to teach Peter. Historians blame Zotov for having had a bad educational influence on Peter, but Zotov was not asked to educate him; he was asked only to teach him reading, writing, and grammar. Many years later Peter appointed him ‘Prince-Pope’, President of the College of Drunkards.

On April 27<sup>th</sup>,1682, just before Peter’s tenth birthday, Tsar Theodore died. This led to an interruption in Peter’s education.

Until the age of ten he was taught his Church-Slavonic grammar in the traditional way. Then at the age of ten, as a result of the terrifying and bloody events of May 1682, he was forced to leave the Kremlin, and was cut off from the typical old Russian environment. However later he was under Timmerman’s<sup>5</sup> supervision. Under Timmerman’s supervision, Peter began ‘zealously and eagerly’ to study arithmetic and geometry, the theory of ballistics and the art of fortification. Peter was quick to learn arithmetic and geometry, theory of ballistics and the

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<sup>3</sup> Pustozersk, afterwards called kola, is near Archangel in North Western Russia.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Kotoshikhin, a government official who was disillusioned about the state of Alexian Muscovy, wrote a highly critical book about Russia in the reign of Alexis.

<sup>5</sup> Timmerman was a Dutch merchant who had settled in Moscow under Alexis.

art of fortifications; he mastered the astrolable, and learned to demolish fortresses and calculate the trajectory of the canon balls.

Zotov had been concerned with training Peter's memory; Timmerman's main interest lay in developing his co-ordination, dexterity, and sense of proportion. Neither appealed to his reasoning powers or to his emotions. It is not surprising; therefore, that Peter's tastes and ideas were somehow one-sided. All his political thinking was dominated by the struggle with his half-sister and the Miloslavskys. His attitude to civic affairs was coloured by hatred of the clergy, the boyars, the Streltsy, and the Old Believers.

## **REVOLT OF THE STRELTSY**

Throughout the first half of Peter's life, the key to power in Russia was the Streltsy<sup>6</sup>, the shaggy, bearded pikemen and musketeers who guarded the Kremlin and were Russia's first professional soldiers. The Streltsy were formed in the reign of Ivan the Terrible. He had foamed these regiments to give a permanent professional core to the unwieldy feudal host which previous Muscovite rulers had led into battle. These older armies, consisting of squadrons of mounted noblemen and a horde of armed peasants, were summoned in the spring and sent home in the autumn. They were concentrated in Moscow and in a few other towns. They paid no taxes, and while not engaged in military duties were allowed to trade on their own account. Naturally, the richer the Streltsy became, the more reluctant they were to resume their primary duties as soldiers.

In May 1682 as the young Tsar Fedor lay in his death bed, the conspiracy of the Tsarevna Sophia and the Miloslavskys caused the terrible revolt of the Streltsy; sinister stories ran in the country. It was rumoured that Fedor had not died naturally, but had been poisoned by the foreign doctors with the connivance of the boyars and the Naryshkins. These same enemies had been pushed aside Ivan, the rightful heir, in favour of Peter. This led to the massacre of the boyars; as a result, Peter and Ivan were proclaimed joint-Tsars<sup>7</sup> with Sophia as Regent(youth and experience of the two Tsars).

Thus, Sophia assumed the leadership of the Russian state. Although she was filling a vacancy which she and her agents had created, Sophia was now in fact the natural choice.

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<sup>6</sup> Singular *strelets*, a shooter, '...named because their chief weapons were muskets, although they were armed also with swords, pikes and battle axes. Some of them were mounted, but the majority were infantrymen.' George Lantzeff, *Siberia in the Seventeenth Century*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1934, p.66

<sup>7</sup> The dual coronation of Ivan and Peter was the last time the Cap of Monomakh was used to crown a Russian autocrat.

The Streltsy revolt, marked Peter for life. The calm and security of his boyhood were shattered, his soul was wrenched and seared. It had a tremendous impact on Peter.

Peter hated what he had seen: the maddened, undisciplined soldiery of the old medieval Russia running wild through the Kremlin; statesmen and nobles dragged from their private chambers and bloodily massacred; Moscow, the Kremlin, the royal family, the Tsar himself at the mercy of ignorant, rioting soldiers. In a way, the Streltsy revolt helped to inspire the building of St. Petersburg<sup>8</sup>. The events of May 1682 finally forced the Tsaritsa Natalia to leave the Kremlin, and she took up residence at Preobrazhensky<sup>9</sup>.

The political exile of the Naryshkins had been Peter's personal good fortune. Sophia's coup d'état and the expulsion of his party from power had freed Peter from all but occasional ceremonial duties. He was at liberty to grow in the free, unrestricted, fresh air life of the country. Natalia still resented bitterly the murder of Matveev and her brother Ivan Naryshkin, and she was certain that Sophia might not take some new action against her and her children.

## **PETER'S MILITARY EXPEDITIONS**

By the time Peter was fourteen his martial games had transformed the summer estate into an adolescent military encampment. Peter's first 'soldiers' were the small group of playmates who had been appointed to his service when he reached the age of five. They had been selected from the families of boyars to provide the Prince with a personal retinue of young noblemen who acted the roles of equerry, valet and butler; in fact they were his friends. Eventually 300 of these boys and young men mustered on the Preobrazhenskoe estate. These men were called as 'Poteshnie' became a particular rank in the military hierarchy. Recruitment to the companies was carried out in an official, departmental manner. The soldiers lived in barracks, trained like soldiers used soldiers' talk and received soldiers' pay. Peter eventually created the proud Preobrazhensky Regiment, the first regiment of the Russian Imperial Guard followed by the creation of the Semyonovky Regiment. The technical knowledge came from the foreign officers in the German Suburb.

In 1684 a foreign specialist called Zommer showed Peter a mortar which eventually became one of his favourite weapons. While Peter accepted the foreigners in his regiment, he made sure that important posts were held by the Russians. Prince Theodore Romodaovky nicknamed Frederick, was the Commander-in-Chief of the 'King of Pressburg's' army.

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<sup>8</sup> A striking parallel to Peter's hatred of Moscow can be found in Louis XIV's abhorrence of Paris.

<sup>9</sup> Preobrazhensky is on the River Yauza, Alexis' favourite country seat.

Romodanovsky was given extensive police powers, and was appointed Chief of the Preovrazhensky military inquisition and minister in charge of Flogging and the torture chamber. An old veteran, Ivan Buturlin, whom Peter called the ‘King of Poland’ or ‘Tsar Semenovskiy’, and who was ‘cruel, corrupt and a sot’, was made Commander-in-Chief of another force, made up mostly from Streltsy.

## **THE GREAT NORTHERN WAR**

The Great Northern War—during most of which Russia, Saxony-Poland, and Denmark allied against Sweden—was fought primarily in Saxony, Poland, the Baltic regions, and Russia. It was essentially the continuation of an earlier, inconclusive struggle between Sweden and Russia for control of the eastern Baltic region. This time, however, the struggle was decisive, and Russia emerged victorious to become the dominant power in the Baltic, while Sweden’s [Charles XII](#) was defeated.

During the early part of the war, the great powers of Western Europe were occupied with their own conflict, the War of the Spanish Succession. After 1713, when that war was in its final stages, Britain and Hanover noticed Russia’s aggression, and they attempted to limit Russia’s domination of the Baltic Sea. Prussia, meanwhile, took advantage of Sweden’s plight and captured Swedish Pomerania. The Ottoman Turks became involved in the conflict as well, granting Charles XII asylum after his defeat at the Battle of Poltava.

In 1699, Czar Peter the Great of Russia had joined Denmark and Saxony-Poland in a secret coalition against Sweden. All three powers had territorial ambitions: King Frederick IV of Denmark wanted Holstein-Gottorp; the ruler of Saxony-Poland, Augustus II, had his eyes on Livonia and Lithuania; and Peter himself dreamed of expanding Russia to the Baltic coast. The idea of this anti-Swedish coalition may have originated with the Livonian nobleman Johann Reinhold von Patkul.

Between January and August, 1700, Saxony-Poland, Denmark, and Russia declared war on Sweden. However, Charles XII, who had come to the Swedish throne at the age of fifteen, was an effective military leader. He quickly defeated Frederick IV, who was forced to sign the Treaty of Travendal on August 8, 1700. The Swedish king then moved against Augustus II, defeating him in Poland. He effectively deposed Augustus as Polish king and replaced him with Stanisław I Leszczyński. Then he defeated Augustus in Saxony as well and forced him formally to renounce the Polish throne in the Treaty of Altranstädt in September, 1706.

Patkul was turned over to the Swedes, who executed him. In the wake of these defeats, Russia found itself fighting Sweden alone for three years. Not until after the Battle of Poltava in 1709 did Denmark and Saxony-Poland rejoin the Russians in the war against Sweden.

Charles XII moved against Russia soon after Peter the Great declared war on Sweden in August, 1700. The Swedish king defeated a Russian force that was besieging the Baltic seaport of Narva on November 30, 1700. After the Siege of Narva was broken, Charles XII thought that Russia was no longer a threat, and over the next six years he turned his attention to the defeat of Augustus II. This decision allowed Peter the Great to reorganize his military, build a Baltic navy, and seize Swedish towns in the Baltic region. In the autumn of 1702, he captured Nöteborg, on the mouth of the Neva River, and renamed it Schlüsselburg (“key fortress”). In early 1703, Peter started the construction of St. Petersburg, the future capital of Russia, near Schlüsselburg. While the Swedish king was occupied in Poland and Saxony, Russia was also able to overrun Dorpat and Narva (1705) and Courland (1705-1706).

After the defeat of Saxony in late 1706, Charles XII again turned his attention to Russia and devoted the following year to building up his army for an invasion of that country. Peter the Great had supported Poland’s nobles in their struggle against Charles by giving them massive subsidies. He also supported anti-Swedish resistance by Lithuanian nobles. He knew that Sweden would eventually invade Russia. In anticipation of the Swedish invasion, Peter withdrew his forces from the Baltic areas he had captured (except St. Petersburg). He engaged in a scorched-earth policy, devastating border regions that might provision Charles XII’s army. He also fortified the Kremlin in Moscow.

In January, 1708, the Swedish king crossed Berezina and moved toward Mogilev on his way to Moscow. By July, Charles had defeated the Russians at Holovzin and reached Mogilev. However, lack of supplies, poor roads, and resistance by the Russians made it difficult to advance any farther into Russian territory. In September, 1708, the Swedish king decided not to take Moscow and instead to invade the more accessible Ukraine in order to solve his supply problems.

Charles expected to obtain additional men and supplies from another Swedish army under the command of general Adam Ludwig Lewenhaupt, but Lewenhaupt was defeated by Peter and his general, [Aleksandr Danilovich Menshikov](#), at the Battle of Lesnaya on September 28, 1708. Although Lewenhaupt did join Charles, he had lost his supplies and much of his artillery, and the aid that Charles expected from [Ivan Stepanovich Mazepa](#), the Cossack leader of the western Ukraine, failed to materialize, because Menshikov attacked Mazepa,

who escaped with only two thousand Cossacks to support Charles's cause. At the Battle of Poltava on July 8, 1709, Peter and Menshikov decisively defeated Charles, who was forced to seek asylum with the Turks. His presence in the [Ottoman Empire](#) led to a Russian-Turkish war in December, 1710. This war against the Ottomans proved disastrous for Peter, who was defeated at the Battle of the Pruth River in 1711, resulting in the loss of Azov.

Charles XII left the Ottoman Empire under the pseudonym Captain Peter Frisk and arrived in Stralsund on November 11, 1714. Charles arrived in Sweden in early 1715 to find new enemy coalitions arrayed against him, coalitions including Prussia and Hanover. A plan organized by Baron Georg Heinrich von Görtz and accepted by Peter in 1713 called for Prussia to support the duke of Holstein's claim to the Swedish throne. In return, Prussia would be allowed to keep Swedish Pomerania. Charles XII did not see the end of the war: He was killed in battle in December, 1718, at Frederikshald, Norway. With Charles dead, Peter's armies and his Baltic fleet could move at will against Swedish positions in the eastern Baltic region, including Finland and the Swedish coast. In February, 1720, Sweden signed peace treaties with Hanover and Prussia at Stockholm, and in June, 1720, Denmark and Sweden agreed to the Treaty of Frederiksborg. Hanover obtained Bremen and Verden, Prussia gained Stettin and portions of Pomerania, and Denmark obtained part of Schleswig. Russia and Sweden agreed to the Treaty of Nystad on September 11, 1721, which awarded Estonia, Livonia, Ingria, and Karelia to Russia.

## **Significance**

The Great Northern War ended Sweden's role as a great European power. It lost its hold on its north eastern German and Baltic territories to Prussia and Russia. Prussia gained much of Swedish Pomerania, paving the way for its massive eastern territorial expansion during the second half of the eighteenth century and its rise to German dominance in the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, as the leading power in Eastern Europe, Russia became much more involved in European affairs, playing a decisive role in major European conflicts in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Russia also gained direct influence over Poland and, because Peter maintained a policy of Russian dynastic intermarriages with nobles in Courland, Wolfenbüttel, Mecklenburg, and Holstein, the country faced future entanglements in German affairs and wars.

Symbolic of Russia's rise as a great European power and its victory over Sweden, Peter in 1721 assumed the title of czar (emperor). There was apprehension among some leading

European philosophers and officials of Russia's rise as a great power. The German philosopher [Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz](#) (1646-1716) reacted to the Russian victory at Poltava by suggesting that Peter the Great would become the new "Turk of the North."

## REFORMS BY PETER

Peter once asked seventy-eight year old Prince Jacob Dolgoruky, sometimes called the Russian Cato "*You criticize me more than anybody else and plague me with your arguments until I sometimes feel I could lose my temper with you....*" "*...But I know you are sincerely devoted to me and to the state and that you always speak the truth, for which I am deeply grateful. Now tell me how do you estimate my achievements...*"<sup>10</sup>

Doldoruky explicitly stated the three most important duties of a Tsar. They were:<sup>11</sup>

- a. The administration of the country and the dispensation of justice;
- b. Organization of the army
- c. Building a fleet, making treaties and determining relationship with foreign countries.

In the years after Poltova, Peter turned his attention from organizing armies and building fleets to a basic remodelling of the structure of civil and church administration, to modernising and changing the economic and social patterns of the nation, and even to rechanneling the age-old trade routes of the Russia he had inherited. It was in the second half of the reign, the years between 1711 and 1725, that the fundamental Petrine reforms were fashioned. The nature and sequence of Peter's early reforms were dictated by war and the need for money to pay it. For a while, as Pushkin wrote, the state was ruled primarily on the basis of Peter's decrees, hastily scribbled on pieces of paper.

## ADMINISTRATIVE REFORMS

Traditionally in Russia, the tsar had ruled with the advice of an ancient, consultive council of boyars, and beneath it, the administration of the laws was carried out by a number of government offices, or *prikazi*. For the first two decades of Peter's reign, 1689-1708, there had been no change in this structure. As Peter grew older and grasped the reins of government more firmly, he used the council little, and his opinion of it became openly contemptuous. In 1707, he ordered the council to keep minutes of its meetings which were to

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<sup>10</sup>Massie,R.(1981) , In the Service of the State, *Peter the Great*, p747

<sup>11</sup> ibid

be signed by all members. “No resolution shall be taken without this”, he instructed, “so that the stupidity of each shall be evident.”

In 1708, when Charles XII was marching on Russia, the central government had seemed unable to cope with the crisis. To raise money and find recruits, both desperately needed, Peter ordered a sweeping *decentralization of government administration*. Peter introduced *Zemski* system which is equivalent to our Panchayati system. The entire nation was divided eight huge provinces or government –Moscow, Ingermanland (later called as St. Petersburg), Kiev, Smolensk, Archangel, Kazan, Azov and Siberia- endowed with wide powers, especially in the areas of revenue collection and army recruiting. To underline the importance of these new regional governments, Peter had assigned his most senior lieutenants as governors. But this new system did not work. Most of the governors lived in St. Petersburg, too far from the regions they supposedly governed to control them effectively. Some of the governors, such as Menshikov and Apraxin, had more pressing duties with the army or the fleet.

Peter realized that he himself was part of the problems. All power was concentrated in his person, which, as he was so often on the move, made administration difficult. Further, he was completely absorbed by military affairs and foreign policy and had no time for domestic matters. He created the under mentioned institution as a result.

The **Senate** was created in February 1711, on the eve of Peter’s departure for the disastrous campaign on the Pruth, and was intended as a temporary institution to govern during the months he was away. The short decree establishing the Senate was specific on this point: “We appoint the governing Senate to administer in our absence.” Because the new body of nine senators would rule in place of the Tsar, it was granted wide powers: It was to oversee the provincial governments, act as the highest court of justice, take charge of all state expenditures and, above all, “to collect money as much as possible, for money is the artery of war.” The Senate did not disappear but gradually became the chief executive and legislative organ of the central government of Russia. It remained a body for transmitting and administering the will of the autocrat and had no independent will of its own. It was an instrument, its powers were those of an agent, its jurisdiction touched only on domestic matters- all questions of foreign policy and peace or war were reserved to the Tsar. The subordinate status was made plainer by the fact that none of Peter’s principal lieutenants- Menshikov, Apraxin, Golovkin, Sheremetev – was included in the Senate. These “Supreme Lords” or “Principals,” as they were called, could send time, Peter instructed Menshikov that he and the others must obey the Senate.

In November 1715, attempting to discipline the Senate and make it more effective, Peter created the supervisory post of **Inspector General of Decrees** to sit “in the same place as the Senate, to take note of the Senate’s decrees, to see that they are enforced, and to denounce and fine negligent senators.” Vasily Zotov, the foreign-educated son of his old tutor, was the first Inspector General.

In 1722, Peter resolved to create a new managerial office, that of the **Procurator General**, who was to be the Emperor’s personal representative in the Senate. “Here is my eye through whom I will see everything”. The Procurator General’s duty was to direct the Senate and superintend its work. Although he was not a member of the body and could not vote, he was in fact President of the Senate, responsible for maintaining order during sessions, for initiating legislation and bringing it to a vote and to send it for approval. Peter’s choice for this important role was Pavel Yaguzhinsky, one of his low-born “fledglings.” Peter used him on diplomatic missions and took him along to Paris, where the French described him as Peter’s favourite.

From 1711 to 1718, the Senate had been responsible for administration as well as for legislation, but Peter realized that the Senate had been responsible for administration as well as for legislation, but Peter realized that the state need a new executive machinery, separate from the Senate, which would permit the Senate to concentrate on legislative matters. It was this realization which led him to begin his experiment with a new government institution imported from Europe, the **system of colleges or ministries**. Peter, admiring both Charles and Swedish efficiency and, having no qualms about borrowing from his enemy, decided to use the Swedish colleges as models for his own. The old prikazy, or government offices, now thirty-five in number, were superseded by nine new colleges: Foreign Affairs, Revenue Collection, Justice, Expenditure, Financial Control, War, Admiralty, Commerce, and Mining and Manufacturing. The Presidents of these colleges were to be Russians and the vice presidents foreigners.

To help make these foreign institutions work, Peter imported foreign experts. Russian agents circulated through Europe inviting foreigners to come to the new Russian colleges. Even Swedish prisoners of war who had learned Russian were invited to the colleges . In the end, enough foreigners were found, and Weber was to describe the humming activity at the college of Foreign Affairs in glowing terms: “Hardly any foreign office in the world issues dispatches in so many languages. They have sixteen interpreters and secretaries : Russian,

Latin, Polish, High Dutch, Low Dutch, English, Danish, French, Italian, Spanish, Greek, Turkish, Chinese, Tatar, Kalmuck and Mongolian.”

In 1711, Peter created a bureau of official informers called **fiscals** to tackle corruption. They were to be headed by a chief, the **Ober Fiscal**, whose assignment was to track down and report to the Senate all offenders, no matter what their rank. The most dedicated of the fiscals was Alexis Nesterov, who eventually became the Ober-Fiscal.

## **EDUCATIONAL REFORMS**

The concept of service was broadened to include the duty of becoming educated. Peter began this program pragmatically with his first impulsive dispatch of young Russians to the West in 1696, on the eve of the Great Embassy. After Poltova, the effort became more serious, more inclusive and more institutionally structured. In 1712, a decree ordered all sons of Landowners to report to the Senate. They were divided into age groups: the youngest were sent to Reval to study seamanship, the middle group went to Holland for naval training and the eldest marched directly into the army.

## **MILITARY REFORMS**

Peter intended the army to be wholly officered by professionally trained Russian noblemen who had begun their twenty-five years of service at the age of fifteen when they entered the Guards or a line regiment as private soldiers. From that lowest rank, each nobleman was to work his way up on the basis of merit. In February 1714, Peter categorically prohibited the commissioning of any officer, no matter what his title, who had not come through the ranks. According to Prince Kurakin, it was not uncommon for Petersburgers to see a Prince Golitsyn or Prince Gagarin with a musket on his shoulder doing sentry duty in front of his barracks.

A different and potentially far-reaching reform incorporating the **principle of meritocracy** was the Tsar's overthrowing of the time-honoured Muscovite law of inheritance. Peter's decree of March 14, 1714, declared that a father must pass his undivided estate to only one son – and that this son need not be the eldest.

The reforms that Peter brought about were designed not only to strengthen Russia as a nation but also to strengthen his rule over that nation. He sought practical Western techniques and skills, rather than theory and philosophy, that could be applied directly to improve Russia's political system, economy, and military forces. When these techniques were introduced into

Russia, the result was a country half European and half Russian. This contradiction can be seen in the financial reforms carried out by Alexis Kurbatov, one of Peter's leading advisers, who substantially increased government revenues by imposing new taxes and increasing existing ones. Such policies added to the misery and hardship of the general population. Peter's political reforms produced an expanded bureaucratic structure, which was clearly designed to be more efficient and augment the autocratic power of the czar.

Peter improved Russia's domestic and foreign trade with the West, using mercantilist theories of extensive state control over goods to be shipped abroad. Primary emphasis was given to the development of industry, including mining and the manufacture of military equipment such as cannons. Substantial funds were provided for Russia's industrial growth. Peter sought to make his nation more independent in meeting its own essential needs, especially for his numerous military campaigns.

## **RELIGIOUS REFORMS**

Among other reforms, Peter abolished the patriarchate of the [Russian Orthodox Church](#) and placed religious affairs under the control of a government department. He ordered the establishment of technical schools to provide the needed skills for government officials and military officers. Less significant but still often noted reforms include the elimination of the old Russian calendar in favor of the [Julian calendar](#) and the adoption of Western dress for the upper classes of society. The Russian alphabet was also simplified.

Peter's policies had the broad effect of creating a larger urban population, which was somewhat better educated than previously. New skills were needed among large segments of the population, especially in industry. The institution of serfdom remained essentially the same, however, as far as the daily lives of individual peasants were concerned. Peter's efforts to reach his objectives led to the creation of a table of ranks of military and government officials: Persons of lower [social status](#) could climb higher on this table on the basis of merit and service to the state. Possessed of a violent temper, Peter demanded total loyalty from his subordinates, and he punished those who fell into disfavor or were suspected of disloyalty.

Such a range of reforms obviously meant changes in the traditional Russian way of life, and they provoked discontent and resistance. A serious serf rebellion broke out but was crushed by Peter's military forces. By 1710, some of the remaining opposition to Peter found a champion in the czar's disgruntled son Alexis Petrovich. As the years passed, Peter's

suspicion of his son's activities increased. The final break between the two came in 1718, when Peter, suspecting Alexis of involvement in a plot to repeal the reforms and cooperate with Russia's foreign enemies, forced him to renounce his succession to the throne. Not satisfied with this, the czar cast him into prison where, in June, 1718, he died from repeated tortures.

## **REFORMS IN COMMERCE**

At first, with his country plunged into the major war, Peter's attempt to build industry related entirely to the needs of war. He developed cannon foundries, powder mills, factories to make muskets, leather works for saddles and harness, textile mills to weave woollen clothes for uniforms and make sails for the fleet. By 1705, the state owned textile factories in Moscow and Voronezh were doing so well that Peter wrote to Menshikov "They are making clothes and God gives excellent results, so that I have made Kaftan for myself for the holidays."

Aware that large sums were being drained out of the country to pay for imports of silk, velvet, ribbon, china, and crystal, he established factories to make these products in Russia. To protect the fledgling industry, he placed high import duties on foreign silk and cloth which doubled their price for Russian buyers. Basically, his policy was similar to that of other European states at the time, which can generally be described as mercantilism: to increase exports in order to earn foreign currency, and decrease imports in order to stem the flow of Russian wealth abroad.

Peter's industrialization policy had a second purpose, equally important. His tax collectors were already wringing the Russian people lifeless to finance the war. The only long term way to extract more revenue from his people, Peter realized, was to increase the production of national wealth, thus increasing the tax base. He understood that private enterprises and initiative were the true sources of national wealth. His goal was to create a class of Russian entrepreneurs who would assist and eventually replace the sovereign and the state as producers of this wealth. The most productive partnership between state and private industry was in mining and heavy industry. In 1718, he established a College of Mining and Manufacturing, to encourage location and development of new mineral sites in the Urals. By the end of Peter's reign, a vast industrial and mining complex consisting of 21 iron and

copper foundries has risen in the Urals, centring on the town of Ekaterinburg named in honour of Peter's wife<sup>12</sup>.

To facilitate trade, Russia needed more circulating currency. New Russian coin has been minted since Peter's return from the west with the Great Embassy, but coins were so scarce that merchants in Petersburg, Moscow and Archangel borrowed them at 15% interest simply to keep their business operating. One reason for this scarcity was ingrained habit of all Russian's of quickly hiding any money on which they could lay their hands. Another reason for the scarcity of coinage was an insufficiency of precious metals. In 1714, to preserve the nation's economy, Peter forbids the export of silver. In 1718, merchants leaving Russia were searched and any gold silver or copper coins found were confiscated. Peter has a single firm purpose; to use foreign technicians to help build the modern Russia.

New systems of canals were built at different points in Russia. Russia has magnificent network of rivers-Dnieper, Don, Volga, and Dvina. Peter's first herculean efforts to try to link Volga with Don thus, by his possession of Azov at the mouth of the Don give most of the Russian heartland access to the black sea. The growth of St Petersburg inspired a second vision, linking hole of Russia to Baltic by connecting Volga to the Neva. The Vyshny-Volochok canal which took 20 thousand men to dig resulted in the linking of the Caspian Sea with St. Petersburg, Baltic and Atlantic Ocean. Today the canal system of Russia forms a giant artery of commerce which permits to large whips to pass and flow.

Peter decided to replace the household tax with the version of the individual head tax he has observed in France. The taxpaying unit of this new poll tax was to be the "soul". The soul tax solved the Peter's problem of revenue but at cost of placing even heavier burden on peasants and strengthening the bonds of Serfdom.

## **Significance**

Peter's methods notwithstanding, his reforms had an undeniable impact upon Russian history, causing Russia to emerge from its Byzantine-Asiatic medieval past. The Petrine framework of modern Russia, particularly its governmental and social structure, remained relatively intact until the Revolution of 1917. Although the country, like its geography, was half European and half Asian, the domestic transformation of Russia strengthened it to the point where it could henceforth play a significant role in the international affairs of Europe.

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<sup>12</sup> In 1918, Ekaterinburg was the site of the murder of the family of the last Russian emperor Nicholas II. Today the city is named Sverdlovsk

One of the major controversies in the field of Russian historiography has been the true significance of Peter's reforms. To some scholars, the importance of these reforms simply cannot be overemphasized; to others, their significance has been greatly exaggerated. Most scholars who study the Petrine period conclude that, while some of Peter's reforms were relatively limited in their impact or actually began under his predecessors, the impact of his economic and military policies in particular was decisive. Moreover, the forceful methods he employed to generate change are noteworthy, even if they were not always admirable or even successful.

Although many Petrine reforms helped lead the way to a modern Russian state, many of his projects were, at best, misguided, and, at worst, disastrous. Many thousands of peasants were killed during the construction of St. Petersburg and the abortive canal system he planned to build between the Baltic, Black, and Caspian Seas. The new taxation system was incomprehensible and peasants were overtaxed and overworked to provide for Peter's constant warfare. His wars were often poorly managed and the Northern War in particular was protracted far longer than it need have been. Although he attempted to compile a new code of laws and to complete an accurate census, both projects failed during his lifetime. He was despised by many Russians for apparently abandoning traditional Russian customs and there were several revolts during his reign. Abroad and in Russia, his reckless behaviour at social gatherings led many to speculate that he was not fit to rule. On the whole though, Peter is generally seen as one of Russia's greatest leaders, and his reign provides a convenient line dividing medieval from modern Russia. His reforms of all aspects of the government, although not bound together by some grand scheme, were designed by necessity to support each other and dramatically improved the quantity and quality of Russian industry. His military victories and extensive foreign travels gave Russia a place in European politics, and the emergence of Russia as a trading nation gave her a place in the European economy. By exploiting innovations abroad and bringing them to Russia, Peter rapidly transformed his state from an isolated Eastern empire to a prominent European monarchy, and his reforms had a long-lasting impact on Russian society.

## **ETERNITY**

Peter the great, in the 53<sup>rd</sup> year of his life and 43<sup>rd</sup> year of his reign collapsed into coma. And at 6 am of January 28, 1725 he breath his last.

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