

## PETER THE GREAT AND THE WESTERNIZATION OF RUSSIA

---



The Bettmann Archive

1672	Born
1682	Joint succession with Ivan V under a regency
1696	Beginning of Peter's sole rule
1697-1698	The Grand Embassy (Peter's tour of the West)
1698	Destruction of the <i>streltsy</i> army revolt
1700-1721	The Great Northern War against Sweden
1706	Start of the building of St. Peters- burg
1725	Died

Peter the Great was six feet eight inches tall and so strong that he could break a horseshoe with his bare hands. He was practically indifferent to comfort, and he had a manic energy and a capacity for the most savage and destructive rage. Despite an education so scant and faulty that he was virtually illiterate, he became a competent expert in more than a dozen technical crafts and a more than respectable amateur scientist. The enormous mass of laws, regulations, and edicts he framed have not even yet been completely edited. He was apt to invite anyone to eat or drink with him and was fond of stopping in the huts or shops of the humblest artisans to admire their skill or try his own and to chat with them. Yet Peter the Great sacrificed the lives of uncounted thousands of his peasants in the building of his new capital city of St. Petersburg—his “window on Europe”—in the desolate, disease-ridden marshes at the mouth of the Neva River on the Baltic. He could endure a slur to his own son made by a drunken companion, yet he rode rough-shod over the customs and sensibilities of his boyar court nobility, forcing them to set aside their old ways in favor of Western fashions in dress and education. He cut their beards him-

self and even demonstrated the new Western craft of dentistry on a few unfortunates among them. When a revolt of the *streltsy*, the imperial musketeers, forced him to return to Moscow from his first journey to the West, he disbanded the unit, personally saw to the torture and execution of more than a thousand of them, and displayed their corpses throughout the city as a lesson to other rebels. When, later in his reign, he suspected his weakling son Alexis of taking part in a conspiracy, Peter ordered his arrest and watched the boy be tortured to death.

Peter the Great is, in short, the most contradictory and intriguing figure in Russian history—as well as the most important. For no matter how it is interpreted, the reign of Peter the Great marks the most fundamental turning point in the history of his nation. And the central issue of this significant reign is Peter's policy of Westernization.

The offspring of the second marriage of Czar Alexis and third in the line of succession, Peter was raised by his mother away from the court in the so-called German suburb, where all the foreign residents of Moscow were compelled to live. Here Peter made friends among the Western merchants, artisans, technicians, and adventurers and developed his passion for Western ways. In 1697, after his succession to the throne, Peter made his celebrated first journey to the West, ostensibly to solicit support for a war against the Turks and also to sample for himself the wonders of Western technology. Peter traveled simply as a member of the party, disguised as Bombardier Peter Mikhailov. His true identity was discovered, however, and he was received at the courts of Brandenburg and Hanover, he met William of Orange and the Emperor Leopold, and he made friends with Augustus the Strong of Saxony, the king of Poland. On the whole, Peter's diplomatic initiative failed, but not so his technological mission. He visited iron foundries in Brandenburg. In Amsterdam he actually worked on the docks and in the shipyards as a ship's carpenter. In England he found the shipyards at Deptford and the Woolwich naval arsenal more interesting than London or Parliament.

When the revolt of the *streltsy* forced him to cut short his visit to the West, Peter returned to Russia with the resolve to Westernize his nation. He not only imposed such seemingly trivial reforms as cleanshaven faces and Western clothing; he instituted the most fundamental changes in every aspect of Russian government and society. He reformed the judicial system and created a senate, whose members were appointed by him, to replace the old council of boyars. A series of ministries for public affairs was established; their directors were both Russians and foreigners. Peter recognized the chaotic system of local government, imposing upon it a structure of governorships responsible to him, and he drove the old conservative religious

faction of the nobility out of the court. The power of the Patriarch over the Russian church was broken, and in its place an administrative system like the other ministries of the state was instituted. Peter forced Western-style education upon the boyars and created a new structure of nobility and a "Table of Ranks" based entirely on merit and service to the state. He reformed the system of taxation as well. He invited Western advisers and experts to Russia in unprecedented numbers and gave them unheard-of status and authority. At the same time, thousands of young Russians were sent to study and train in the West.

Peter the Great founded a merchant marine and opened up the vast resources of Russia to foreign trade. He created the Russian navy and completely reorganized the military establishment into Russia's first standing army. Never content to stand on the sidelines, Peter himself passed through all the ranks and grades in all the services of both the army and the navy. Even his foreign policy marked a fundamental turn to the West. The war against the Turks, early in his career, was undertaken in the hope of gaining access to the Mediterranean through the Black Sea. And the major conflict of his reign, the Great Northern War (1700–1721), was waged to challenge Swedish supremacy in the Baltic and open Russia to the West. In the course of the war, he faced the greatest military genius of his age in Charles XII of Sweden; and, though defeated by him at Narva in 1700, Peter came back to defeat Charles at Poltava nine years later. In the treaty that ended the war at Nystadt, it was Peter's Russia that gained the lion's share of territory, and Peter gained his long hoped-for access to the West.

By the end of his reign in 1725, Peter the Great had changed the Russian monarchy into a Western absolutism; he had displaced Sweden as the dominant power in the Baltic; and he had thrust Russia as a new and powerful force into the family of European nations from which it would never again be excluded.

## Panegyric to the Sovereign Emperor Peter the Great

MIKHAIL LOMONOSOV

*Peter the Great not only had his detractors and opponents; he also had his champions, some of whom he had raised to high position and others, both contemporaries and near contemporaries, who shared Peter's vision of the future of their nation. One such defender was Mikhail Vasil'evich Lomonosov (1711–1765), as fanatic a champion of Russian cultural modernization as the great Czar himself and the author of "Panegyric to the Sovereign Emperor Peter the Great," from which the following selection is taken. The occasion for the panegyric was the coronation of Peter's daughter Elizabeth in 1741, and its purpose was clearly to remind the new empress of her father's policies. But the panegyric is important not only as a sympathetic retrospective survey of Peter's reign, but also as one of the first important contributions to the myth of Peter the Great, the founder of modern Russia, a man larger than life and altogether heroic. A contemporary of Lomonosov, P. N. Krekshyn, hailed the Czar in these terms, "Our father Peter the Great! Thou broughtest us from nothingness into existence!"<sup>1</sup>—a sentiment thoroughly compatible with Lomonosov's views.*

... As I embark on this undertaking, with what shall I begin my discourse? With His bodily endowments? With the greatness of His strength? But it is manifest in his mastery of burdensome labors, labors without number, and in the overcoming of terrible obstacles. Shall I begin with His heroic appearance and stature combined with majestic beauty? But apart from the many who vividly call to mind an image of Him engraved in their memory, there is the witness of those in various states and cities who, drawn by His fame, flocked out to admire a figure appropriate to His deeds and befitting a great Monarch. Should I commence with His buoyancy of spirit? But that is proved by the tireless vigilance without which it would have been impossible to carry out deeds so numerous and great. Wherefore I do immediately proceed to present these deeds, knowing that it is easier

<sup>1</sup>Quoted in M. S. Anderson, *Peter the Great* (London: The Historical Association, 1969), p. 3.

to make a beginning than to reach the end and that this Great Man cannot be better praised than by him who shall enumerate His labors in faithful detail, were it but possible to enumerate them.

And so, to the extent that strength and the brevity of limited time will permit, we shall mention only His most important deeds, then the mighty obstacles therein overcome, and finally the virtues which aided Him in such enterprises.

As a part of His grand designs the all-wise Monarch provided as a matter of absolute necessity for the dissemination of all kinds of knowledge in the homeland, and also for an increase in the numbers of persons skilled in the higher branches of learning, together with artists and craftsmen; though I have given His paternal solicitude in this matter the most prominent place, my whole speech would not be long enough to describe it in detail. For, having repeatedly made the rounds of European states like some swift-soaring eagle, He did induce (partly by command and partly by His own weighty example) a great multitude of His subjects to leave their country for a time and to convince themselves by experience how great an advantage a person and an entire state can derive from a journey of inquiry in foreign regions. Then were the wide gates of great Russia opened up; then over the frontiers and through the harbors, like the tides in the spacious ocean, there did flow in constant motion, in the one direction, the sons of Russia, journeying forth to acquire knowledge in the various sciences and arts, and, in the other direction, foreigners arriving with various skills, books, and instruments. Then to the study of Mathematics and Physics, previously thought of as forms of sorcery and witchcraft, but now arrayed in purple, crowned with laurels, and placed on the Monarch's throne, reverential respect was accorded in the sanctified Person of PETER. What benefit was brought to us by all the different sciences and arts, bathed in such a glow of grandeur, is proved by the superabundant richness of our most varied pleasures, of which our forefathers, before the days of Russia's Great Enlightenment, were not only deprived but in many cases had not even any conception. How many essential things which previously came to Russia from distant lands with difficulty and at great cost are now produced inside the state, and not only provide for our needs but also with their surplus supply other lands. There was a time when the neighbors on our borders boasted that Russia, a great and powerful state, was unable properly to carry out military operations or trade without their assistance, since its mineral resources included neither precious metals for the stamping of coins nor even iron, so needful for the making of weapons with which to stand against an enemy. This reproach disappeared through the enlightenment brought by PETER; the bowels of the mountains have been opened up by his

mighty and industrious hand. Metals pour out of them, and are not only freely distributed within the homeland but are also given back to foreign peoples as if in repayment of loans. The brave Russian army turns against the enemy weapons produced from Russian mines and Russian hands.

In the establishment of the sizable army needed for the defense of the homeland, the security of His subjects, and the unhindered carrying out of important enterprises within the country, how great was the solicitude of the Great Monarch, how impetuous His zeal, how assiduous His search of ways and means! . . . The impossible was made possible by extraordinary zeal, and above all by an unheard-of-example. In former times the Roman Senate, beholding the Emperor Trajan standing before the Consul to receive from him the dignity of Consul, exclaimed: "Through this thou art the greater, the more majestic!" What exclamations, what applause were due to PETER the Great for His unparalleled self-abasement? Our fathers beheld their crowned Sovereign not among the candidates for a Roman consulship but in the ranks of common soldiers, not demanding power over Rome, but obedient to the bidding of His subjects. O you beautiful regions, fortunate regions which beheld a spectacle so wondrous! Oh, how you marveled at the friendly contest of the regiments of a single Sovereign, both commander and subordinate, giving orders and obeying them! Oh, how you admired the siege, defense, and capture of new Russian fortresses, not for immediate mercenary gain but for the sake of future glory, not for putting down enemies but to encourage fellow countrymen. Looking back at those past years, we can now imagine the great love for the Sovereign and the ardent devotion with which the newly instituted army was fired, seeing Him in their company at the same table, eating the same food, seeing His face covered with dust and sweat, seeing that He was no different from them, except that in training and in diligence He was superior to all. By such an extraordinary example the most wise Sovereign, rising in rank alongside His subjects, proved that Monarchs can in no other way increase their majesty, glory, and eminence so well as by such gracious condescension. The Russian army was toughened by such encouragement, and during the twenty years' war with the Swedish Crown, and later in other campaigns, filled the ends of the universe with the thunder of its weapons and with the noise of its triumphs. It is true that the first battle of Narva was not successful; but the superiority of our foes and the retreat of the Russian army have, through envy and pride, been exaggerated to their glorification and our humiliation, out of all proportion to the actual event. For although most of the Russian army had seen only two years' service and faced a veteran army accustomed to battle, although disagreement arose between our commanders, and a malicious turncoat

revealed to the enemy the entire position in our camp, and Charles XII [of Sweden] by a sudden attack did not give the Russians time to form ranks—yet even in their retreat they destroyed the enemy's willingness to fight on to final victory. Thus the only reason the Russian Life Guard, which had remained intact, together with another sizable part of the army, did not dare to attack the enemy thereafter was the absence of its main leaders, who had been summoned by Charles for peace talks and detained as prisoners. For this reason the Guards and the rest of the army returned to Russia with their arms and war chest, drums beating and banners flying. That this failure occurred more through the unhappy circumstances described than through any lack of skill in the Russian troops and that PETER's new army could, even in its infancy, defeat the seasoned regiments of the enemies, was proved in the next year and subsequently by many glorious victories won over them. . . .

Having covered Himself and His army with glory throughout the world by such famous victories, the Great Monarch finally proved that he had been at pains to establish His army mainly in the interests of our safety! For He decreed that it should never be dispersed, even in times of untroubled peace (as had happened under previous Sovereigns, frequently to no little loss of the country's might and glory), and also that it should always be kept in proper readiness. . . .

Having cast a quick glance over PETER's land forces, which came to maturity in their infancy and combined their training with victories, let us extend our gaze across the waters, my Listeners; let us observe what the Lord has done there, His marvels on the deep, as made manifest by PETER to the astonishment of the world.

The far-flung Russian state, like a whole world, is surrounded by great seas on almost every side and sets them as its boundaries. On all of them we see Russian flags flying. Here the mouths of great rivers and new harbors scarcely provide space for the multitude of craft; elsewhere the waves groan beneath the weight of the Russian fleet, and the sounds of its gunfire echo in the chasms of the deep. Here gilded ships, blooming like spring, are mirrored on the quiet surface of the waters and take on double beauty; elsewhere the mariner, having reached a calm haven, unloads the riches of faraway countries to give us pleasure. Here new Columbuses hasten to unknown shores to add to the might and glory of Russia; there a second Tethys dares to sail between the battling mountains; she struggles with snow, with frost, with everlasting ice, desirous to unite East and West. How did the power and glory of Russian fleets come to be spread over so many seas in a short time? Whence came the materials, whence the skill? Whence the machines and implements needed in so difficult and varied an enterprise? Did not the ancient giants tear great oaks from

dense forests and lofty mountains and throw them down for building on the shores? Did not Amphion with sweet music on the lyre move the various parts for the construction of those wondrous fortresses which fly over the waves? To such fancies would PETER's wondrous swiftness in building a fleet truly have been ascribed if an exploit so improbable and seemingly beyond human strength had been performed in far-off ancient times, and if it had not been fixed in the memory of many eyewitnesses and in unexceptionably reliable written records. . . . From that very time when the contriving of a boat (which, though small in dimensions, was great in influence and fame) aroused in PETER's unsleeping spirit the salutary urge to found a fleet and to show forth the might of Russia on the deep, He applied the forces of His great mind to every part of this important enterprise. As He investigated these parts, He became convinced that in a matter so difficult there was no possibility of success unless He Himself acquired adequate knowledge of it. But where was that to be obtained? What should the Great Sovereign undertake? . . .

. . . But greater still was the amazement that He aroused, greater the spectacle that He presented to the eyes of the whole world when, becoming convinced of the untold benefits of navigation—first on the small bodies of water in the Moscow area, then on the great breadth of Lake Rostov and Lake Kubensk, and finally on the expanse of the White Sea—He absented himself for a time from His dominions and, concealing the Majesty of His Person among humble workmen in a foreign land, did not disdain to learn the shipwright's craft. Those who chanced to be His fellow-apprentices at first marveled at the amazing fact that a Russian had not only mastered simple carpentering work so quickly, had not only brought Himself to the point where He could make with His own hands every single part needed in the building and equipping of ships, but had also acquired such skills in marine architecture that Holland could no longer satisfy His deep understanding. Then how great was the amazement that was aroused in all when they learned that this was no simple Russian, but the Ruler of that great state Himself who had taken up heavy labors in hands born and anointed to bear the Scepter and the Orb. But was it merely out of sheer curiosity or, at the most, for purposes of instruction and command, that He did in Holland and Britain attain perfection in the theory and practice of equipping a fleet and in navigational science? Everywhere the Great Sovereign aroused His subjects to labor, not only by command and reward, but also by His own example! I call you to witness, O great Russian rivers; I address myself to you, O happy shores, sanctified by PETER's footsteps and watered by His sweat. How many times you resounded with high-spirited and eager cries as the heavy timbers, ready for launching of

the ship, were being slowly moved by the workmen and then, at the touch of His hand, made a sudden spurt toward the swift current, inspiring the multitude, encouraged by His example, to finish off the huge hulks with incredible speed. To what a marvelous and rousing spectacle were the assembled people treated as these great structures moved nearer to launching! When their indefatigable Founder and Builder, now moving topside, now below, now circling round, tested the soundness of each part, the power of the machinery, and the precision of all the preparations and by command, encouragement, ingenuity, and the quick skill of His tireless hands, rectified the defects which He had detected. In this unflagging zeal, this invincible persistence in labor, the legendary prowess of the ancients was shown in PETER's day to have been not fiction but the very truth! . . .

I say nothing of the assistance afforded in this matter by other wise institutions, but will mention the increase of external revenues. Divine Providence aided the good designs and efforts of PETER, through His hand opening new ports of the Varangian [Baltic] Sea at towns conquered by His valor and erected by His own labors. Great rivers were joined for the more convenient passage of Russian merchants, duty regulations were established, and commercial treaties with various peoples were concluded. What benefit proceeded from the growth of this abundance within and without has been clear from the very foundation of these institutions, for while continuing to fight a burdensome war for twenty years Russia was free from debts.

What, then, have all PETER's great deeds already been depicted in my feeble sketch? Oh, how much labor still remains for my thoughts, voice, and tongue! I ask you, my Listeners, out of your knowledge to consider how much assiduous effort was required for the foundation and establishment of a judiciary, and for the institution of the Governing Senate, the Most Holy Synod, the state colleges, the chancelleries, and the other governmental offices with their laws, regulations, and statutes; for the establishment of the table of ranks and the introduction of decorations as outward tokens of merit and favor; and finally, for foreign policy, missions, and alliances with foreign powers. You may contemplate all these things yourselves with minds enlightened by PETER. . . .

Nothing can serve me so well to demonstrate the kindness and gentleness of His heart as His incomparable graciousness toward His subjects. Superbly endowed as He was, elevated in His Majesty, and exalted by most glorious deeds, He did but the more increase and adorn these things by His incomparable graciousness. Often He moved amongst His subjects simply, countenancing neither the pomp that proclaims the monarch's presence nor servility. Often anyone afoot was free to meet Him, to follow Him, to walk along with Him, to

start a conversation if so inclined. In former times many Sovereigns were carried on the shoulders and heads of their slaves; graciousness exalted Him above these very Sovereigns. At the very time of festivity and relaxation important business would be brought to Him; but the importance did not decrease gaiety, nor did simplicity lessen the importance. How He awaited, received, and greeted His loyal subjects! What gaiety there was at His table! He asked questions, listened, answered, discussed as with friends; and whatever time was saved at table by the small number of dishes was spent in gracious conversation. Amid so many cares of state He lived at ease as among friends. Into how many tiny huts of craftsmen did He bring His Majesty, and heartened with His presence His most lowly, but skilled and loyal, servants. How often He joined them in the exercise of their crafts and in various labors. For He attracted more by example than He compelled by force. And if there was anything which then seemed to be compulsion, it now stands revealed as a benefaction. . . .

## On the Corruption of Morals in Russia

PRINCE M. M. SHCHERBATOV

*Lomonosov had proclaimed that the "compulsion" that had brought about Peter's reforms is "now revealed as a benefaction." To many, however, it continued to seem a compulsion. One person who held this view was the conservative aristocrat Prince Mikhail Mikhailovich Shcherbatov (1733–1790). Shcherbatov belonged to one of the oldest and proudest families of the Russian traditional nobility, and throughout his life he was preoccupied with the status and the condition of the class to which he belonged. He was also a scholar and historian, one of the first to write a systematic, documentary history of his nation. Shcherbatov was commissioned by the Empress Catherine II to edit the private and public papers of Peter the Great. Thus, there was no one of his generation in a better position to assess Peter's accomplishments.*

*Shcherbatov was an admirer of Peter and even, to an extent, of Peter's Westernizing reforms. But, at the same time, he was alarmed by the consequences of those reforms, which he saw as undermining the position of the*

*old aristocracy and corrupting the moral base that he considered to be fundamental to the greatness of Russia. These views are nowhere better or more succinctly expressed than in Shcherbatov's tract On the Corruption of Morals in Russia, a work of his old age and a kind of summation of his reflections on the direction of Russian history. In Shcherbatov we have a cautious, even gloomy conservative to set beside Lomonosov, the euphoric enthusiast for Peter's reforms.*

Peter the Great, in imitating foreign nations, not only strove to introduce to his realm a knowledge of sciences, arts and crafts, a proper military system, trade, and the most suitable forms of legislation; he also tried to introduce the kind of sociability, social intercourse and magnificence, which he first learnt from Lefort, and which he later saw for himself. Amid essential legislative measures, the organization of troops and artillery, he paid no less attention to modifying the old customs which seemed crude to him. He ordered beards to be shaved off, he abolished the old Russian garments, and instead of long robes he compelled the men to wear German coats, and the women, instead of the "telogreya" to wear bodices, skirts, gowns and "samaras," and instead of skull-caps, to adorn their heads with fontanges and cornettes. He established various assemblies where the women, hitherto segregated from the company of men, were present with them at entertainments. . . .

The monarch himself kept to the old simplicity of morals in his dress, so that apart from plain coats and uniforms, he never wore anything costly; and it was only for the coronation of the Empress Catherine Alexeevna, his wife, that he had made a coat of blue gros-de-tours with silver-braid; they say he also had another coat, grey with gold braid, but I do not know for what great occasion this was made.

The rest was all so plain that even the poorest person would not wear it today, as can be seen from such of his clothes as have remained, and are kept in the Kunst-Kamera at the Imperial Academy of Sciences.

He disliked cuffs and did not wear them, as his portraits attest. He had no costly carriages, but usually travelled in a gig in towns, and in a chaise on a long journey.

He did not have a large number of retainers and attendants, but had orderlies, and did not even have a bodyguard, apart from a Colonel of the Guard.

However, for all his personal simplicity, he wanted his subjects to have a certain magnificence. I think that this great monarch, who did nothing without farsightedness, had it as his object to stimulate trade,

industries and crafts through the magnificence and luxury of his subjects, being certain that in his lifetime excessive magnificence and voluptuousness would not enthrone themselves at the royal court. . . .

As far as his domestic life was concerned, although the monarch himself was content with the plainest food, he now introduced drinks previously unknown in Russia, which he drank in preference to other drinks; namely, instead of domestic brandy, brewed from ordinary wine—Dutch aniseed brandy which was called “state” brandy, and Hermitage and Hungarian wine, previously unknown in Russia.

His example was followed by the *grandees* and those who were close to the court; and indeed it was proper for them to provide these wines; for the monarch was fond of visiting his subjects, and what should a subject not do for the monarch? . . .

Closely copying him, as they were bound to do by their very rank, other leading officials of the Empire also kept open table, such as Admiral-of-the-Fleet, Count Fyodor Matveevich Apraxin, Field-Marshal-in-Chief, Count Boris Petrovich Sheremetev, the Chancellor, Count Gavrilov Ivanovich Golovkin, and the boyar, Tikhon Nikitich Streshnev, who as first ruler of the Empire during Peter the Great’s absence abroad, was given estates in order to provide for such meals.

As these eminent men were copied by their inferiors, so the custom of keeping an open table was now introduced in many homes. The meals were not of the traditional kind, that is, when only household products were used; now they tried to improve the flavor of the meat and fish with foreign seasonings. And of course, in a nation in which hospitality has always been a characteristic virtue, it was not hard for the custom of these open tables to become a habit; uniting as it did the special pleasure of society and the improved flavour of the food as compared with the traditional kind, it established itself as a pleasure in its own right. . . .

With this change in the way of life, first of the leading officials of state, and then, by imitation, of the other nobles, and as expenditure reached such a point that it began to exceed income, people began to attach themselves more and more to the monarch and to the *grandees*, as sources of riches and rewards.

I fear someone may say that this, at any rate, was a good thing, that people began to attach themselves more and more to the monarch. No, this attachment was no blessing, for it was not so much directed to the person of the monarch as to personal ends; this attachment became not the attachment of true subjects who love their sovereign and his honour and consider everything from the point of view of the national interest, but the attachment of slaves and hirelings, who sacrifice everything for their own profit and deceive their sovereign with obsequious zeal.

Coarseness of morals decreased, but the place left by it was filled by flattery and selfishness. Hence came sycophancy, contempt for truth, beguiling of the monarch, and the other evils which reign at court to this day and which have ensconced themselves in the houses of the *grandees*. . . .

But despite [his] love of truth and his aversion to flattery, the monarch could not eradicate this encroaching venom. Most of those around him did not dare to contradict him in anything, but rather flattered him, praising everything he did, and never resisting his whims, while some even indulged his passions. . . .

I said that it was voluptuousness and luxury that were able to produce such an effect in men’s hearts; but there were also other causes, stemming from actual institutions, which eradicated resoluteness and good behaviour.

The abolition of rights of precedence (a custom admittedly harmful to the service and the state), and the failure to replace it by any granting of rights to the noble families, extinguished thoughts of noble pride in the nobility. For it was no longer birth that was respected, but ranks and promotions and length of service. And so everyone started to strive after ranks; but since not everyone is able to perform straightforward deeds of merit, so for lack of meritorious service men began to try and worm their way up, by flattering and humouring the monarch and the *grandees* in every way. Then there was the introduction of regular military service under Peter the Great, whereby masters were conscripted into the ranks on the same level as their serfs. The serfs, being the first to reach officer’s rank through deeds suited to men of their kind, became commanders over their masters and used to beat them with rods. The noble families were split up in the service, so that a man might never see his own kinsman.

Could virtue, then, and resolution, remain in those who from their youth had gone in fear and trembling of their commanders’ rods, who could only acquire respect by acts of servility, and being each without any support from his kinsmen, remained alone, without unity or defence, liable to be subjected to violent treatment?

It is admirable that Peter the Great wished to rid religion of superstition, for indeed, superstition does not signify respect for God and his Law, but rather an affront. For to ascribe to God acts unbecoming to him is blasphemy.

In Russia, the beard was regarded as being in the image of God, and it was considered a sin to shave it off, and through this, men fell into the heresy of the Anthropomorphites.<sup>2</sup> Miracles, needlessly per-

<sup>2</sup>Attributing humanlike qualities to God.—Ed.

formed, manifestations of ikons, rarely proven, were everywhere acclaimed, attracted superstitious idolatry, and provided incomes for dissolute priests.

Peter the Great strove to do away with all this. He issued decrees, ordering beards to be shaved off, and by the Spiritual Regulation, he placed a check on false miracles and manifestations and also on unseemly gatherings at shrines set up at crossways. Knowing that God's Law exists for the preservation of the human race, and not for its needless destruction, with the blessing of the Synod and the Ecumenical patriarchs, he made it permissible to eat meat on fast-days in cases of need, and especially in the Navy where, by abstaining even from fish, the men were somewhat prone to scurvy; ordering that those who voluntarily sacrificed their lives by such abstinence, should, when they duly fell ill, be thrown into the water. All this is very good, although the latter is somewhat severe.

But when did he do this? At a time when the nation was still unenlightened, and so, by taking superstition away from an unenlightened people, he removed its very faith in God's Law. This action of Peter the Great may be compared to that of an unskilled gardener who, from a weak tree, cuts off the water-shoots which absorb its sap. If it had strong roots, then this pruning would cause it to bring forth fine, fruitful branches; but since it is weak and ailing, the cutting-off of these shoots (which, through the leaves which received the external moisture, nourished the weak tree) means that it fails to produce new fruitful branches; its wounds fail to heal over with sap, and hollows are formed which threaten to destroy the tree. Thus, the cutting-off of superstitions did harm to the most basic articles of the faith; superstition decreased, but so did faith. The servile fear of Hell disappeared, but so did love of God and his Holy Law; and morals, which for lack of other enlightenment used to be improved by faith, having lost this support began to fall into dissolution. . . .

And so, through the labours and solicitude of this monarch, Russia acquired fame in Europe and influence in affairs. Her troops were organized in a proper fashion, and her fleets covered the White Sea and the Baltic; with these forces she overcame her old enemies and former conquerors, the Poles and the Swedes, and acquired important provinces and sea-ports. Sciences, arts and crafts began to flourish there, trade began to enrich her, and the Russians were transformed—from bearded men to clean-shaven men, from long-robed men to short-coated men; they became more sociable, and polite spectacles became known to them.

But at the same time, true attachment to the faith began to disappear, sacraments began to fall into disrepute, resoluteness diminished, yielding place to brazen, aspiring flattery; luxury and voluptu-

ousness laid the foundation of their power, and hence avarice was also aroused, and, to the ruin of the laws and the detriment of the citizens, began to penetrate the law-courts.

Such was the condition with regard to morals, in which Russia was left at the death of this great monarch (despite all the barriers which Peter the Great in his own person and by his example had laid down to discourage vice).

## Peter the Great: A Modern View

NICHOLAS V. RIASANOVSKY

*Modern historians of Russia, in their efforts to gain an objective view of Peter, have tried to uncover the real person behind the myth of Peter the Great. They have tried to strike a balance between the work of Peter's champions and the work of his detractors in order to put Peter's reign in proper perspective.*

*Their efforts have been complicated by the myths and prejudices not only of the eighteenth century but of the twentieth century as well. It is precisely on the issue of Peter's Westernization that the greatest difficulty arises. Through the late nineteenth century until the very eve of the revolution of 1917, one of the dominant themes of Russian intellectual life was Pan-Slav nationalism, with its extravagant praise of things Russian and its almost paranoid suspicion of outside, non-Slavic influences. The effect of such a point of view can be seen in the following conclusion of Vasili Klyuchevsky, the greatest Russian historian of the generation just before the revolution. "He was not a blind admirer of the West, on the contrary, he mistrusted it, and was not deluded into thinking that he could establish cordial relations with the West, for he knew that the West mistrusted his country, and was hostile to it. . . . Thus for Peter association with Europe was only a means to an end, and not an end in itself."<sup>3</sup>*

*Russian hostility toward the West was only increased by the revolution and by the events of Russian history ever since. The kindest treatment Peter the Great has ever received at the hands of Soviet historians is a kind of*

<sup>3</sup>Vasili Klyuchevsky, *Peter the Great*, tr. Liliana Archibald (London: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 262-63.

*faint praise for his advancing of Russia's modernization. But even that faint praise is no longer heard: Peter's Westernization is now simply denounced as "cosmopolitanism,"<sup>4</sup> and work on the editing of the documentary sources for Peter's reign has been halted indefinitely.*

*Despite such difficulties, a consensus view of Peter the Great is finally beginning to appear among modern, non-Soviet Russian historians. That view is represented in the following selection from A History of Russia by the American scholar Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, considered by many Russian historians to be the best general treatment of Russia's history.*

After Peter took over the conduct of state affairs and began to reform Muscovy, he found few collaborators. His own family, the court circles, and the boyar duma<sup>5</sup> overwhelmingly opposed change. Because he discovered little support at the top of the state structure, and also because he never attached much importance to origin or rank, the sovereign proceeded to obtain assistants wherever possible. Before long an extremely mixed but on the whole able group emerged. . . .

Among foreigners, the tsar had the valuable aid of some of his old friends, such as Patrick Gordon and the Swiss Francis Lefort, who played a prominent role until his early death in 1699. Later such able newcomers from Germany as the diplomat Andrew Ostermann and the military expert Burkhard Münnich joined the sovereign's entourage. Some of his numerous foreign assistants, for example, the Scot James Bruce who helped with the artillery, mining, the navy and other matters, had been born in Russia and belonged to the second generation of foreign settlers in Muscovy.

Russian assistants to Peter ranged over the entire social gamut. . . .

War against Turkey was the first major action of Peter I after he took the government of Russia into his own hands in 1694, following the death of his mother.<sup>6</sup> In fighting Turkey, the protector of the Crimean Tartars and the power controlling the Black Sea and its southern Russian shore, the new monarch followed in the steps of his predecessors. However, before long it became apparent that he managed his affairs differently. The war began in 1695, and the first Russian campaign against Azov failed: supplied by sea, the fortress remained impregnable to the Muscovite army. Then, in one winter, the tsar built a fleet in Voronezh on the Don River. He worked indefatigably himself, as well as ordering and urging others, and utilized

<sup>4</sup>*Rewriting Russian History: Soviet Interpretations of Russia's Past*, ed. Cyril E. Black, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 254.

<sup>5</sup>The old council of nobility.—Ed.

<sup>6</sup>Who had served as his regent.—Ed.

to the best advantage the knowledge of all available foreign specialists along with his own previously acquired knowledge. By displaying his tremendous energy everywhere, Peter the Great brought thirty sea-going vessels and about a thousand transport barges to Azov in May 1696. Some of the Russian fleet, it might be noted, had been built as far away as Moscow and assembled in Voronezh. This time besieged by sea as well as by land, the Turks surrendered Azov in July.

With a view toward a further struggle against Turkey and a continuing augmentation and modernization of the Russian armed forces, the tsar next sent fifty young men to study, above all shipbuilding and navigation, in Holland, Italy, and England. Peter dispatched groups of Russians to study abroad several more times in his reign. After the students returned, the sovereign often examined them personally. In addition to experts, the tsar needed allies to prosecute war against Turkey. The desire to form a mighty coalition against the Ottoman Empire, and an intense interest in the West, prompted Peter to organize a large embassy to visit a number of European countries and—a most unusual act for a Muscovite ruler—to travel with the embassy.

Headed by Lefort, the party of about 250 men set out in March 1697. The sovereign journeyed incognito under the name of Peter Mikhailov. His identity, however, remained no secret to the rulers and officials of the countries he visited or to the crowds which frequently gathered around him. The tsar engaged in a number of important talks on diplomatic and other state matters. But, above all, he tried to learn as much as possible from the West. He seemed most concerned with navigation, but he also tried to absorb other technical skills and crafts, together with the ways and manners and, in fact, the entire life of Europe as he saw it. As the so-called Grand Embassy progressed across the continent and as Peter Mikhailov also took trips of his own, most notably to the British Isles, he obtained some first-hand knowledge of the Baltic provinces of Sweden, Prussia, and certain other German states, and of Holland, England, and the Hapsburg Empire. From Vienna the tsar intended to go to Italy, but instead he rushed back to Moscow at news of a rebellion of the streltsy. Altogether Peter the Great spent eighteen months abroad in 1697–98. At that time over 750 foreigners, especially Dutchmen, were recruited to serve in Russia. Again in 1702 and at other times, the tsar invited Europeans of every nationality—except Jews, whom he considered parasitic—to come to his realm, promising to subsidize passage, provide advantageous employment, and assure religious tolerance and separate law courts.

The streltsy had already caused trouble to Peter and suffered punishment on the eve of the tsar's journey to the West—in fact delaying the journey. Although the new conspiracy—that was aimed at depos-

ing Peter and putting Sophia<sup>7</sup> in power had been effectively dealt with before the sovereign's return, the tsar acted with exceptional violence and severity. After investigation and torture more than a thousand *streltsy* were executed, and their mangled bodies were exposed to the public as a salutary lesson. Sophia was forced to become a nun, and the same fate befell Peter's wife, Eudoxia, who had sympathized with the rebels.

If the gruesome death of the *streltsy* symbolized the destruction of the old order, many signs indicated the coming of the new. After he returned from the West, the tsar began to demand that beards be cut and foreign dress be worn by courtiers, officials, and the military. With the beginning of the new century, the sovereign changed the Russian calendar: henceforth years were to be counted from the birth of Christ, not the creation of the world, and they were to commence on the first of January, not the first of September. More important, Peter the Great rapidly proceeded to reorganize his army according to the Western pattern.

The Grand Embassy failed to further Peter the Great's designs against Turkey. But, although European powers proved unresponsive to the proposal of a major war with the Ottomans, other political opportunities emerged. Before long Peter joined the military alliance against Sweden organized by Augustus II, ruler of Saxony and Poland. . . .

In modern European history the Great Northern War was one of the important wars and Poltava one of the decisive battles. The Russian victory over Sweden and the resulting Treaty of Nystadt meant that Russia became firmly established on the Baltic, acquiring its essential "window into Europe," and that in fact it replaced Sweden as the dominant power in the north of the continent. Moreover, Russia not only humiliated Sweden but also won a preponderant position vis-à-vis its ancient rival Poland, became directly involved in German affairs—a relationship which included marital alliances arranged by the tsar for his and his half-brother Ivan V's daughters—and generally stepped forth as a major European power. . . .

In regard to internal affairs during the reign of Peter the Great, we find that scholars have taken two extreme and opposite approaches. On the one hand, the tsar's reforming of Russia has been presented as a series, or rather a jumble, of disconnected *ad hoc* measures necessitated by the exigencies of the moment, especially by the pressure of the Great Northern War. Contrariwise, the same activity has been depicted as the execution of a comprehensive, radically new, and well-integrated program. In a number of ways, the first view seems closer

<sup>7</sup>Peter's older half-sister.—Ed.

to the facts. As Kliuchevsky pointed out, only a single year in Peter the Great's whole reign, 1724, passed entirely without war, while no more than another thirteen peaceful months could be added for the entire period. . . .

Yet a balanced judgment has to allow something to the opposite point of view as well. Although Peter the Great was preoccupied during most of his reign with the Great Northern War and although he had to sacrifice much else to its successful prosecution, his reforming of Russia was by no means limited to hectic measures to bolster the war effort. In fact, he wanted to Westernize and modernize all of the Russian government, society, life, and culture, and even if his efforts fell far short of this stupendous goal, failed to dovetail, and left huge gaps, the basic pattern emerges, nevertheless, with sufficient clarity. Countries of the West served as the emperor's model. We shall see, however, when we turn to specific legislation, that Peter did not merely copy from the West, but tried to adapt Western institutions to Russian needs and possibilities. The very number and variety of European states and societies offered the Russian ruler a rich initial choice. It should be added that with time Peter the Great became more interested in general issues and broader patterns. Also, while the reformer was no theoretician, he had the makings of a visionary. With characteristic grandeur and optimism he saw ahead the image of a modern, powerful, prosperous, and educated country, and it was to the realization of that image that he dedicated his life. Both the needs of the moment and longer-range aims must therefore be considered in evaluating Peter the Great's reforms. Other fundamental questions to be asked about them include their relationship to the Russian past, their borrowing from the West—and, concurrently, their modification of Western models—their impact on Russia, and their durability.

Peter the Great hit Muscovy with a tremendous impact. To many of his contemporaries he appeared as either a virtually superhuman hero or the Antichrist. It was the person of the emperor that drove Russia forward in war and reform and inspired the greatest effort and utmost devotion. It was also against Peter the Great that the *streltsy*, the Bashkirs, the inhabitants of Astrakhan, and the motley followers of Bulavin staged their rebellions, while uncounted others, Old Believers and Orthodox, fled to the borderlands and into the forests to escape his reach.<sup>8</sup> Rumor spread and legends grew that the

<sup>8</sup>We have already noted the revolt of the *streltsy*. In Astrakhan an uprising took place in 1705–1707 against Western influence and was headed by a renegade member of the *streltsy* and a fanatic monk. Bulavin led a revolt of the Don Cossacks in 1707 over the same issue and again with religious overtones. The Bashkirs were Turkish subjects

reformer was not a son of Tsar Alexis, but a foreigner who substituted himself for the true tsar during the latter's journey abroad, that he was an imposter, a usurper, indeed the Antichrist. Peter himself contributed much to this polarization of opinion. He too saw things in black and white, hating old Muscovy and believing himself to be the creator of a new Russia. Intolerance, violence, and compulsion became the distinguishing traits of the new regime, and St. Petersburg—built in the extreme northwestern corner of the country, in almost inaccessible swamps at a cost in lives far exceeding that of Poltava—became its fitting symbol. The emperor's very size, strength, energy, and temperament intensified his popular image. . . .

. . . Scholarly investigations of the last hundred years, together with large-scale publication of materials on the reformer's reign, undertaken by a number of men from Golikov to Bogoslovsky, have established beyond question many close connections between Peter the Great and the Muscovite past. Entire major aspects of the reformer's reign, for example, foreign policy and social relations and legislation, testified to a remarkable continuity with the preceding period. Even the reformer's desire to curb and control ecclesiastical landholding had excellent Muscovite precedents. The central issue itself, the process of Westernization, had begun long before the reformer and had gathered momentum rapidly in the seventeenth century. In the words of a modern scholar, Peter the Great simply marked Russia's transition from an unconscious to a conscious following of her historical path.

Although in the perspective of Russian history Peter the Great appears human rather than superhuman, the reformer is still of enormous importance. Quite possibly Russia was destined to be Westernized, but Peter the Great cannot be denied the role of the chief executor of this fate. At the very least the emperor's reign brought a tremendous speeding up of the irreversible process of Westernization, and it established state policy and control, where formerly individual choice and chance prevailed.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

The historiography of Peter the Great divides along the line separating Russian national scholars from Westerners. As we observed in the

---

of Peter in the lower Volga area who rebelled against heightened Russian interference at about the same time. All these revolts were eventually put down. The Orthodox party and the Old Believers were conservative factions that were opposed to Peter's Westernization and often involved in revolt.—Ed.

headnote to the Riasanovsky selection, this separation is a product not only of the Soviet revolution but of the earlier Pan-Slav movement with its deep suspicions of Western influence. Of this viewpoint of Russian nationalist historians, the best example is Vasily O. Klyuchevsky, whose *A History of Russia*, tr. C. J. Hogarth, 5 vols. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1960), originally published in Russia between 1911 and 1931, is among the monuments of modern Russian historical writing. The section of Klyuchevsky's history dealing with Peter has been separately published: *Peter the Great*, tr. Liliانا Archibald (London: Macmillan, 1961). To some extent the views of Klyuchevsky are seconded by M. T. Florinsky, *Russia: A History and an Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1953), which many admirers consider contains the best general account of Peter the Great. See also his *Russia: A Short History* (New York: Macmillan, 1965). For the Soviet views see the essay by C. E. Black, "The Reforms of Peter the Great" in *Rewriting Russian History: Soviet Interpretations of Russia's Past*, ed. Cyril E. Black, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: Random House, 1962).

In the Western tradition, probably the best full-scale biography of Peter is Ian Grey, *Peter the Great: Emperor of All Russia* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1960), while the two best brief accounts are B. H. Sumner, *Peter the Great and the Emergence of Russia*, "Teach Yourself History Library" (London: English Universities Press, 1950), and L. Jay Oliva, *Russia in the Era of Peter the Great* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969). Students may prefer the exciting popular biography by Harold Lamb, *The City and the Tsar: Peter the Great and the Move to the West, 1648–1762* (New York: Doubleday, 1948). There are three excellent recent biographies of Peter: Matthew S. Anderson, *Peter the Great* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), is a brief, solid, up-to-date survey; Alex DeJonge, *Fire and Water: A Life of Peter the Great* (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1980), is also a substantial book but more readable; and Robert K. Massie, *Peter the Great: His Life and World* (New York: Knopf, 1980), is a huge, nine-hundred-page work, the most important aspect of which is its detailed description of the setting, the world of Peter the Great. For the interpretive problems of Peter, see *Peter the Great: Reformer or Revolutionary*, ed. Marc Raeff, rev. ed. (Boston: Heath, 1972) as well as Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

For the role and setting of such figures as Lomonosov and Shcherbatov, see Hans Rogger, *National Consciousness in Eighteenth-Century Russia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), and Marc Raeff, *Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia, the Eighteenth-Century Nobility* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966).

Of brief general accounts of Russian history for the background to

#### 48 *Makers of the Western Tradition*

Peter the Great, the best is Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), excerpted in this chapter. But students should also see the fine narrative history, George Vernadsky, *A History of Russia*, 6th rev. ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1971), and the exciting and readable James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1966). For the role of Russia in Europe, see J. B. Wolf, *The Emergence of the Great Powers, 1685–1715*, cited for the preceding chapter.