



Chapter 13

Peter the Great

No tsar was more dynamic or energetic than that giant of rulers, Peter I. No tsar attempted to accomplish as much. He waged war almost constantly, gained Baltic territory, built St. Petersburg, made Russia a major European power, conquered Caspian territories from Persia, and dreamed of a still greater global role for Russia. In the process, he created a more bureaucratized government, expanded governmental controls and industry, and greatly accelerated westernization and secular ideas, including a new secularized concept of tsarist authority.¹ The burden he imposed was heavy and distasteful to many. There was much opposition to him and his policies, though little of it seemed immediately effective. In the long run, however inertia, the nobles, and Russian tradition were able to negate or reduce the effects of some of his reforms.

YOUTH AND PERSONALITY

When Peter ousted his half-sister Sophia as regent, he was only seventeen. Years of rivalry between his mother's family (the Naryshkins) and that of Sophia (the Miloslavskys) had exposed him to political intrigue. His formal education was slight. He learned to read, write, memorize scriptural passages, and sing some church songs. He also studied a little arithmetic, geography, and history. His lively curiosity, however, coupled with his dynamic (almost hyperactive) energy and enthusiasm, enabled him to learn much on his own.

His favorite games were military ones. After Sophia became regent in 1682, he spent much time at Preobrazhenskoe, a royal property a few miles northeast of Moscow. There amidst fields and woods, he played at soldiering with other youngsters, both noble and more plebeian. Because Peter was co-tsar—and Sophia

¹James Cracraft, in his *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Imagery* (Chicago, 1997), p. 34, has especially emphasized Peter's westernization or Europeanization, stating, for example, "Peter pursued . . . a program of intensive Europeanization, one that sooner or later affected virtually all spheres of Russian life."

at first apparently saw no harm in indulging her half-brother—he was able to order real firearms and cannon from the royal arsenal. His "play" increasingly became like real military training. As his small regiment grew, Preobrazhenskoe could no longer hold all the boy soldiers, so Peter relocated some to another nearby royal property, Semenovskoe. He also turned to foreign officers and technicians residing in the Foreign Suburb to help train his young soldiers and himself.

In these youthful years, he first displayed his willingness to mix with those much less royal than himself. Rather than immediately taking the highest rank, he served first as a drummer in the lower ranks of his Preobrazhenskii Regiment. He ate, slept, and worked along with the other young soldiers. One who drilled with Peter was the commoner Alexander Menshikov—later opponents claimed he had once peddled *pirozhki* and cakes in Moscow streets. He eventually became Peter's most trusted assistant and the second most powerful man in Russia. As a ruler, Peter continued to be more down-to-earth than previous tsars, preferring the informal and spontaneous to the more formal and ritualized activities of his predecessors, some of which he brought to an end.

Peter was fascinated with almost all types of "hands-on" activities. He learned stonemasonry, carpentry, printing, metalworking, and, most importantly and intensely sailing and boatbuilding. Later, he boasted of having acquired many other skills, including shoemaking and—probably to the dismay of any around him who unthinkingly complained of a toothache—dentistry. Surgery, especially blood-letting, was another of his specialities. The mature Peter also displayed a lively interest in architecture and other visual arts.

Peter was about six foot, seven inches tall, and his great height, along with his inexhaustible energy and autocratic powers combined to make him one of history's most unforgettable personalities. The Duke of St. Simon left the following description after observing Peter in France in 1717:

What he ate and drank at his two regular meals is inconceivable . . . a bottle or two of beer, as many more of wine, and, occasionally, liquors afterward; at the end of the meal strong drinks, such as brandy, as much sometimes as a quart.

Peter rose early, worked long hours, moving from one place to another with fast, long strides. When his feet were not moving, his hands often were, and his residences were full of model boats, snuffboxes, chairs, and other artifacts he made himself. He even moved at times involuntarily: As an adult, he suffered from an occasional twitching of his face, which sometimes became severe enough also to affect the left side of his neck and his left arm.

Rashness, a bad temper, coarseness, and insensitivity were among Peter's chief faults. When angry, he sometimes knocked to the floor even the best of his friends. In the early 1690s, he created "the Most Drunken Council of Fools and Jesters," which devoted itself to heavy drinking and making fun of the Catholic and Orthodox hierarchy and rituals. It continued to operate throughout his reign. He also liked to force alcohol upon others. He and his second wife, Catherine, even acquired two white bears who had been trained to serve vodka and harass those who refused.

At times, Peter's insensitivity, plus his coarseness and temper, made him seem

cruel. The era's harsh laws and customs for dealing with political opposition also contributed to such an image, and Peter may have personally executed some of the many *streltsy* rebels who were put to death in the final years of the seventeenth century. The imprisonment and torture of his son Alexei, who died in prison in 1718, calls to mind Ivan the Terrible's killing of his son Ivan. But Peter was more rational and less bloodthirsty than this earlier tsar, who Peter nevertheless admired. He also displayed a compassionate side on occasion and objected to cruelty to animals.

Although Peter was far from being a faithful husband (with either of his two wives), his relationship to women was also more stable than that of the many-wived Ivan the Terrible. Peter's mother arranged his first marriage to Evdokiia Lopukhina in 1689, but ten years later Peter forced her to enter a convent. There were apparently only two women that he ever really loved: Anna Mons, daughter of a German merchant and his mistress for over a decade, and Catherine, the daughter of a Lithuanian peasant, whom Peter took up with in 1703, perhaps married privately in 1707, and publicly in 1712. Catherine was a good match for Peter in being physically strong and hardy. She also possessed a good sense of humor and an ability to calm Peter when he became enraged.

THE OUSTING OF SOPHIA AND THE FIRST DECADE OF PETER'S REIGN, 1689–1699

In the summer of 1689, news of Sophia's unsuccessful Crimean campaign and Peter's new status as the husband of a now-pregnant wife helped increase tensions and suspicions between Sophia's followers and those of Peter. On August 7, when Peter heard that *streltsy* and soldiers of the guard had been ordered to Preobrazhenskoe (where Peter was residing) "to put certain persons to death," he rode some forty miles to the well-fortified St. Sergius Monastery. For almost a month, a stand-off ensued, but as Peter's support grew, Sophia's diminished, especially among a now divided *streltsy*. Patriarch Joachim also went over to Peter's side. In early September, Peter's supporters forced Sophia into confinement in the Novodevichii Convent and soon afterwards dispatched Vasili Golitsyn to a far northern exile, where he was kept until his death, twenty five years later.

Although Peter's half-brother, the feeble Ivan V, continued as co-tsar until his death in 1696, Peter's primacy was now unchallenged. Yet for the next five years, until his mother's death in 1694, Peter left the running of government to his mother, his uncle Leo Naryshkin, and other boyar supporters. Meanwhile, Peter concentrated his energies on his latest passions, especially shipbuilding. With the help of some Dutchmen, Peter built and sailed ships on Lake Pleshcheevo, near (Northern) Pereiaslavl. In 1693, he headed for larger waters—those of the White Sea. At nearby Archangel, he saw his first big foreign merchant ships, and he began constructing a warship and ordered a forty-four gun frigate (*The Holy Prophecy*) built in Holland.

Peter also became thoroughly at home in the Foreign Suburb and there developed several important friendships. One was with the Swiss Franz Lefort, a charming, adventuresome army officer with a notorious capacity for alcohol.

Mandatory Drinking for Peter's "Guests"

The following selection is from an ambassador from Hanover, Friedrich Christian Weber, *The Present State of Russia* (London, 1722–1723), Vol. 1, pp. 93–94. In this excerpt, he writes of two partial days in mid-1715 spent by him and some other foreign diplomats with Peter at Peterhof, his new summer retreat on the Gulf of Finland. I have modernized the spellings and taken a few liberties with punctuation; bracketed material and ellipses are mine.

[We] were entertained there as usual: For at dinner we were so plied with Tockay wine, though his Tsarist Majesty forbore drinking too much, that at our breaking up, we were hardly able to stand. Nevertheless we were obliged to empty each a bowl holding a full quart, which we received from the Tsarina's own hand, whereupon we quite lost our senses, and were in that pickle carried off to sleep, some in the garden, others in the wood, and the rest here and there on the ground. . . . At supper [before which Peter had forced them to spend about three hours helping him cut down trees] . . . we received such another dose of liquor as sent us senseless to bed; but having scarcely slept an hour and [a] half, a certain favorite of the tsar's was sent about midnight to rouse us, and carry us, willing or unwilling, to the Prince of Circassia, who was already abed with his consort, where we were again by their bedside pestered with wine and brandy till four in the morning. That next day none of us remembered how he got home. About eight we were invited to court to breakfast, but instead of coffee and tea, as we expected, we were welcomed with large cups of brandy. . . . We had the fourth drinking bout at dinner [after which Peter displayed his seamanship by sailing off with them in the Gulf of Finland for what proved to be about seven hours, most of it in a frightening storm].

Lefort was frequently surrounded by women, one of whom, the beautiful Anna Mons, soon became Peter's lover. Older and more important than Lefort was the Scottish general Patrick Gordon, who had been the chief foreign officer to support Peter in 1689. He now befriended the young Peter. Lefort was most instrumental in introducing Peter to a light-hearted world of wine, women, and song, whereas the older Gordon was a more sobering influence and became his chief military tutor.

A year after his mother's death in 1694, Peter went to war against Turkey. Following Golitsyn's unsuccessful efforts, there had been a lull but no formal peace. Tatars still sporadically raided Russian territory. And Poland and Austria, still fighting the Turks, encouraged Russia to renew its campaign against them. Peter's own military and seafaring enthusiasms; fears of gaining less than Russia's allies when peace finally came; and Russia's animosity toward the Muslim Turks, who ruled over so many Orthodox Christians, were additional reasons for a new Turkish campaign.

The main target was the fortress town of Azov. It lay at the mouth of the Don River, upstream from where it flowed into the Sea of Azov. Command of the fortress and the nearby sea (which flowed into the Black Sea) would threaten the Crimean Tatars and secure a base for any further moves in the Black Sea and Caucasus.



FIGURE 13.1. The Intercession (Pokrovskii) Convent, Suzdal, the convent where Peter I sent his first wife, Evdokiia. Several other earlier discarded royal wives, including the first wife of Vasili III, also ended up here.

With Lefort and Gordon among his commanders, Peter and his troops besieged Azov in the summer of 1695. Although a lack of warships hindered Peter from immediately gaining his objective, he was undeterred by this setback. He drafted men to build ships and boats, and he took part in shipbuilding at Voronezh. In late spring 1696, he again attacked Azov; in late July 1696, the Turkish pasha defending it surrendered.

Peter now oversaw the creation of a town, harbor, and naval base at Taganrog, on the sea of Azov. He ordered clerical and lay landowners to contribute to building ships, mostly at Voronezh, where Peter had gathered about fifty Western shipwrights. Moreover, he sent a similar number of Russians to Western Europe to learn shipbuilding techniques and, even more dramatically, decided to learn more himself by a long visit to the West.

Thus, for eighteen months in 1697–1698, Peter traveled in Western Europe, spending about half the time in the two great maritime powers of Holland and England. (He did not visit France until a second, shorter trip to Western Europe in 1717, two years after the death of the Sun King, Louis XIV.) Despite the obvious difficulties of concealing the identity of a six-foot-seven tsar, Peter made Lefort the nominal leader of his traveling “Great Embassy” and started out himself supposedly incognito, as one “Peter Mikhailov.” The main stated purpose of the 1697–1698 embassy was to forge a large anti-Turkish coalition, but not much came of these efforts.

Peter, however, did gain valuable diplomatic experience, and his other goals for the trip were more successful. He learned much, especially in the shipyards of

Holland and England, and about applied science and technology generally. In prosperous Amsterdam the shipyards where he spent the most time belonged to the Dutch East India Company, which had played such a significant role in helping the Dutch build an overseas empire. While abroad, Peter recruited more than 750 Western experts and skilled craftsmen and purchased materials to strengthen his shipbuilding and other military efforts at home. Although he paid little attention to more abstract matters or to political institutions like the British Parliament, the practical Western ways and prosperity he did observe influenced him for the rest of his life.

Peter would have stayed even longer in the West, but while in Vienna in the summer of 1698, he received word of a *streltsy* revolt at home. Even before he returned to Russia in September, however, troops under Patrick Gordon and other commanders had suppressed the revolt. Peter now oversaw six months of gruesome tortures, mutilations, and executions—about 1100 of the latter—and sent most surviving *streltsy* to southern posts. Although he found no proof that his half-sister Sophia was implicated in the plot, he forced her to become a nun at the Novodevichii Convent (see Figure 9.1), where she already had been confined, and hanged three *streltsy* outside her window.

THE GREAT NORTHERN WAR AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS, 1700–1725

On the way from Vienna to Moscow, Peter stopped in Poland, where he talked of joint anti-Swedish activities with the new Polish king, Augustus II. To Peter's sea-loving mind, Sweden must have seemed a natural target. It still controlled some southern Baltic areas including territory that had previously been part of Russia until lost by Ivan the Terrible in the Livonian War.

By mid-1700, the time for attacking Sweden seemed ripe. Its ruler, Charles XII, was only eighteen. His country's gradual rise to Baltic dominance had created many enemies. Earlier in the year, Poland, Denmark, and Saxony (also ruled by King Augustus II of Poland) had gone to war against Sweden. Realizing that he could not successfully fight the Turks and Swedes at the same time and that Austria was unwilling to join in his anti-Turkish effort, Peter formally ended the Turkish war—keeping Azov and Taganrog—and the next month (August 1700) declared war on Sweden.

Unfortunately for Peter, and unbeknownst to him, while he was declaring war, Denmark was capitulating. A few months later at Narva, without either Lefort or Gordon, both of whom had died the previous year, Peter's troops were routed in a snowstorm. The victory went to a much smaller army under Charles XII, who was already proving to be a great military tactician.

Yet for complex reasons, Charles failed to follow up his victory and for the next six years mired himself in a war with Poland. This allowed Peter time to regroup and build up his forces, which he did with his customary vigor. He drafted more and more peasants and townsmen, reorganized military units, and even ordered some church bells melted down to produce more cannons.

In 1703, Peter captured the mouth of the Neva River along the Gulf of Finland.



MAP 13.1

Nearby, he soon began building a fortress, that of Sts. Peter and Paul (see Figure 18.1), and a new city, St. Petersburg. During the next several years, he won additional victories in the Baltic area, continued his military buildup, and sent an army to Poland to aid in the fight against Charles XII.

But the Swedish king was still able to defeat Augustus II and in 1706 force him to relinquish his Polish crown. Charles then faced Russian troops in Poland and Ukraine. Unhappy with Peter, the Ukrainian hetman, Mazepa, and some of his Cossacks went over to Charles XII's side. Others, however, were opposed to the Protestant Swedish forces, and after Russian forces in 1708–1709 destroyed the hetman's capital of Baturin and the Zaporozhian Sech (main settlement), Ukrainian opposition to Peter's policies diminished.

The decisive Russo-Swedish battle occurred at Poltava, about 200 miles southeast of Kiev. There in late June 1709, a Swedish force of about 22,000 was met and defeated by a Russian army almost twice its size. While the vigorous Peter led the Russian troops into combat and reputedly had a musket shot hit his hat, Charles had been seriously wounded in the foot shortly before the big battle and was not able to play his usual active role. Although most Swedish troops were forced to surrender, Charles, Mazepa, and a small force of Swedes and Cossacks escaped to Moldavia and Ottoman protection.

For Peter and Russia, Poltava was a turning point in the war and thrust Russia forward as a major European power. After Poltava, Russia was respected and feared. Foreign rulers became anxious to improve their ties with Russia through regular diplomatic relations and dynastic marriages. Two of Peter's nieces soon married Baltic dukes: Anna, to the Duke of Courland in 1710, and Catherine, to the Duke of Mecklenburg in 1716. Both marriages further strengthened Russia's Baltic position. In 1711, Peter gained the hand of Charlotte of Brunswick-Wolfenbuttel for his son Alexei. But success also brought the increased wariness of foreign powers like England, concerned about growing Russian ascendancy in the Baltic.

Following Poltava, Russia won additional battles against Sweden, including Baltic victories in 1710. Before the fruits of Poltava and these other victories could be fully enjoyed, however, Peter had one more major obstacle to overcome—a new war thrust upon him by the Ottoman Turks. The Ottoman government was upset with Russia's demand that Charles XII be expelled from the Ottoman Empire. For varied other reasons, Charles, Louis XIV of France, and the Crimean khan encouraged Turkish hostility to Russia. Thus, in late 1710, the Turkish sultan arrested and incarcerated the Russian ambassador, Peter Tolstoi, and declared war.

The following summer, Peter I, accompanied by Catherine, found himself in a similar position to that of Charles XII at Poltava. He was also now in enemy territory, some 300 miles southwest of Poltava on the Pruth River. There, short of supplies, he found his troops greatly outnumbered and in danger of complete humiliation. His fate was not to be that of Charles XII's, however; rather than see his army completely crushed, he sought terms from the Turkish commander. Peter's position was so bad that he was prepared to concede a great deal: Azov, Taganrog, his gains from a decade of fighting Sweden (except St. Petersburg), and even additional northern territory such as Pskov.

Yet, for reasons that still remain mysterious, the Turkish grand vizier did not fully press his advantage. He demanded only that Peter give up Azov and other

gains of 1696, abandon his Black Sea fleet, evacuate Poland, and allow King Charles XII to return to Sweden.

In the decade after the Russo-Turkish war of 1710–1711, Peter continued the Northern War against Sweden. Charles XII died in 1718, and three years later the war came to an end with the Treaty of Nystad. By its terms, Russia gained a wide stretch of Baltic and northern territory, from just south of Riga to about 200 miles north of St. Petersburg. Peter now officially had his “window on the sea,” and the new Latvian and Estonian territories and their peoples, including the Baltic German upper class, would make an important contribution to the Russian Empire in the days ahead—Russia formally became the Russian Empire after Peter celebrated the treaty by adopting the title “Emperor.”

In a war of 1722–1723 Peter, who thought of Russia as an expanding European empire, extended it at Persia’s expense. By the war, he gained control over the western and southern coast of the Caspian Sea—but Russia’s hold on the territory was tenuous, disease took a heavy toll on the Russians stationed there, and within a decade Russia relinquished control over it.

In Central Asia, Peter wished to expand Russian influence because of its trade routes and rumored gold. He dispatched a military expedition to the khanate of Khiva, but the Russian troops aroused the ire of the khan and were killed or enslaved in 1717. Attempts in the early 1720s to establish a trade agreement with India and broaden trade with China also failed. Peter was more successful, however, in expanding Russia’s holdings in Siberia, even claiming the Kurile Islands, which stretched from the Kamchatka Peninsula to Japan. Shortly before his death, Peter sent out the Danish-born Captain Vitus Bering (dubbed the “Russian Christopher Columbus” by the poet Lomonosov) to explore the area connecting America and Asia. There Bering discovered the strait that now bears his name and stretches fifty-two miles between Alaska and Siberia.

DOMESTIC CHANGES AND REFORMS

Shortly after returning from abroad in 1697–1698, Peter began cutting the beards of his boyars and demanding that they abandon their long Russian caftans and switch to less cumbersome Western attire. He also later demanded or encouraged others to follow suit, although the clergy and peasants, who thought it sinful for a man to be without a beard, were exempted from the new regulations. Others had to pay a graduated tax or fine if they wished to maintain their old ways, and even peasants had to pay a small “beard tax” if they wished to enter a town. Many boyar women were dismayed at Peter’s insistence that they dress in Western attire, which for certain occasions might include corsets, low-cut dresses, and high heels. Even though Peter’s decrees on proper attire for various categories of people were often reiterated, they were not always obeyed, especially outside of court and government circles.

In 1699, Peter insisted that the Russian year no longer begin on September 1 or be counted from the supposed creation of the world, but rather that it begin January 1 and the new year be 1700—not 7208—since henceforth years were to be reckoned from the birth of Christ.

FIGURE 13.2. An Old Believer is about to lose his beard. The barber is apparently Peter the Great. (From Ian Grey, *The Horizon History of Russia*, American Heritage Publishing Company, New York, 1970, p. 160.)



These changes dramatically foreshadowed many others. Indeed some, such as with the military, had already begun. Although these changes are usually called "reforms," many of Peter's subjects did not think of them as improvements.

One motive, above all others, stands out for his reforms (we will use the term for convenience sake): Peter's desire for a stronger Russia, militarily and otherwise. More a doer than a systematic thinker, Peter often moved intuitively toward this goal. To achieve it, he attacked numerous Russian traditions and attempted to replace them with practices based more on Western ideas. His youthful experiences and his trip to Western Europe disposed him toward such an approach. Some historians explain Peter's actions in a more deterministic manner. Kamenski, for example, depicts Russia on the eve of Peter's reign as facing a "crisis of traditionalism" and states that "radical reform became for . . . Russia an unavoidable necessity, the only escape from crisis and the only way to save the state" and enable it to become a major European power.²

Military Reform

New style and better equipped regiments created under Tsar Alexei, plus others like the Preobrazhenskii and Semenovskii Regiments formed early in Peter's reign,

²Aleksandr B. Kamenskii, *The Russian Empire in the Eighteenth Century: Searching for a Place in the World*, trans. and ed. David Griffiths (Armonk, N.Y. 1997), p. 38.

created the basis for a more modern army. But the Great Northern War, along with the disbanding of the Moscow *streltsy* after the revolt of 1698, necessitated more extreme measures.

To build his army, Peter at first generated more volunteers by promises of better pay. He also drafted household serfs and slaves, who were delivered by their masters according to a quota system. As the war continued for two decades, one levy after another demanded more draftees—John Keep estimates that during Peter's reign there were altogether fifty-three levies, general and partial, and that more than 300,000 were inducted. The levies often differed on the quota of recruits demanded. One big levy in 1705 required one recruit per 20 households, but from 1713 to 1724 the quota varied from one per 40 to one per 250 households. These draftees were overwhelmingly peasants, both serf and nonserf, and townsmen, and they were drafted for life. By 1725, Russia had an army of about 200,000 regular troops and about 100,000 others (mainly Cossacks)—roughly 40 percent larger than the army of 1681.

But improved quality more than quantity distinguished the new Russian army. Units were better organized, better trained, and better equipped than earlier. Although Russian geographic conditions still necessitated more cavalry units than in most of Europe, cavalry fighting was increasingly taken over by lighter, more mobile, dragoon regiments. The army in general became more uniform and less class stratified. By 1720, at least one-third of the officers came from nonnoble roots—few of these officers, however, reached the highest officer ranks. Dependency on foreign officers lessened; and by 1720, 88 percent were Russian. Peter improved the pay and status of officers, especially in elite units like the Preobrazhenskii Regiment. Infantry were armed with flintlock muskets and relied heavily on the bayonet. Prior to a bayonet attack (which was accompanied by shouts of "ura!"), artillery fire attempted to soften up the enemy. Domestic production of weapons increased about tenfold during the Great Northern War. In 1715, the Tula ironworks alone already produced a total of 26,000 muskets, pistols, and carbines.

Having created a Russian navy, Peter continued its buildup throughout his reign, and it helped him defeat Sweden. By 1725, Russia's Baltic fleet possessed almost 50 large warships and close to 800 other vessels—a much smaller number of ships also remained in the Caspian Sea. Many of Peter's ships were built at the new Admiralty shipyard in St. Petersburg, which employed thousands of workers. Peter also constructed an important naval base, Kronstadt, on Kotlin Island, which guarded the entrance to the Neva River and St. Petersburg.

St. Petersburg and the Government

In 1703, at the Neva's marshy mouth, Peter decided to build St. Petersburg. Although legend described the area as containing little more than Finnish huts, a Swedish fortress and some Swedish officials' dwellings were also in the vicinity. By 1712, St. Petersburg had become the new capital. From Peter's perspective, it had much to recommend it, primarily its access to the Baltic and the West and its newness. It provided Peter a clean slate, free of the tangled traditions of Moscow. But this "Venice of the North" also had many disadvantages: its extreme northern

location (comparable to Juneau, Alaska), which kept the Neva frozen five months a year; the frequent flooding that inundated the city at spring thaw; its unhealthy, damp climate; its poor crop potential; and its vulnerability to foreign attack.

Peter, however, was not about to let such considerations stop him. Every year, 10,000 to 30,000 peasants were brought in to help build the new capital. By 1725, besides all the temporary workers, about 40,000 permanent residents lived in the city, most of them brought by Peter's decrees. Here he ordered artisans to settle and wealthy nobles and merchants to build houses. In 1714, in a move to obtain more masons, he even issued a decree prohibiting masonry construction in other parts of the country.

Although some workers brought to the city soon fled and others died in the unhealthy marshy climate, Peter persisted. Influenced by what he had seen in the great port city of Amsterdam, he constructed a Russian city of canals, straight streets, parks, as many stone buildings as possible, and even some streetlamps. To provide for construction, he ordered all carts and ships entering the city to bring in a specified quantity of stones. Gradually, under Peter and his successors, a wondrous new capital emerged—beautifully described by Alexander Pushkin in his poem "The Bronze Horseman." The new capital came to symbolize both Peter and all he stood for, including a government more westernized than its Muscovite predecessor.

By the late 1690s, the government still consisted of boyar duma, more than forty *prikazy* (government bureaus), and the *voevody* (local governors or commanders). The boyar duma's significance continued to decline, however, and after 1700, it ceased to play any meaningful role. From the beginning, Peter had relied more on his own hand-picked group of advisers, who included both men from the old boyar aristocracy and newcomers like Menshikov and Lefort.

By 1708, Peter had appointed those personally close to him to head eight large guberniias (regions) into which he now divided the country. The primary function of the new regional governors was to improve Russia's military capability, but the reform also served to decentralize power from Moscow in the transitional period when the central government was being moved from Moscow to St. Petersburg.

In 1711, before departing to battle the Turks, Peter established a nine-man Senate to run the government in his absence. After his return, he made it a permanent institution which filled the vacuum left by the now defunct boyar duma. It soon oversaw provincial administration and tax-collecting, and served as the country's highest judicial body. To help it uncover tax evasion and other crimes that would weaken Russia and its military efforts, Peter directed it to appoint an *oberfiscal*. Although the *oberfiscal* and his hundreds of fiscals (agents) were responsible to the Senate, they could also investigate senators, leading to some conflict between the two groups.

Although Peter eventually asked the Senate to deal with and advise him on many matters, he never gave it much trust or autonomy. He was forever issuing orders instructing senators how to act and threatening them with fines and worse if they failed to comply. And he did not merely threaten; in 1715, for example, two senators had their tongues branded. Furthermore, Peter appointed various officials to supervise the Senate's work, culminating in the 1722 appointment of a procurator general. The latter was to be the tsar's representative at Senate meetings, and none of its decisions was valid without his approval. He was also placed in charge

of the fiscals and of newly created procurators, who were to investigate provincial justice to insure it was being applied according to the law.

Meanwhile, Peter created new *prikazy* and reorganized others. The most interesting new *prikaz* was the Preobrazhenskii *prikaz*. Although Peter initially established it to deal with the Preobrazhenskii Regiment's administrative matters, by 1697 it had become a political police (and sentencing authority) with all-encompassing jurisdiction throughout the country. Often acting on the basis of denunciations, it used torture on both suspects and denouncers to ferret out crimes directed against the tsar and government.

But the overlapping functions of so many *prikazy* offended Peter's sense of order and efficiency. In 1717–1718, he began replacing most of them—the Preobrazhenskii *prikaz* being a notable exception—with "colleges." Similar institutions already existed in Sweden and Prussia. At first, Peter created nine of them, each supervising a certain sphere: foreign affairs, army, navy, justice, and five dealing with different financial and economic matters. In theory, if not usually in practice, they were to be run in a collegial (or collective) fashion—thus their name—by a small group of officials at the top of each college. In 1721, Peter placed the colleges under Senate authority and soon afterward also under the watchful eyes of the procurator general's staff of procurators.

Despite all of Peter's attempts to mold an efficient, hard-working, and honest centralized government, his own chief supervisor, the procurator general, told him: "We all steal, the only difference being that some are bigger and more conspicuous thieves than others."

In 1719, by which time the Northern War was almost over and most of his new centralized government institutions were in existence, Peter decreased the powers of the regional governors he had earlier appointed. During that same year, the guberniias over which they ruled (by now there were eleven of them) were subdivided into forty-five (later fifty) provinces and the provinces into districts. These changes were intended to facilitate the transition from wartime to civilian rule. Peter had ambitious plans for further transforming local government, but little of any lasting value developed, partly because his plans depended too much on foreign models unsuited to Russian reality. Throughout almost all of Russia, local government served as little more than an extension of the central state.

The newly conquered Baltic area, encompassing most of present-day Estonia and Latvia, was somewhat of an exception. Baltic German nobles and merchants had long dominated the region and maintained substantial autonomy under Swedish control. Following Peter's Baltic conquests, he continued to allow considerable local autonomy, despite occasional flashes of autocratic behavior.

Left-Bank Ukraine was not so fortunate. Following Mazepa's defection to Sweden's Charles XII, Peter increased Russian control in Ukraine. He appointed a Russian to command the Cossack forces, gave substantial Ukrainian lands to favorites such as Menshikov, and closely restricted Ukrainian publications. Most significantly in 1722, he established a "Little Russian College," consisting of six Russian officers stationed in Ukraine; they were to share power with the hetman who had taken Mazepa's place. At the same time, the Russian government imposed direct taxes on Ukrainians. By 1724, the chairman of the Little Russian College claimed to be collecting six times the previous revenues taken from the



FIGURE 13.3. Medieval towers and churches of Reval. This important Baltic City (modern-day Tallinn in Estonia) was taken by Peter's forces in 1710.

Hetmanate. When the old hetman died in 1722, Peter delayed approving a new one and shortly thereafter imprisoned an acting hetman and others who had petitioned him on behalf of Ukrainian self-rule.

Peter, Political Theory, and the Orthodox Church

In reorganizing Russia's government, Peter often acted hastily, partly because of pressing military concerns. During his last decade, however, as military pressures eased, his changes were motivated by a more comprehensive and articulated political theory.

Muscovite theory had stressed the tsar's conservative role as a maintainer of true Orthodoxy and Orthodox society, but Peter now emphasized a more activist, reformistic, and secular tsarist rule. The imagery and symbols that glorified his power were borrowed more from those of the West, including those of the old Roman Empire, than from the older tsarist tradition. One Russian forerunner he did make good use of was the early Russian warrior-prince Alexander Nevsky. Peter emphasized his own similarity to Nevsky the conqueror and reburied Nevsky's remains in the new capital's Nevsky Monastery.

Peter also viewed himself as the chief overseer and catalyst of economic growth, good citizenship, education, social welfare, and respect for law. In contrast to earlier theorizing about tsarist powers, Peter relied less on religious arguments and more on reasoning, which he regarded as "the highest of all virtues."³

³Quoted in Lindsey Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great* (New Haven, 2000), p. 377.

His westernizing proclivities, his quest for efficiency, and his contempt for many old customs and traditions made him especially susceptible to some rational (and scientific-technological) influences of the European "Age of Reason." Thinkers like Newton and Leibniz were his contemporaries. The latter, although he never set foot in Russia, even acted as a paid consultant to Peter.

Peter's many decrees, issued in unprecedented numbers, reflected the influence of Reason. In them, he mentioned frequently "the general good" and "the interests of the state," and he took great pains to explain how various decrees would serve these ends. As Tolz has noted, "state patriotism" was the new ideology he preached; but he wanted reason—as he interpreted it, of course—to rule Russia, not a ruler's caprice, not the interests of upper-class clans, not the deadweight of custom, and not church authority.

To insure as little church interference as possible, Peter blocked a new patriarchal election when the conservative Patriarch Adrian died in 1700. Instead, for the next two decades, Peter relied on Metropolitan Stefan Yavorsky to administer the church.

Peter also depended on two other important Orthodox clerics, Feodosi Yanovsky and Feofan Prokopovich. Like Yavorsky, both men had been educated at the Kiev Academy but were more sympathetic to Protestant political theory than was Yavorsky. Peter was especially interested in Protestant thinking that justified monarchical control over church affairs.

Protestant influence can clearly be seen in Peter's *Ecclesiastical Regulation* of 1721, mainly drafted by Prokopovich. This statute formally ended the patriarchate, which Peter distrusted, and in its place created an Ecclesiastical College, originally of ten clergymen. Although Peter soon agreed that it could instead be called "the Most Holy Synod," its original name makes its paternity clear: It was to be the branch of government that supervised the Orthodox Church, just as the Foreign Affairs College supervised foreign affairs. To make this even clearer, in 1722 Peter named a chief procurator, a colonel in one of his Guards regiments, to oversee the synod's work.

By Peter's policies, any surviving autonomous church authority was dealt an almost fatal blow. The emperor now appointed the Synod's members and had the right to choose, from Synod nominees, the Russian Orthodox bishops. Furthermore, documents of the early 1720s indicate that priests were expected to administer loyalty oaths to all but peasants and report information obtained in confession about any intended criminal activity, especially of a rebellious or treasonous nature.

If bringing the clergy under firm state control was one of Peter's goals, another was to pare it down. He thought too many joined the clergy to avoid taxes and state service. He was especially contemptuous of monks, whom he considered lazy, and he issued decrees aimed at limiting their numbers and making them more "productive." Although these measures decreased the number of monks and nuns and increased state revenue from the monasteries, Peter failed to pare the number of priests. In fact, from the early 1720s to the late 1730s, their number grew faster than that of monks and nuns declined.

Toward non-Orthodox religions, Peter was more openly tolerant than previous rulers. His non-Orthodox friends from the Foreign Suburb, his early trip abroad,

his desire for more foreign help in Russia, and his own rationalistic and secular absolutistic tendencies all inclined him to support religious toleration, which he did in a 1702 edict. In 1721, he also issued a decree allowing Orthodox Christians to marry Western Christians.

Tolerant, of course, did not necessarily mean respect. Although Peter believed in God and basic Christian ideas, his "Most Drunken Council of Fools and Jesters" made fun of Catholic rituals as well as Orthodox ones. Generally, his toleration was based on reasons of state, and when he violated this principle, for example, by decreeing in 1716 that Old Believers were to pay double taxes, it was also for state financial or security purposes.

Economic, Social, and Cultural Policies

Like most European rulers of his day, Peter was a mercantilist. He wished to obtain a favorable balance of trade and increase the government's supply of precious metals. But the mercantilist interest that most appealed to him was its emphasis on a strong state role in building up native industry.

In strengthening Russian industry, Peter used foreign expertise but not foreign capital and sought to reduce greatly Russian dependence on foreign products. At first, he concentrated overwhelmingly on industries that would arm and supply his military, but later, as war pressures eased, he also paid more attention to other industries. Perhaps a little less than 200 new manufactories came into existence under Peter, which compares with about 25 still operating in 1689 (see Chapter 11). Of the new enterprises, more than half produced iron, armaments, nonferrous metals, textiles, or lumber; others made such products as glass, leather, silk, and paper. Especially significant was growth of production in the St. Petersburg area and the rapid development of the iron industry in the Urals. By 1725, Russia was producing more than eight times as much iron as it had a quarter century earlier.

Of the new factories, about half were started by private owners and the other half by the government. Although most of the former came from the merchant class, some nobles also became involved. Because of Russian traditions and the weakness of its middle class, the government's role was greater than in the West, but Peter tried to encourage private enterprise. Partly to offset a shortage of private capital in Russia, the government offered inducements such as loans, subsidies, tax exemptions, tariff protection, and forced labor. Toward the end of his reign, Peter stepped up the practice of turning government-owned factories over to private owners. He also relinquished some government monopolies.

Yet the lot of entrepreneurs was not easy. The many government inducements were themselves evidence of a general reluctance to become involved in the risky business of private large-scale manufacturing. At times, the government even compelled individuals to take over factories.

By the last decade of Peter's reign, Russian exports greatly outnumbered imports, with Great Britain being the chief trading partner. In 1724, Peter introduced protective tariffs that tacked on to the cost of an import a tax ranging up to 75 percent of its value.

By 1725, most Russian foreign trade was going through St. Petersburg and Riga, with Archangel declining rapidly in significance. Astrakhan was a center for

the less important trade with Persia and Central Asia. Peter hoped to emulate countries like England and Holland by building up a merchant fleet that would trade abroad, but his efforts bore little fruit. He was more successful in fostering trade by building canals, roads, and bridges. Most significant were the canals that completed the water passage from the Baltic to the Caspian via the Neva-Volga route and also linked, via the Volga's eastern tributaries, the Neva to the Urals' growing industrial complex.

Because of Russia's scarcity of precious metals in this era, Peter decreed that Russian merchants had to exchange gold and silver they obtained from foreigners for Russian money and forbade the export of bullion. The silver content of coinage was also lowered. Finally, Peter encouraged the exploration of new sources of gold and silver, including trade with gold-rich Spain and the disastrous military expedition to Bokhara.

The burden of Peter's economic policies fell mainly on the poorer classes. Russia's stratified society left little room for any free laboring class to develop. Those who built and worked in the new factories were thus overwhelmingly forced to do so. Some were soldiers, criminals, prostitutes, orphans, vagrants, or beggars. Peter had little sympathy for many of the poor, whom he believed were just lazy and shirking their responsibilities. Most of those sent to the factories, however, were state peasants and serfs—a 1721 decree allowed factory owners to purchase serfs for factory work. One estimate is that by 1725, some 54,000 state peasants had been assigned to work in the metallurgical industry alone.

Besides being dragooned into factories and military service—and into other projects like constructing St. Petersburg and canals—commoners paid for Peter's policies with taxes and inflation. Most revenue went for military needs, for as Peter stated: "Money is the artery of war."⁴ In 1725, although the Great Northern War was now over, the government was spending 65 percent of its revenues on the army and navy. Although estimates vary considerably, there is little doubt that both revenues and taxes increased significantly during Peter's reign.

Peter even employed "profiteers," whose job it was to think up new sources of revenue. From beards and bathhouses to weddings and watermelons, one new item after another was taxed. The largest gain, however, was in direct taxes and tribute, which made up 55 percent of state income in 1724. In place of the old household tax, Peter introduced a new tax beginning in 1724—the poll (or soul) tax. It successfully overcame some evasions of the old tax, for example, the combining of households.

Another source of income, an especially important one in the first decade of the Northern War, was the old tactic of debasing the currency—as Peter's father had done before the Copper Riot of 1662. By 1725, the ruble was worth only about half of what it had been at the beginning of Peter's reign.

Besides these burdens, serfs became more subjugated to their lords. The masters became responsible for delivering recruits to the government and for collecting the new soul tax from their serfs. After the new tax was introduced, it became harder for unhappy serfs to flee their masters because henceforth they had to have their lord's written permission to set foot off his property. Although the government did

⁴Ibid., p. 135.

issue decrees aimed at preventing transactions that broke up serf families and at limiting the masters' rights to beat their serfs, these edicts seem to have had little effect.

Although the serfs were becoming more like slaves, slavery itself disappeared (except in Siberia, where it lingered for another century). Slavery ended not for humanitarian reasons but because by laws of 1680 and 1724 Peter transformed the small number of remaining slaves, who had traditionally not paid taxes, into tax-paying serfs.

Although nobles except for one lowly group were exempt from the soul tax, they also found themselves more subjugated. During the first decade of the Northern War, Peter drafted some nobles along with commoners. Although many nobles quickly became officers, others did not, for Peter thought that rank should be earned by merit. But it was only in the second decade of the war that Peter stepped up efforts to insure that all men served the state, either in the military (which took about two-thirds of those recruited) or in the civilian bureaucracy. Service was to be until death or incapacitation.

In 1710–1711, he ordered new measures to prevent young nobles from concealing themselves from the state. In 1722, he decreed that such men were to be treated as bandits, and could be slain on sight. Realizing that the state, including the military, needed educated nobles, he tried to force at least the rudiments of education upon them—as late as 1767 about 60 percent of the nobles in the Orenburg province remained illiterate. In 1714, he prohibited nobles from marrying unless they could prove their competence in mathematics. That same year, partly in an attempt to deprive most nobles of any alternative to state service, he prohibited fathers from bequeathing their estates to more than one son. At the same time, Peter ended the remaining distinctions between *pomestie* and *votchina* estates, declaring all noble estates both inheritable and necessitating state service.

In 1722, Peter issued one of his most carefully prepared reforms, the Table of Ranks. It listed fourteen parallel ranks for officers and officials in each branch of state service: the military, civil service, and at court. Although mainly nobles rose to these posts, commoners could become nobles upon reaching any of these ranks. Yet, unless they served in the military or reached the eighth rank of civil or court service, they could not pass on the distinction to their children.

The Table of Ranks became one of Peter's most significant reforms. Nobles soon realized it was the only ladder to social status and success and that education was a propellant which helped their sons reach the bottom rank and accelerated their progress upward. In modified form, it lasted until 1917.

Peter viewed education and culture as tools for strengthening the state. When he sent fifty nobles abroad for education in 1697, he told them to learn everything they could about seamanship. The main upper-level schools he founded were technological in nature: for example, one of Mathematics and Navigation (1701), of Engineering (1712), and of Mines (1716). Partly to prepare individuals for such schools, he ordered (in 1714) that mathematical (or cipher) schools be started throughout the provinces, and by 1722 more than forty such schools existed. Peter also laid the groundwork for the foundation of an Academy of Science.

Although Peter's approach to education and culture was utilitarian, the impact of his policies was broad. The architecture of St. Petersburg and Peter's summer



FIGURE 13.4. Peterhof (Petrodvorets), fountains and canal leading to the Grand Palace from the Gulf of Finland.

retreat of Peterhof, the new calendar, Western clothing fashions, the presence of women at social gatherings, his introduction of Arabic numerals, a simplified Russian alphabet, Western language borrowings, and the first Russian newspaper, which Peter began in 1703, all bore witness to this breadth. In areas like literature and philosophy, his impact was less direct and immediate but still eventually great. In fact, Bushkovitch has written that the "Westernization of Russia culture was the most permanent effect of Peter's reign."⁵ (See Chapter 17 for more on Peter's contributions to the development of Russian culture.)

Peter's educational and cultural policies were often accompanied with his usual threats and force. At the Naval Academy, which he founded in 1715, he recommended that discipline be maintained by retired guardsmen, who could sit in the classrooms and whip anybody, regardless of social status, who got out of line.

OPPOSITION

Given Peter's penchant for forcing his policies upon his people, it is not surprising that many opposed him. Opposition took many forms, overt and covert, active and passive, by word and by deed. It came because of hostility to high taxes and forced service, including conscription. It came because of opposition to Western ways and to Peter's expansionist and church policies. And it came because of his scandalous behavior—smoking, making fun of church rituals, divorcing his

⁵Paul Bushkovitch, *Peter the Great* (Lanham, Md., 2001), p. 47.

Russian wife and taking up with common foreign women, and persecuting his pious son, Alexei. Bushkovitch has written of the "sullen opposition of the great families," and that most aristocrats opposed Peter's policies.⁶

One simple form of opposition was ignoring new decrees or orders. Peter issued so many, the country was so vast, and his enthusiastic supporters so few that enforcing compliance was often very difficult. A more active response to increased service obligations, whether in factories, on estates, in military units, or on civilian projects like building canals or St. Petersburg, was simply to flee. Partly because of this, the number of peasant households in Siberia between 1678 and 1710 almost doubled. Officers and officials, however, now took additional steps to combat this age-old problem. Army recruits were sometimes chained together on their way to military service. Beginning in 1712, recruits were branded on their left arms, thereby facilitating the apprehension of runaways.

Another form of dissatisfaction was more verbal but still nonviolent. In fact, the most common political offense dealt with by the Preobrazhenskii Prikaz in its first decade was verbal criticism or disrespect toward Peter, his family, or government. Toward the end of his reign, a man was executed for publicly referring to Peter as the anti-Christ—a common belief among many Old Believers.

Violent opposition was less frequent but certainly common enough. Throughout Peter's reign, there were scattered rebellions of peasants (on estates and at industrial sites), of Cossacks, and of non-Russian peoples. On the far-off Kamchatka Peninsula—further east than Japan—many natives lost their lives resisting Russian expansion. Closer to the heartland, east of the middle Volga, the Bashkirs, who had revolted under Tsar Alexei, again revolted from 1705–1711. Upset with increased demands for tribute and horses to help fight the Great Northern War, the Bashkirs attacked Russian troops and forts in their lands and tried to obtain help from their fellow Muslims, the Crimean Tatars and the Turks. After none was forthcoming, the Russians snuffed out the revolt.

The most dramatic opposition to Peter came from three sources: the *streltsy*, the southern borderlands, and his son, Alexei.

The *streltsy* revolt of 1698 was motivated by opposition to Peter's Western ways and friends, his rejection of traditional customs, and his further downgrading of the *streltsy* in favor of new-style regiments and naval construction. After suppressing the *streltsy* in 1698–1699, Peter sent many of them southward to garrison duty in areas like Astrakhan. Here, in 1705, they became involved in another revolt.

The Astrakhan rebels' grievances were similar to those of 1698. They also opposed new taxes, the policies of local officials and officers (including some foreigners), and the prohibition on beards and traditional Russian clothes. They killed the local governor and several hundred others and set up their own government. In 1706, however, with the help of Kalmyk tribesmen and Don Cossacks, Peter's troops reconquered Astrakhan, and the Preobrazhenskii Prikaz executed several hundred rebels.

In 1707–1708, it was the turn of the Don Cossacks under Kondrati Bulavin. While echoing earlier grievances, such as those against government attempts to recapture runaway peasants, this uprising was also directed at the growing

⁶Ibid., pp. 171–172.

presence and demands of Russian officials, officers, and landowners in the Don region. Opposition to westernization and sympathy for old traditions, especially among some Old Believer communities in the region, also played a part. As Bulavin's revolt spread in the Don area, it appealed to antinoble sentiments. Although Bulavin died in 1708 and the Don Cossack revolt was finally squashed, again with Kalmyk help, it helped spark scattered peasant revolts to the north and west that continued for over a year.

As already indicated, another instance of southern dissatisfaction was the defection of Mazepa and many of his Ukrainian Cossack followers to Charles XII of Sweden. Mazepa's grievances against Peter, to whom he had once been close, arose primarily from Peter's Ukrainian policies in the first decade of the Great Northern War. While demanding great sacrifices from Ukrainian Cossack troops, Peter curtailed their autonomy (for example, by assigning foreign and Russian officers to their regiments) and in 1707 told Mazepa he could spare no troops to help him turn back a Polish attack. Still another grievance was the behavior of Russian troops quartered in Ukrainian towns and villages.

The opposition of Tsarevich Alexei manifested itself most openly when he resorted to the peasants' favorite method—flight. In 1716, while Peter was in Denmark, Alexei fled to Austria. Born in 1690 and influenced by his conservative mother, Evdokiia, he was separated from her when she was exiled to a convent in 1698. Despite, or perhaps partly because of, Peter's subsequent attempts to mold his son's character, Alexei turned out quite the opposite from his father—as his German mother-in-law put it: "He prefers a rosary to a pistol in his hands."⁷ This pious and passive young man became a beacon of hope for those opposed to Peter's newfangled ways.

Prior to his flight to Vienna, Peter had often berated him for his reluctance to embrace the duties and enthusiasms that Peter thought were fitting for his heir, and Peter feared that after coming to the throne Alexei would undo all his herculean efforts to modernize Russia. He warned his son to shape up or spend the rest of his life in a monastery.

For a long time scholars were unclear about Alexei's activities in Vienna, but Bushkovitch recently found evidence in Austrian archives that Alexei was actively plotting to return to Russia with foreign help and overthrow his father. Yet these plans never materialized, and after over a year abroad, Alexei was persuaded to return by his father's envoy, Peter Tolstoi. Despite assurances that he would be forgiven, Alexei was then imprisoned and tortured. To investigate the whole suspected conspiracy surrounding the defection of his son, Peter established a new office, the Secret Chancellery. Although the investigation did reveal considerable opposition to Peter and his policies, not much of it was linked to Alexei.

According to the testimony of Alexei's mistress, who after his wife's death in 1715 he hoped to marry, the tsarevich told her that, after becoming ruler, "I shall live in Moscow and leave St. Petersburg as a mere provincial town. I shall keep no ships and an army only for defense."⁸ What a rejection this must have seemed to

⁷Quoted in B. H. Sumner, *Peter the Great and the Emergency of Russia* (New York, 1962), p. 97.

⁸Quoted in M. S. Anderson, *Peter the Great*, 2d ed. (London, 1995), p. 178.

Peter! On June 26, 1718, a few days after 126 assembled notables condemned Alexei and recommended execution, he died in the capital's Sts. Peter and Paul Fortress. Although official reports declare that he died of a seizure, a more likely cause was his weak health exacerbated by imprisonment and torture that continued even after his trial.

Among a small number of others who lost their life as a result of this "conspiracy" was the metropolitan of Rostov. The Secret Chancellery also unearthed evidence of additional church antagonism to Peter. This hostility contributed to Peter's decision to abolish the patriarchate and institute the Holy Synod. Correctly thinking that aristocratic opposition had helped embolden Alexei to oppose him, Peter arrested some prominent aristocrats including a few Dolgorukys. After Alexei's death he took further steps to weaken suspected aristocrats, and he strengthened the powers of Menshikov, whose prominence had ebbed somewhat earlier in the decade. Thus, for not the first time in Peter's reign, opposition from more traditional elements spurred Peter toward replacing an old institution (the patriarchate) with a new one (the Holy Synod) and relying more on "new men" such as Menshikov.

PETER'S DEATH AND LEGACY

Although one legend attributed Peter's death to a fever he caught after plunging into icy waters to help save some people, the reality was less dramatic. He died in bed in late January 1725, three months after this incident. A serious urinary ailment, from which he had suffered for some time, seems to have been the primary cause.

In 1722, Peter issued a decree announcing that the Russian emperor had the right to name his own successor, but he himself failed to do so. And even though Catherine had borne him several sons, none remained living by 1725.

With his death, one of Russia's most dramatic reigns came to an end. Its significance has been debated ever since, most noticeably by Russian Westernizers and Slavophiles in the early nineteenth century. What is certain is that Russia became a major European power during Peter's reign, that he instituted sweeping domestic changes, and that he was one of history's most important rulers.

Although his wars and diplomacy ultimately gained Russia little in the south, in the north he strengthened Russia at the expense of both Sweden and Poland and made Russia the dominant power in the Baltic.

Peter's domestic policies greatly accelerated the modernization and westernization of Russia and its small elite. He permanently changed the political justification for tsarist rule, and most of his successors at least paid lip service to the concept he established of a "reforming tsar." His policies also strengthened and modernized the idea of state service. His new capital St. Petersburg remained a fitting symbol of these policies.

Despite all his rational explanations for decrees, however, Peter's changes relied more on coercion than persuasion. Furthermore, Lindsey Hughes has stated that Peter did not leave Russia better governed and more orderly than earlier. Besides the heavy burdens and suffering he inflicted on his people, his policies led to a

widening cultural gap between a small westernized elite and the rest of the population. It would later be seen by individuals such as the novelist Dostoevsky as one of Russia's great tragedies, though Hughes has noted that the elite only partially and selectively "westernized" and that the charge that Peter created a split has been "ill-aimed."

Yet, whatever its dimensions and significance, Peter did widen a gap. It was similar to ones later experienced by other countries that attempted westernization and modernization and points to Peter's significance for world history. In his efforts to westernize a technologically underdeveloped country, he was a trailblazer. Furthermore, his relations with the West were not all one-sided. After being influenced by Western thinking on absolutist monarchy, he himself served as one of the models for some of Europe's later enlightened absolute monarchs.

Yet, despite all his dynamism and new policies, certain basic characteristics of Russian life did not change or, if they did, not for long. Although active opposition could not stop Peter, custom, inertia, and self-interest eventually frustrated and scaled back some of his policies. The overwhelming majority of the Russian people, the peasants, continued to follow the customs of their ancestors, virtually untouched by any westernizing influences. The nobles gradually chipped away at the obligations Peter had imposed upon them and continued to rule over their serfs as they wished. Despite all the new laws and government institutions created by Peter, patronage and informal networks remained essential ingredients of Russia's political culture.

The chief elements of the Russian sociopolitical order in the late eighteenth century were the same as they had been a century earlier—autocracy, a ruling elite and serfdom. And the Pugachev revolt that broke out a half-century after the end of Peter's reign occurred for basically the same reasons as the Razin revolt a century earlier—increasing government demands and an unjust social order.

The final evaluation of Peter must to some extent depend on one's own values. Admirers of traditional Russian culture and religion and critics of the West—such as the nineteenth-century Slavophiles—were critical of Peter. Others, who cared little for Russia's pre-Petrine traditions and admired Western culture—such as the westernizing literary critic V. Belinsky (1811–1848)—praised Peter. Opponents of strong state or autocratic powers—such as the novelist and later nonviolent anarchist Leo Tolstoy—criticized him, but admirers of such powers, including Stalin, generally praised him. The nineteenth century historian Sergei Soloviev, who emphasized the importance of state power to Russia's development, called Peter I "the greatest leader in history."

In the late 1980s, a period in which many Russian intellectuals were criticizing the Communist system, the Soviet historian Evgeni Anisimov faulted Peter for creating a totalitarian, militaristic, bureaucratic, police state and beginning an imperialistic foreign policy. He referred to Peter's reforms as "progress through coercion" and noted a continuity between Petrine Russia and Soviet Russia—a point worth considering later in Russian history.