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PETER
THE
GREAT

1672 - 1725

Peter the Great is generally acknowledged to be the most outstanding of the Russian czars. The policy of westernization that he instituted was a major factor in the transformation of Russia into a great power.

Peter was born in 1672, in Moscow, the only son of Czar Alexis and his second wife, Natalia Narishkina. Peter was not yet four years old when his father died. Since Alexis also had had thirteen children by his first wife, it is hardly surprising that there was a lengthy and sometimes violent struggle over the succession to the throne. On one occasion, the young Peter even had to flee for his life. For several years, Peter's half-sister Sophia served as regent, and it was not until 1689, when she was removed from that office, that Peter's position became reasonably secure.

Russia in 1689 was a backward region, centuries behind western Europe in almost every way. Towns were fewer than in the West. The institution of serfdom was flourishing—indeed, the number of serfs was increasing, and their legal rights declining. Russia had missed both the Renaissance and the Reformation. The clergy was ignorant; literature was almost nonexistent; mathematics and science were ignored or despised. In contrast with western Europe, where Newton had recently written his

Principia, and where literature and philosophy were flourishing, Russia was almost medieval.

In 1697-98, Peter made a lengthy trip to western Europe, a trip which was to set the tone for the succeeding years of his reign. Peter took about 250 people along with him on this "grand embassy." By using a pseudonym (Pyotr Mikhaylov), Peter was able to see many things which he could not have observed otherwise. In the course of this trip, Peter worked for a period as a ship's carpenter with the Dutch East India Company in Holland. He also worked in the Royal Navy's dockyard in England, and he studied gunnery in Prussia. He visited factories, schools, museums, and arsenals, and even attended a session of Parliament in England. In short, he learned as much as he could about Western culture, science, industry, and administrative techniques.

In 1698, Peter returned to Russia and embarked on a far-ranging series of reforms designed to modernize and westernize the Russian state. In order to encourage the introduction of Western technology and techniques, Peter brought many Western technicians into Russia. He also sent many young Russians to study in western Europe. Throughout his reign, Peter encouraged the development of industry and commerce. Under his rule, towns grew in size and the bourgeoisie increased in numbers and in influence.

During Peter's reign, the first good-sized Russian navy was built. Furthermore, the army was remodeled on the Western style, the troops were provided with uniforms and modern firearms, and Western style military drilling was instituted. Peter also instituted many changes in the Russian civil administration, including the sensible reform of promoting civil servants on the basis of their performance in office, rather than their hereditary rank.

In social matters, also, Peter encouraged westernization. He decreed that all beards must be cut off (though he later modified the decree), and men at court were ordered to dress in the Western style and were encouraged to take up smoking and the drinking of coffee. Although at the time many of his proposals

met with strenuous opposition, the long-term effect of these policies was that much of the Russian aristocracy eventually developed Western manners and culture.

Not surprisingly, Peter considered the Russian Orthodox Church to be a backward and reactionary force. Peter succeeded in partly reorganizing the Orthodox Church and in gaining considerable control over it. Peter instituted secular schools in Russia and encouraged the development of science. He also introduced the Julian calendar and modernized the Russian alphabet. During his reign, the first newspaper was established in Russia.

In addition to all these domestic reforms, Peter engaged in a foreign policy that had important consequences for the future. Under him, Russia was involved in wars both with Turkey in the south and with Sweden in the north. Against Turkey he initially had some success, conquering the port of Azov in 1696, and thereby providing Russia with some access to the Black Sea. Later in his reign, however, the Turks got the better of the fighting, and in 1711 he was forced to cede Azov back to Turkey.

In the war against Sweden, the sequence of events was almost exactly reversed, with the Russians defeated at the beginning and victorious at the end. In 1700, Russia joined with Denmark and Saxony in a war against Sweden, which at that time was a major military power. (Poland, too, later declared war on Sweden.) At the battle of Narva, in 1700, the Russian forces were badly defeated. Following this battle, the Swedish king turned his attention to his other enemies. Meanwhile, Peter rebuilt the Russian army. Eventually, the battle between Sweden and Russia was resumed, and at Poltava, in the year 1709, the Swedish army was decisively defeated.

The Russian territorial gains from the war included (roughly) Estonia and Latvia, plus a substantial area near Finland. Although the area conquered was not extremely large, it was important because it gave Russia an outlet on the Baltic Sea, and therefore a "window to Europe." On the banks of the Neva River, on some of the land conquered from Sweden, Peter founded a new city, St. Petersburg (today known as Leningrad).

In 1712, he moved his capital there from Moscow. Thereafter, St. Petersburg became the major point of contact between Russia and western Europe.

Peter's various domestic policies and foreign wars were, of course, very costly, and inevitably led to the imposition of additional taxes. Both the high taxes and the reforms themselves angered many Russians, and there were several revolts, all of which Peter crushed ruthlessly. Though he had many opponents in his own day, today both Russian and Western historians agree that Peter was the greatest of the Russian czars.

In his person, Peter made an imposing appearance. He was tall (at least 6' 6"), strong, good-looking, and energetic. He was full of lusty and boisterous high spirits, and was mirthful, although his humor was often rather crude. He sometimes drank heavily, and he had a violent streak in him. In addition to his political and military skills, Peter had studied carpentry, printing, navigation, and shipbuilding. An unusual monarch!

Peter was married twice. He married his first wife, Eudoxia, when he was seventeen. They lived together for only a week, and when he was twenty-six, he had her sent to a convent. In

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1712, he divorced her and married another woman. His second wife, Catherine, was a Lithuanian girl of humble birth. Peter had a son, Alexis, by his first wife; however, Peter and his son were on bad terms. In 1718, Alexis was arrested on charges of conspiracy against Peter. He was arrested, tortured, and died in jail. Peter himself died in St. Petersburg in early 1725, at the age of fifty-two. He was succeeded by his widow, Catherine (not to be confused with Catherine the Great).

Peter the Great is on this list because of the important role he played in the westernization and modernization of Russia. However, since the rulers of many other countries have pursued similar policies, one might reasonably ask why Peter has been included on this list and most of the others omitted.

It is true enough that *today*, in the twentieth century, most heads of state see the importance to their nations of adopting Western methods, particularly in science and technology. In 1700, however, the desirability of westernization was not obvious to most persons outside of Europe. What makes Peter so significant is that he was two centuries ahead of his time in realizing the importance of westernization, and in modernizing his country. Because of Peter's foresight, Russia, which at his accession had been a very backward country, was able to pull well ahead of most countries in the world. (However, because of the very rapid progress that western Europe made during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Russia was unable to draw abreast of western Europe.)

The contrast with Turkey, the other important state on the eastern frontiers of Europe, is particularly striking. Turkey and Russia were both semi-European countries. During the two centuries immediately preceding Peter's reign, Turkey was more advanced than Russia militarily, economically, and culturally. (For that matter, Turkey had been more advanced than Russia throughout most of history.) But there was no Turkish sultan around 1700 who realized the importance of rapid westernization and who pushed his country in that direction. Therefore, while Russia, from Peter's time on, made rapid strides, Turkey

made only slow progress. It was not until the twentieth century that Kemal Ataturk led Turkey in a program of rapid modernization. By that time, Russia was more advanced industrially and educationally than Turkey.

Today, of course, we take Russian predominance over Turkey for granted. Suppose, however, that instead of Peter the Great in Russia there had been, at that time, a great reforming sultan in Turkey. Then Turkey might well be a major power today, and probably would control the region which instead became Soviet Central Asia. (The residents of that region are Moslems, and are far more closely related to the Turks than they are to the Russians.)

Peter the Great was not a ruler who simply floated with the current, but was rather a man who was ahead of his time. His foresight quite possibly changed history and diverted it into a path it might not otherwise have followed. For these reasons, it seems plain to me that Peter is entitled to a place on this list.

In deciding where to rank Peter, I have been somewhat influenced by the comparison between him and Queen Elizabeth I of England. Elizabeth is much more *famous*, particularly in the West. However, I think I would find it difficult to persuade even the most fair-minded Russian that Elizabeth was more *influential* than Peter the Great. Peter was far more innovative, far more original. Whereas Elizabeth mainly represented a consensus of her people's desires, Peter pulled the Russians in a direction in which they had never previously contemplated going. The difference between the rankings of the two would be even larger were it not for the fact that through most of the intervening centuries, England has played a far more significant role in the world than Russia has.