Peter the Great

I. Introduction

Peter the Great or Peter I (1672-1725), tsar and, later, emperor of Russia (1682-1725), who is linked with the Westernization of Russia and its rise as a great power.

II. Early Life

Peter was born in Moscow of the second marriage of his father, Alexis I, who ruled Russia from 1645 to 1676. Alexis’s first marriage, to Maria Miloslavsky, had produced 13 children, but only two of the sons, Fyodor and Ivan, both of them sickly, survived their father. After Maria died in 1669 Alexis married Natalia Naryshkin in 1671, and Peter, a strong and healthy child, was born the next year. Fyodor III succeeded his father as tsar, but died without an heir in 1682. A bitter struggle for the throne between the two families, the Miloslavskys and the Naryshkins, ensued. The Naryshkins gained an early victory: Supported by the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, a majority in the boyar duma (Russia’s council of nobles), and a gathering of the gentry (untitled landowners), nine-year-old Peter was proclaimed tsar in April of 1682. Because of his youth, his mother became regent, while her relatives and friends secured leading positions in the state. However, as early as May, the Miloslavsky party, led by Alexis's able and strong-willed daughter Sofia, Peter's half-sister, inspired a rebellion of the streltsy, musketeers who made up Russia’s top military corps. The streltsy in Moscow murdered leading members of the Naryshkin clique—Peter witnessed some of these murders—and the Miloslavskys seized power. At the request of the streltsy, the boyar duma declared Ivan senior tsar and allowed Peter to be junior tsar. A little later, Sofia was made regent with the justification that the sickly and feeble-minded Ivan was unable to rule.

From 1682 to 1689 Sofia and her associates governed Muscovy, as the Russian state was then known, with Peter I, together with the Naryshkin party, kept away from state affairs at the village of Preobrazhenskoye. Prince Vasily Golitsyn, the regent's favorite, played a particularly important role in Sofia’s government. An enlightened and humane person who spoke several languages and arranged his own home and life in a Western manner, Golitsyn cherished vast projects of improvement and reform, including the abolition of serfdom (a system that bound agricultural laborers to the land they worked) and the development of education on a large scale. He did liberalize the Muscovite penal code, even if he failed to implement his more ambitious schemes. But two disastrous campaigns against the Crimean Tatars, in 1687 and 1689, together with other accumulated tensions, proved to be his and Sofia's downfall.

III. Accession to the Throne and Early Reign

A new rebellion of the streltsy, this time against Sofia’s regency, inspired a final confrontation between the Miloslavsky and Naryshkin parties in August 1689. The rally in support of Peter was such that Sofia capitulated to her brother. There were a few executions, Sofia was sent to live in a convent, and Golitsyn and some of his associates
suffered exile. Peter, who had spent his early teen years away from the capital playing at soldiering and learning about boatbuilding, was acknowledged as the real ruler of Russia, although Ivan retained his position as co-tsar. Still, at 17, Peter left state affairs to his mother and her rather reactionary clique. Natalia Naryshkin's death in 1694 marked the true beginning of Peter's reign. In 1696 Ivan V died, and Peter formally became the sole occupant of the Muscovite throne.

Very tall, tremendously strong, fantastically energetic, and an intellectually precocious child, Peter received no extensive systematic education, barely being taught to read and write. Instead, from an early age he began to absorb information on his own and to pursue a variety of interests. The quarter for foreigners in Moscow became his favorite locale. There he learned from a variety of specialists what he wanted to know most about military and naval matters, geometry, and the erection of fortifications. There too, in a busy, informal, and unrestrained atmosphere, the tsar apparently felt much more at ease than in the conservative, tradition-bound palace environment, which he never accepted as his own. The smoking, drinking, lovemaking, rough good humor, and conglomeration of languages that he first discovered in the foreign quarter in Moscow became an enduring part of Peter's life. He would always judge people not by their background, but by what they knew and what they were able to do. As a result, throughout his reign his assistants constituted a remarkably diverse group, ranging socially from the old, established Russian aristocracy to able newcomers from lower classes and including a great variety of foreigners.

The war games of Peter's childhood developed over a period of years into a serious military undertaking. He had formed two disciplined regiments of soldiers, known as the guards, from among his friends while at Preobrazhenskoye. The guards would later become the elite core of a new, modernized army. Similarly, the young tsar began building small vessels on a nearby body of water, and as early as 1694 he had established a dockyard in Arkhangelsk and personally constructed a large ship there. A Russian navy was being created literally from scratch. The determined attempt of Peter's mother to make him change his ways in a more conventional direction by marrying him to Eudoxia Lopukhina in 1689 failed completely.

The first years of Peter's effective rule brought more military surprises. Peter declared war against the Ottoman Empire in 1695. After failing to capture the key fortress of Azov near the mouth of the Don River by land, Peter built in one winter a fleet at Voronezh, a settlement up the Don. Working indefatigably himself and ruthlessly driving everyone around him, from foreign experts to Russian peasants, he managed to bring 30 seagoing vessels and about 1000 transport barges to Azov in May 1696. Besieged by sea as well as by land, the Ottomans surrendered Azov in July.

IV. The Grand Embassy
Next, Peter organized a large delegation—the so-called Grand Embassy—to visit a number of European countries. He was spurred by the desire to form a mighty coalition against the Ottoman Empire, but also by his intense interest in the West. In a most unusual act for a Muscovite ruler, Peter traveled with the Grand Embassy himself. The party of approximately 250 men set out in March 1697. It was headed by Peter’s close Swiss friend and associate, Franz Lefort, while the tsar himself journeyed incognito under the name of Peter Mikhailov. His identity, however, was easy to discover, and it remained no secret to the rulers and officials of the countries he visited or even to the crowds that frequently gathered around him. The tsar engaged in a number of important talks on diplomatic and other state matters.

Above all Peter 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, manners, and entire way of life of Europe as he saw it. As the Grand Embassy progressed across the continent Peter also took trips of his own, most notably to the British Isles, and obtained firsthand knowledge of Prussia, Holland, England, the Habsburg Empire, and the Baltic provinces of Sweden. From Vienna the tsar intended to go to Italy, but instead he rushed back to Moscow in the fall of 1698 at news of a rebellion of the streltsy. During his 18-month trip abroad, Peter recruited more than 750 foreigners, especially Dutchmen, to serve in Russia. Experts in their fields, these artisans, doctors, and soldiers continued their careers while training the Russians.

The streltsy, who had made a bid to depose Peter in favor of Sofia, were defeated before Peter's return, but the tsar acted with exceptional violence and severity. After investigation and torture, more than 1000 streltsy were executed, with Peter himself performing as one of the executioners. Their mangled bodies were displayed publicly as a salutary lesson, and the streltsy were disbanded. Sofia was forced to become a nun, as was Peter's wife, Eudoxia, who had sympathized with the rebels. Also, after returning home the tsar demanded that courtiers, officials, and the military conform to Western standards of appearance, ordering them to cut their beards and wear Western-style clothing. With the beginning of the new century, Peter changed the old Russian calendar to the Julian calendar used in the West; 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.

V. Later Reign

Before long, however, these and other reform measures had to cede center stage to the prosecution of the Great Northern War (1700-1721) against Sweden. Peter’s journey west did not result in a great alliance against the Ottomans, but it led to one against Sweden. Russia fought together with Denmark and the union of Poland and Saxony against Sweden to win the Baltic coastline, the 'window into Europe,' and to break Swedish dominance over the northern part of the continent. At the time, Sweden was considered to have the best army in Europe and was led by the most famous commander, the youthful
King Charles XII. Thus, the war required utmost exertion from backward Russia. It has been described both as the reason for Peter’s reforms and as their main burden and limitation.

Crushed by the Swedes at Narva in 1700, Peter modernized and transformed the Russian army, and the tide turned in the war. By 1703 the Russians had scored important victories against Sweden, and Peter founded Saint Petersburg at the site of a former Swedish fortress on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Finland. Russia destroyed invading Swedish forces at Poltava on July 8, 1709, and, although the war lasted many more years, the Swedes could not reverse its course. By 1714 Russian troops occupied most of Finland, then a Swedish duchy. The new Russian Baltic navy, under Peter's direct command, joined the army to defeat the Swedish fleet off Hangö and to carry the war into Sweden itself. The Treaty of Nystad, concluded on August 30, 1721, gave Russia Livonia, Estonia, Latvia, Ingrina, part of Karelia, and certain islands, although Russia returned the bulk of Finland and paid 2 million Swedish rix-dollars. Russia obtained the Finnish borderlands located strategically next to Saint Petersburg as well. At a solemn celebration of the peace settlement, the Senate, which had been recently created to assist the tsar in governing the country, prevailed upon Peter to accept the titles of Great, Father of the Fatherland, and Emperor. His acceptance of the last title marked the official inauguration of the Russian Empire.

During the Great Northern War, Peter also mounted a rash campaign against the Ottoman Empire near the Prut River in 1711. He was fortunate to make peace and extricate himself and his army at the cost of abandoning Azov, some other southern gains, and his southern fleet to the Ottomans.

VI. Reforms Under Peter

Internal reforms under Peter were generally enacted under the pressure of war, usually in an ad hoc, disjointed manner. Often the confusion they were designed to fix was made worse. Still, Peter's reforming of Russia was by no means limited to hectic measures to bolster the war efforts. Rather, he wanted to Westernize and modernize the entire Russian government, society, and culture. Peter literally moved the capital west, from Moscow to Saint Petersburg, in 1712. Even if he failed to overhaul all of Russia, changes pointed more and more away from backward Muscovy and toward borrowing from the West. Peter the Great was not a theoretician, but he had the makings of a visionary.

Of the reforms, the modernization of the army and the creation of the navy were among the most successful. In 1711, before leaving on the Ottoman campaign, Peter created a Senate of 10 (later 11) members to supervise all judicial, financial, and administrative affairs in his absence. Upon his return it became a permanent institution, with a special high official, the ober-procurator, serving as the link between the Senate and the monarch, or, in Peter’s own words, as 'the sovereign's eye.'
In 1717 and the years immediately following, Peter replaced Muscovy’s numerous and unwieldy governmental departments with new agencies, called colleges. Originally nine in number, the colleges were councils that served as the main agencies of the newly structured government, dealing with such matters as foreign affairs, justice, and commerce. The group leadership of each agency was meant to provide a variety of opinion and to deter corruption. Town government also underwent major reform. In 1699 control of the cities was shifted from appointed governors to locally elected officials. Intended to stimulate the initiative and activity of the townspeople, the reform failed in practice because of local inertia and ignorance. An even greater failure was provincial reform, again very progressive and ambitious but totally unrealistic. Peter divided the country into 50 gubernias (provinces), for which he established a vast bureaucracy. A governor headed each gubernia and answered to the Senate. The system provided more uniformity, but corruption and confusion thrived within the new bureaucracy.

Peter was more effective at changing the structure of the Russian Orthodox Church. His reforms were influenced especially by church-state arrangements in the Lutheran states of Northern Europe. In 1721 a Holy Synod, or religious college, of 10, and later 12, clerics replaced the patriarch at the head of the Orthodox Church. A secular official, the ober-procurator, was appointed to supervise the synod for the ruler. Although the emperor acquired no authority on questions of faith, the reform enabled the government to exercise control over church organization, possessions, and policies.

On the whole Peter had to accept Russian society as it was, with serfdom and the economic and social dominance of the gentry; he did not produce any revolutionary changes in the Russian economy. However, Peter’s tremendous effort to make that society and economy serve his purposes brought some lasting social results. To fund the wars and the building of Saint Petersburg, taxation became extremely oppressive, with new taxes of every conceivable kind proliferating. After a census was ordered in the early 1720s, a head, or poll, tax replaced the household tax and the tax on cultivated land. Serfs and eventually even vagrants—individuals who had previously escaped taxation because they did not own land or were not part of a household—were subject to the new tax.

Under Peter, members of the service gentry, landowners who held property in return for their service to the state, were divided into classes. In 1722, Peter promulgated a system of ranks that classified the gentry according to their level of service. This system, called the Table of Ranks, listed in hierarchic order the 14 ranks to be attained in the military, civil, and imperial court service. Promotion now depended on ability and service to the state, not birth, which historically determined how far one rose in Russian society. The Table of Ranks served as the foundation of the imperial Russian bureaucracy and lasted, with modification, until 1917.

Peter’s war endeavors provided a strong stimulus to the Russian economy, from mining and metallurgy, which supplied armaments and ships for the army and navy, to the new
textile industry. But perhaps his most significant impact was in the broad field of education and culture, where the Western orientation could never again be reversed. This orientation began before Peter’s reforms, but it was Peter who made it state policy and thus transformed an optional and slow process into a compulsory official drive. In a sense, the Academy of Sciences, planned by the emperor and inaugurated shortly after his death, remained his most appropriate monument.

Peter died in February 1725 after a brief illness, without using a new law, issued in 1722, giving him the right to appoint a successor. His only son to grow to maturity, Alexis, had died in 1718 in prison in tragic and unclear circumstances after having been condemned to death for treason against his father, whose views he never shared. The reformer's semiliterate second wife ascended the throne as Empress Catherine I, sponsored especially by Peter's most prominent assistant, Aleksandr Menshikov, and the guards.

Evaluation

Peter the Great was virtually unconditionally admired, almost worshiped, in his native country by the educated public during the Age of Enlightenment, which followed after his death and which he had done so much to introduce. He then became a subject of argument in the first half of the 19th century among such ideologists as the Westernizers, who applauded Peter’s accomplishments, and the Slavophiles, who claimed he had betrayed his country’s traditions with his reforms.

While historical studies provided a more realistic context for understanding Peter the Great and his significance, his figure remained immense in Russian literature and culture. Even Soviet Marxist writing after the Russian Revolution of 1917 applauded the emperor. Soviet historians de-emphasized the role of personality in history and stressed the oppressive feudal nature of Peter’s reign, but they glorified his creation of the navy, his military reform and victories, and the emergence of Russia as a great world power. All Soviet schoolchildren were brought up on that dual, even contradictory, interpretation. With the collapse of the Soviet state in 1991, Peter the Great again became a magnet for a variety of different evaluations.

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