

Absolutism in Russia

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Part Two

The Time of Troubles: Ivan IV's son Fedor succeeded him, but he was totally incapable of ruling. The real power was in the hands of a group of boyars. Among these the most powerful turned out to be Boris Gudonov, whose only claim to prominence was the marriage of his sister to Fedor. Although he had no legitimate claim to the throne Boris Gudonov managed to have himself crowned Czar in 1598 when Fedor died with no heir. Immediately thereafter, there was a tremendous social upheaval which became known as the Time of Troubles. Close relatives of Fedor fought against each other, even welcoming Swedish and Polish armies to invade, and who occupied Moscow briefly. Also, a great Cossack revolt under Ivan Bolotnikov marched north, slaughtering nobles and officials and calling for the "true Czar" who would restore their freedom of movement and reduce their tax load.

The peasant revolt brought the nobles to their senses. If they were to survive, they must unite against the Peasants. They were able to crush the Peasant revolt at the gates of Moscow, and in 1613, elected Ivan IV's grandnephew, Michael Romanov as Czar Michael I. He was the first of the Romanov Czars, the dynasty that would rule Russia until the end of the Czarist regime with the abdication and murder of Nicholas II in 1917.

Inasmuch as the nobles had occasioned his election, Michael was understandably more kindly disposed to the Boyars than to the peasants. As a result, he eased the military obligations imposed on the boyars, and at the same time completely inserted the peasants. His successor, Alexis, was even more disposed to accommodate the nobles while further grounding the serfs. As a result, a second upheaval occurred. This second upheaval had religious implications. The patriarch of Moscow, one Nikon, wanted to conform Russian religious practice with that of the Greek Orthodox Church. The peasants bitterly resented his reforms, calling him the Anti-Christ, who stripped them of the one consolation they had in life, the true religion of "holy Russia." These so-called Old Believers were hunted down and persecuted mercilessly. On one occasion, twenty thousand burned themselves alive while chanting from the old liturgy. This apparent mass suicide was to prevent their capture and death at the stake by government forces. The upheaval caused the established church to become more and more alienated from the masses, and more and more dependent upon the government for support. The church in essence became an arm of the government.

Among the issues which caused the Old Believers grief was that Nikon wished to stop their practice of using two fingers instead of three when they genuflected, and chanting the hallelujah three times instead of two

The situation was exacerbated when the Cossacks again revolted, and were joined by the disgruntled peasants. They slaughtered landlords and government officials, and proclaimed that they would end the government of oppression. The forces of the boyars were finally able to put down the revolt; but keeping the lid on the peasants became a full time occupation for both Lords and Czar.

Russia was considered the great "barbaric" unknown by most of Europe. So little was known about it that Louis XIV once sent a letter to a Czar who had been dead for twelve years. The reign of Peter the Great brought Russia to the forefront of Europe.

Peter the Great: (r. 1682 – 1725) Peter was the second son of Czar Alexis, and second in line. His elder brother, Alexis, was quite feeble minded, and unable to rule. Their older sister Sophia acted as regent for the

two, and ruled with an iron hand. It is she who had ordered troops to burn the old Believers at the stake.

Alexis and Peter were actually proclaimed co-Czars. Though both were underage, their presence was required at state affairs. It was rumored that on such occasions, Sophia hid herself behind a curtain behind the two boys and whispered to them the appropriate responses they were to utter.

As a child, Peter was fascinated with all things military, with ships, and with Western culture. He organized his own military garrison of boys to wage mock warfare, and used real weapons whenever he could. He was obsessed with knowing the most minute details of military planning. For that reason, he refused to command the garrison himself, but took the part of a drummer. He also constructed a ship with his own hands to sail on the Volga River. He also spent much time in an English conclave in Moscow where European merchants and dignitaries often gathered. He had no interest in learning English, only in learning about Western culture and habits.

When he was fully grown, Peter was six foot eight inches tall, in a time when most men seldom measured taller than five foot six. He developed a nervous tick which caused his head to jerk when he was tired or excited. He tended to rough play, once pouring vinegar and oil down the throat of a Boyar who professed not to care for it until blood ran from the man's nostrils. At one point, he organized a "Drunken Synod," in which members of the "court," all personal friends, engaged in raucous drinking games. The fun did not end until all had passed out drunk, in fact the rules for members required that they must get drunk every day and never go to bed sober. The Synod's most important tasks were to offer excessive libations to the glory of Bacchus, and to lay down a suitable procedure to ensure that "Bacchus be worshipped with strong and honorable drinking and receive his just dues." The Charter also prescribed the vestments to be worn, drew up a Psalter and Liturgy, and even created an "All-jesting Mother Superior with Lady Abbots". It even went so far as to imitate the catechism, and decreed that, just as a baptismal candidate was asked DO you believe? so a candidate for this institution was to be asked "Do you drink?.. Those who lapsed into sobriety after initiation were to be debarred from all the inns of the Empire, and a heretic was to be banned from the society in perpetuity. On one occasion, they even elected a drunken "Pope" who was paraded down the street in a cart pulled by two bears, which were goaded along with pikes.

The Great Embassy: Following the death of Alexis, Peter arranged a grand tour of Western Europe, the so called Great Embassy to learn about the West. He traveled incognito, and refused to be recognized as Czar; he even dressed as a member of his own entourage, although it is doubtful that he fooled anyone because of his great height. In Holland, he took a job in a ship yard, working as a carpenter and talking with workmen and learning about shipbuilding. He lived in a simple cottage, and went to work every morning with a tool sack over his shoulder.

Peter's somewhat raucous nature did not change while he was on tour. In London he and his entourage virtually destroyed a rented house with wild parties where everyone got drunk and danced. They were so boisterous that a bishop worried aloud that this "furious man had been raised up to so absolute an authority over so great a part of the world."

The reason for the Great Embassy has been a subject of debate among historians. For years, there was a belief that Peter was fascinated by all things Western, because he forced his subjects, particularly the Boyars, to adopt many Western Customs. Prevailing opinion has discounted that view. Prof. Gerhard Rempel of Western New England College says: "Peter has often been accused of being a blind and inveterate Westerner who admired everything foreign, not because it was unlike anything Russian, and it was believed that he wanted rather to assimilate Russia to Western Europe than to make Russia resemble Western Europe. It is difficult to believe that as sensible a man as Peter was troubled by such fantasies." Peter's Great Embassy was "with the intention of acquiring general technical knowledge and recruiting West European naval technicians. Indeed it was for technical reasons that the West was necessary to Peter. He was not a blind

admirer of the West; on the contrary, he mistrusted it, and was not deluded into thinking that he could establish cordial relations with the West, for he knew that the West mistrusted his country, and was hostile to it. On the anniversary in 1724 of the Peace of Nystadt, Peter wrote that all countries had tried hard to exclude the Russians from knowledge in many subjects, particularly military affairs, but somehow the countries had let information on military affairs escape them, as if their sight had been obscured, as if everything was veiled in front of their eyes." Peter found this a miracle from God, and ordered the miracle to be forcefully expressed in the forthcoming celebrations "and boldly set out, for there is a lot of meaning here, by which he meant that the subject was very suggestive of ideas. Indeed we would gladly believe the legend which has come down to us, that Peter once said, as Osterman records, "We need Europe for a few decades; later on we must turn our back on it." Thus for Peter association with Europe was only a means to an end, and not an end in itself."

Peter was forced to return to Russia because of a revolt of the Palace Guard, the Strelsky, which had been stirred up by his sister Sophia. He put down the revolt savagely, executing thousands of Strelsky, and ordering Sophia confined to a convent for the rest of her life.

One of Peter's favorable impressions of the West was that Western men did not wear beards. Russian men considered it a sin to shave; they argued that God had put a beard on man, and he should not tamper with God's creation. Most of them wore long flowing beards. During a welcoming reception upon his return from Western Europe, Peter pulled a straight razor from his pocket and shaved several Boyars who were present. All were mortified, but said nothing. Those who wished to keep their beards could do so, provided they paid a heavy tax and wore a metal token around their necks indicating that the "beard tax" had been paid. Peter also insisted that his nobles wear western clothes as did he himself. Russian Boyars had long worn brocaded robes, but he insisted they exchange them for Western style suits and wigs. He also encouraged the use of individual glasses, bowls and napkins at meals, and ordered a Western book of etiquette to be translated into Russian. He ordered nobles to build Western style palaces and demanded that women wear bonnets, petticoats and skirts. He purchased German and Italian statues and began a royal collection that became famous.

Peter also began a major campaign to improve Russian technology and war making machinery. According to Prof. Rempel, "The establishment of industry depended on technical knowledge, so Peter founded a naval academy, and many schools of navigation, medicine, artillery and engineering, including some where Latin and mathematics were taught, as well as nearly fifty elementary schools in provincial and sub-provincial main towns. He even provided nearly fifty garrison schools for soldier's children. There was insufficient revenue, so Peter more than trebled it. There was no rationally organized administration capable of managing this new and complicated business, so foreign experts were called on to help to create a new central administration. Many of these experts trained his army and provided them with bottle green uniforms and flintlock muskets with socket bayonets.

Peter continued his predecessor's policy of territorial expansion of Russia. His primary goal was to obtain a warm water seaport for Russia, which he called a "window on the West." Russia's only seaports, Murmansk and Archangel, were frozen over in the winter.

His first campaign was against the Ottomans on the Sea of Azov. During this campaign, the new Russian navy fired on Turkish forces encamped near the Greek Acropolis, which had stood since classical times. The cannon fire severely damaged the Acropolis. Modern pictures reveal the damage with broken columns and large pieces of broken marble. The damage was not caused by the passage of time, but by Russian cannon fire. Although he succeeded in capturing Azov, and hoped to take Constantinople, his troops were turned back, and Peter still did not have his warm water port.

The Great Northern War: (1701-1721) Peter then entered into a secret alliance with Denmark and the elector

of Saxony to wage a sudden war of aggression against Sweden, a leading power in the Baltic whose territory extended into northern Germany, Finland, and Estonia. Peter and his allies believed they would win easily because, although Sweden was a major military power, its King, eighteen year old Charles XII, was inexperienced. They underestimated him. Charles was prudish and never married, but was soldier to the core. Were he in ROTC, he would have been Cadet Commander hands down. Charles gloried in warfare as much as Peter gloried in ships; and strengthened his sword arm by striking off the heads of sheep with one blow of his sword.

Charles became king of Sweden at the age of fifteen, and refused to even take the coronation oath when he came of age in 1700. Symbolically, he snatched the crown away from the hands of the bishop who was to crown him and placed it on his own head. He had been instructed only in warfare, and remained a headstrong military man throughout his short life. He died in 1718 at age thirty three, when the idiot stood up and looked over a battlement when it was under intense fire. He received several wounds, one to the head, which killed him instantly. He had previously suffered a severe leg wound, but carried on as if nothing had happened.

Charles forces quickly eliminated Denmark from the war, and turned on Russia. In a blinding snowstorm, his professional army attacked and routed the unsuspecting Russian forces at Narva on the Baltic coast. Peter and his entourage were forced to flee in panic lest he be taken as a prisoner of war.

Peter knew he had a real fight on his hands, so he decided to strengthen the army by putting the nobility back in the military, which he did with a vengeance. Every nobleman, great or small, was required to serve in the army or in civil administration for life. He created schools and universities to produce experts; and required five years of compulsory education away from home for every young nobleman.

After the disaster at Narva, Peter increased service requirements for peasants. He established a standing army of more than 200,000 soldiers commanded by officers from the nobility. When a peasant boy was drafted, his family and village celebrated as if it were his funeral, which it practically was, as he was drafted for life. He also increased taxes threefold. Under his reign, people, not land, became the primary unit of taxation. He also arbitrarily assigned serfs to work in factories and mines, in which all work was done exclusively for the military. Eighty to eighty five per cent of all revenues brought in during Peter's reign were consumed by warfare.

The war ended with the Treaty of Nystadt (1721) after which Peter declared Russia an empire, and himself Emperor. His nobles begged him to accept the title of Peter the Great, Emperor of Russia, which he did with some embarrassed reluctance. The Great Northern War brought only modest gains to Russia, but one important one. At the Battle of Poltava, Peter's new army crushed the smaller Swedish army, and Russia annexed lands on the Black Sea, Estonia, and much of present-day Latvia. Peter directed the construction of a new capital city on the coast, which he named for his patron saint, St. Peter. St. Petersburg soon became the capital of Russia, and a beautiful Baroque palace, the Peterhof, was constructed. Peter himself had no love of finery, and often wore old clothes and darned socks, but the Peterhof is testimony to his efforts to make Russia a modern nation.

Peter did have problems, including a plot to overthrow him in which his own son, the Tsarivich, was involved. Peter ordered him executed, and named his son by his second wife, Peter II, as his heir. To his dismay, the child died at age twelve before Peter.

The circumstances of Peter's own death are testimony to his vitality. He was on a ship in the harbor of St. Petersburg, and saw another ship which had run aground, and the sailors were about to drown. He jumped into the water himself, and helped rescue them. He was chilled from the encounter, and never recovered his health. He died of natural causes shortly thereafter.

AT the time of Peter's death in 1725, Russia controlled territory six times greater than at the time of Ivan the Terrible. The Russian empire was thirty times larger than that of France. Because of Peter's efforts to employ technology, many Westerners and western ideas flowed into Russia for the first time. A new class of educated Russians emerged. Sadly however, the split between the serfs and educated class widened, and the serfs hated Peter more than ever.

Unlike his predecessors, Peter fostered the idea that his actions were for the good of the country; that the state's interest were more important than his own personal interests. He was the first Czar to distinguish between his person as ruler and the state. He required his nobles to take two oaths, one to him as ruler, and the other to the state itself. For the first time in history, the Czar attached explanations to his decrees in an attempt to gain the confidence and support of the populace. Even so, the Czar had the last word, and this became a continuing source of tension between the Czar and the people that finally erupted in 1917. Even so, Peter's actions moved Russia into the modern era and closer to the West. His ideas allowed Russia to participate in the age Enlightenment under Catherine the Great.