


PETER THE GREAT

The adventurous tsar took an isolated country and willed it into a great power

BY DAVID HOLZEL



Peter the Great in 1717. An imposing figure at 6 feet, 8 inches tall, he served as emperor of Russia from 1682 until his death in 1725.

The storehouse had been locked for years. That only made the question of what was inside more tantalizing to 16-year-old Peter Alekseyevich Romanov. He and his companions broke in, and in the misty gloom, Peter—tsar of Russia—found an old boat about 20 feet long, its timbers rotting.

Long forgotten on this royal estate outside Moscow, the vessel, so different from the riverboats that plied Russia's inland waterways, ignited the teenager's fierce curiosity. Could it be repaired, he asked one companion, a Dutch trader who was the young tsar's makeshift tutor. The Dutchman believed it could.

In 1688, when this story took place, Russia's foreign residents were restricted to "the German suburb" outside Moscow. There, the old Dutch trader found another countryman, a carpenter, who repaired the boat, fitted it with masts and sails and took it on rollers to a nearby river.

And so on an early summer day, Peter saw a boat tack against the wind for the first time. Soon he was learning from his Dutch teachers how to handle the vessel himself. "And mighty pleasant it was to me," he later wrote.

That boat opened up the world for a teenager of boundless energy who was looking to escape the cramped and bloody world of politics in Moscow. It led the young tsar to the sea, to Western ideas and the creation of the Russian navy. In the process, Peter the Great, as he was called by the end of his reign, recreated Russia, turning a vulnerable, inward-looking land into a great, expansive European empire.

Isolated and Vulnerable

For people of our time, who only know Russia as the largest country on Earth, a superpower or a force to be reckoned with, a European country on the far east of the continent and a place where, for so long, the individual counted for less than the state, the Russia that Peter was

born into on June 9, 1672, can seem about as alien as the moon.

"Russia was an empire of villages, a collection of simple log houses centered on a church whose onion dome gathered up the prayers and passed them along to heaven," writes Robert K. Massie in his biography *Peter the Great*.

At the time of Peter's birth, Russia had a population of 8 million, about the same as contemporary Poland. While the tsar was known as the absolute ruler, Russia's Orthodox Church, which traced its authority to the Greek Orthodox Church of Constantinople, was more powerful. The state barely touched life in the village. The Church, in its quest for purity, isolated Russia. The Russia of Peter's birth was defensive and inward looking, as it strove to exclude foreign influences and heretical thoughts.

If Russia was, according to the Orthodox Church, spiritually vulnerable, it also was a land surrounded by powerful physical enemies—Turks, Poles, Lithuanians and Swedes. Its vast grasslands provided no natural defenses. Russia, whether from the religions or armies of Europe and Asia, was always under attack.

In 1676, when Peter was 4, his father, Tsar Alexis, died, and the crown passed to Peter's 15-year-old half-brother,



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A chromolithograph captures Peter the Great in his younger years.

Feodor. A sickly youth, Feodor died in 1682. Peter was named tsar—he was robust and lively, unlike another older half-brother, Ivan, who was passed over. Ivan's mother's family feared the loss of power would bring ruin to them and revolted. They were supported by the *streltsy*, "the shaggy, bearded pike men who guarded the Kremlin and were Russia's first professional soldiers," as Massie describes them.

In the Kremlin, the citadel that was home to the tsar and the Orthodox patriarch, the *streltsy* massacred the relatives and supporters of Peter's mother, hacking them to death as the 10-year-old watched. The political

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outcome was that, in 1682, Ivan was crowned co-ruler with Peter. Power shifted to Ivan's sister Sophia (Peter's half-sister), who was proclaimed regent.

An Extended Adolescence

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Peter's mother removed him and a younger sister to a small estate outside Moscow. Meanwhile, in the capital, half-sister Sophia ruled, while half-brother Ivan carried out the formalities required of a tsar. Peter only returned to the capital for state occasions. Otherwise, Peter began an extended

adolescence, shunning most of the responsibilities of royalty but taking advantage of its perks.

Answering to no authority, he was free to follow his interests, and he mastered skills and areas of knowledge that touched his boundless curiosity. He befriended foreigners and learned of the world outside Russia. His favorite childhood game was war.

Peter began attracting and welcoming boys his age to his play army. Boys of low birth were embraced alongside the sons of nobility, whose families saw an association with the young tsar as good for their fortunes. But Peter was not a boy who jumped to

playing general. Following a pattern he often used when trying to master a skill, he entered his regiment as a drummer boy, and promoted himself only when satisfied he had met the requirements of a higher rank.

In this way, Peter challenged the old Russian ways of doing things. "From the beginning, Peter set this example," according to Massie, "degrading the importance of birth, elevating the necessity for competence."

As Peter grew older, the war games grew more elaborate, with imposed discipline and live ammunition. His army spent a year building a fort of earth and timber and then bombarded it, to see if they could knock it down.

Technical knowledge for Peter's "army" came from foreign officers in the German suburb. It was there—among the pipe-smoking Dutch, Germans and Scotsmen—that he learned to enjoy alcohol. Just as he was indefatigable in building a boat or constructing a fort, Peter took to drinking with gusto and good humor. Still in his teens, he established the Drunken Synod,

A 1717 painting by Jean-Marc Nattier depicts the Battle of Poltava, in which Peter the Great defeated the Swedish king Charles XII. Oil on canvas, 90 x 112cm.

A steel engraving, colored by W. Steelink after Johannes Bosboom, depicts Peter the Great as a carpenter.





An engraving of Peter the Great supervising the building of St. Petersburg

multi-day-long revels whose symbols mocked the Church and which he led until the end of his reign.

In 1693, Peter's love of ships drew him to the open sea. In those days, all of Russia had only one seaport, Archangel, near the White Sea. Archangel is 130 miles south of the Arctic Circle and frozen six months of the year. From there, Russia conducted its meager sea trade. But it was still the sea. And at the height of summer, Peter and his retinue started out on the 1,000-mile journey from Moscow to see the sea for the first time. He wrote his mother letters of what he saw there and signed them "Skipper Peter."

And so, Massie writes, "impelled by the will of this strange sea-dreamer, the huge landlocked nation stumbled toward the oceans."

Peter Rules

Peter's extended adolescence ended in 1695 when at age 23 he set his sights on the Black Sea, controlled by the Ottoman Empire. No longer playing war, he led an overland march to capture the Turkish fortress of Azov

in an attempt to end Russia's isolation from the sea. The attack ended in failure. But it convinced Peter that Russia needed a large, modern navy, and he set about building it. The next year he returned to Azov and with the aid of 30 Russian ships, captured the fortress.

Ivan died in 1696, leaving Peter as sole ruler of Russia. The country would be at war for all but a single year until the end of Peter's reign. For most of the time, the enemy would be Sweden.

In 1700, Peter looked north to gain a foothold on the Baltic. To do that, he would need to defeat the Swedes, who were the preeminent northern power. Peter launched what became known as the Great Northern War. Begun with the disastrous Battle of Narva, it came to an end 21 years later when a treaty gave Russia lands on the Baltic that had previously been ruled by Sweden—including present-day Estonia. Russia agreed to pay Sweden 2 million Riksdaler and returned to the Swedes most of Finland, which Russia had captured.

"Russian victory over Sweden meant Russia was firmly established on the

Baltic, had its window on Europe and replaced Sweden as the dominant power in Northern Europe," Nicholas V. Riasanovsky writes in *A History of Russia*.

In the process, Peter reformed Russia's army. He took a force that disbanded every winter and he built a standing army, a professional fighting force manned by soldiers who served for life and were cared for by the state. By the end of Peter's reign, the army had 200,000 men, a number slightly smaller than that of the continent's powerhouse, France. The burgeoning army expanded the population of Russians who lived in service to the state.

Peter's gains in the war allowed him to turn his back on Moscow and build a glittering European capital on the Baltic. He established St. Petersburg in 1703.

He discovered his love for European culture and technology early, on his Grand Tour of Europe in 1697. Disguised (largely unsuccessfully) as Peter Mikhail, the tsar accompanied a Russian delegation to win assistance from the kings of Europe for Peter's war against the Turks. In this, Peter was unsuccessful, but particularly in the



Peter the Great on his deathbed, in a 1725 painting by Ivan Nikitin.

Netherlands and England, he was able to soak up the social and scientific advances of Protestant Europe, as well as technological skills like shipbuilding.

He brought to Russia Western innovations like coffee houses and newspapers, Western dress and education. And he infamously required his noblemen to shave their beards, levying a tax on those who refused.

Like Peter's other reforms, the tsar's beard edict was met with fierce suspicion. "Traditionalists objected on the ground that shaving impaired the image of God in men and made the Russians look like such objectionable beings as Lutherans, Poles, Kalmyks, Tartars, cats, dogs and monkeys," Riasanovsky writes.

Throughout Peter's reign, there were many who believed that he was, at best, a foreigner installed in place of the real

tsar or, at worst, the anti-Christ. Known for his ruthlessness (his own son, whom he suspected of treason, died after being severely tortured, and Peter had at least two of his mistresses tried on false charges of adultery), he nonetheless left an indelible legacy.

Peter died in February 1725, at the age of 52, from kidney failure. During the course of his 42-year reign, the giant of a man had transformed Russia from an isolated medieval nation to a major European power. The cultural revolution that Peter oversaw replaced antiquated social and political systems with ones that were modern, scientific and westernized. Today, many existing institutions of Russian government trace their origins back to his momentous reign. ●

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