Peter the Great

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Czar of Russia (r. 1682-1725)

- **Born:** June 9, 1672
- **Birthplace:** Moscow, Russia
- **Died:** February 8, 1725
- **Place of death:** St. Petersburg, Russia

Borrowing both ideas and technology from the West, Peter the Great modernized Russian society, introduced significant military reforms, and built a navy almost from scratch. He won important territories on the Baltic coast from Sweden and transformed Russia into a great European power.

Early Life

Peter the Great was born on June 9, 1672, the first child of Czar Alexis’s second wife, Natalia Naryshkin. From his first wife, Maria Miloslavskaya, Alexis had several daughters, the eldest of whom was Sophia, and two sons, Fyodor and Ivan. Inevitably, even while Peter’s father was still alive, the court factions centering on the Miloslavsky and Naryshkin families contended for power and influence. On Alexis’s death in 1676, the eldest son Fyodor, though physically weak, became the czar. He died in 1682 without leaving an heir.

Thus, Peter was only ten years old when the Kremlin saw an open and violent struggle of power between the Naryshkins and Miloslavskys, who were now supported by the streletsy, the special regiments created in the sixteenth century by Ivan the Terrible. Peter witnessed the brutal killings of several members of the Naryshkin faction, including his mother’s former guardian, Artamon Matveyev. Although the struggle ended by making Peter and his mentally disabled half brother Ivan co-czars, these unnecessary and savage killings created a deep hatred in Peter for the streletsy and a permanent revulsion against the Kremlin and its politics.
During the next seven years, when Sophia acted as a regent, Peter spent most of his time in the nearby village of Preobrazhenskoe. Because of neglect, he had failed to get a good education even before the 1682 events; this continued to be the case. Peter used his own devices, however, to acquaint himself with military matters and Western technology. While in Preobrazhenskoe, he amused himself with live “toy” soldiers and later organized them in two well-trained battalions. He learned, at least on a rudimentary basis, about Western science, military technology, and shipbuilding from foreigners, mainly German and Dutch, who lived in a nearby German settlement.

In 1689, a number of events affected Peter. In January, his mother married him to Eudoxia Lopukhin, a court official’s daughter, by whom he had a son, Czarevitch Alexis, a year later. In August, 1689, as he lay asleep at Preobrazhenskoe, he was awakened and told that the streltsy, at the orders of Sophia, were on their way to kill him. He ran to take shelter at the Monastery of the Trinity in the northeast, where he was joined by his “toy” regiments and his mother and the patriarch. Sophia quickly lost support and was imprisoned in the Novodevichy Convent in Moscow. Peter’s mother now served as a regent. Her death in 1694, and that of Ivan in 1696, left Peter as the sole ruler of Russia.

Eager to acquire Western knowledge and to seek European allies against Turkey, Peter undertook a long journey to the West in 1697-1698. Traveling with a large Russian delegation as an ordinary member, he spent several months in the Netherlands, learning how to make ships. He also visited England, Austria, and Prussia, and was about to go to Italy when he learned of the revolt by the streltsy. Although the revolt had already been crushed, he hurried home to destroy the force forever. Beside executing thousands of the streltsy savagely and publicly so that no one would dare oppose him in the future, Peter forced Sophia to become a nun. Peter now enjoyed unchallenged power.

**Life’s Work**

A very important part of Peter’s work consisted of acquiring territories on the Black Sea in the south and on the Baltic in the north in order to establish direct links with Central and Western Europe. Just before he left for his European journey in 1697, he had captured Azov on the Black Sea from the Turks. This acquisition was now formalized in a treaty that the two countries signed in July, 1700.

Although Peter had failed to acquire allies against Turkey during his stay in Europe, he did enter into an alliance with Poland-Saxony and Denmark, against the youthful Swedish ruler, Charles XII. While Poland-Saxony and Denmark entered the Great Northern War in early 1701, however, Peter waited until after the signing of his treaty with Turkey to join the fray. Charles XII proved a tough adversary. He forced Denmark out of the war and then inflicted a humiliating defeat on the Russian army at Narva. It would be very hard to predict what the outcome would have been had he decided to continue his march toward Moscow, but he suddenly turned toward Poland first.

For Peter, Charles XII’s decision to turn first against Poland became a blessing, which he exploited to the fullest with great determination, inexhaustible energy, and imagination. From
melting church bells (to replace lost artillery) to making it necessary for individuals of noble background to rise in the military ranks only after the proper training (as well as enabling commoners to become officers), Peter soon succeeded in recruiting and training a large and efficient army.

As Charles XII remained entrenched in his struggle against Augustus II of Poland, Peter used his new army skillfully and effectively in making inroads into Livonia and Estonia and inflicted defeat on the Swedes at many points, thus firmly establishing his predominance over the Gulf of Finland. In 1703, he founded the city of St. Petersburg on the Neva River as his future capital, and, in order to protect it, he ordered the construction of a fortress on Kronstadt Island. He also rapidly built a navy in the Baltic Sea.

Having defeated Poland in 1706, Charles was now free to turn toward Moscow. Rather than attack from the north, he decided to go southward into the Ukraine, hoping to secure the support of the Cossacks and the Ukrainians. The Russians succeeded, however, in interrupting and destroying some of his supplies at Lesnaia in September, 1708. Though the Cossack leader Ivan Stepanovich Mazepa did support him, the majority of the Ukrainians still remained loyal to Peter. The two armies finally faced each other at Poltava in the Ukraine in July, 1709. At this historic battle, a depleted Swedish army met Peter’s larger force and was defeated. Both Charles and Mazepa had to escape into Turkey.

Peter’s great victory at Poltava was complicated by Turkey’s entry into the war. Rather than making peace with the Turks, at a time when he was still at war with Sweden, Peter, in an overconfident mood, entered the Balkans hoping to incite Turkey’s Christians against their masters. He soon decided to extricate himself by returning the hard-won Azov to Turkey in the Treaty of Pruth of 1711.

Peter could now concentrate on the north, where his army was already active in acquiring new territories on the Baltic. War with Sweden finally ended in 1721. In the Treaty of Nystadt, Peter obtained more than what he had hoped for when he first went to war against Sweden in 1700. In addition to the territories now known as Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, Russia annexed Ingria and part of Karelia with the strategic Viborg.

Peter’s success in foreign affairs was not confined to his acquisitions from Sweden. His efforts to establish links with China would result in the Treaty of Kiakhta in 1727, establishing important trade links with Beijing. He encouraged further exploration of Siberia and obtained, from Persia, territory along the Caspian Sea, including the important Port of Baku.

His efforts to modernize Russia, which initially appeared haphazard and were often undertaken more to facilitate his war efforts than with a clear vision to change Russian society, finally began to take shape toward the latter part of his reign. While his efforts to force the Russians to surrender their beards and traditional long dresses had only a limited impact, steps taken to develop industry and simplify the Russian language (making it possible to translate a large number of European scientific works into Russian) had lasting positive results.
One of Peter’s most interesting and effective innovations was the creation of a table of ranks. Providing for fourteen categories in a hierarchical order for all officials, including officers in the military, this device enabled Peter to reward individuals of non-noble background, even allowing them to become nobles. In this manner, without abolishing the institution of serfdom, he was able to secure for the empire the services of all its talented subjects, regardless of their social status.

A very important administrative reform, undertaken in 1711 when he was away fighting Turkey, also proved lasting: So the work of the government could continue in his absence, Peter created a senate to supervise all judicial and administrative functions. Its head, the ober-procurator, served as the direct agent of the czar, a kind of modern prime minister. In 1717, Peter created colleges for such governmental functions and branches as foreign affairs, finance, and the navy. Again, Peter’s reform resembled a modern institution, this time the modern ministries of parliamentary governments. He also made significant but less successful attempts to restructure local government.

Although the church in Russia had gradually come under the control of Muscovite rulers since the days of the Mongolian rule, it was still led by a patriarch who could attempt to undermine the czar’s wishes. Peter wanted to abolish that anomaly, and in line with the model of state-church relations existing in the German Lutheran states, he wanted the state’s absolute primacy over the church. When Patriarch Adrian died in 1700, Peter decided not to appoint a replacement. After intense personal interest and painstaking work over a number of years, he decided in 1721 to create a synod of members of the Orthodox clergy to replace the office of the patriarch and to be headed by a lay official: The church administration almost became a function of the government.

**Significance**

A man of inexhaustible energy and determination, Peter the Great succeeded, in a span of only a quarter of a century, in fulfilling all of his ambitions on the Baltic. Russia now came to replace Sweden as a great European power. Flopan Prokopavich, Peter’s adviser on church affairs, in his funeral oration was not amiss when he said that Peter had “found but little strength” in Russia but succeeded in making its “power strong like a rock and diamond.” On the territory he won from Sweden, he built his new capital as a living symbol of his orientation toward the West, and even today it stands as one of the most beautiful cities of Europe.

While there is hardly any dispute regarding the significance of his accomplishment in creating a modern army and navy and his remarkable military victories made possible by them, the nature and impact of his reforms aroused much controversy in his own time. Even in the later period, when the problems of change and modernization still concerned the Russians, Peter aroused both deep hatred and admiration, as, for example, in the bitter debate between the Slavophiles and the Westernizers in the nineteenth century. Peter’s policies raised a fundamental question: Which path should Russia take in order to modernize itself and create a better society and political system?

In one respect, though, Peter followed the old Russian tradition. He did not hesitate to use maximum force, as was the case in his treatment of the rebellious streltsy, in order to suppress
the opposition. He remains the only Russian ruler who did not even hesitate in torturing and eventually causing the death of his only son, Czarevitch Alexis. In his total dedication to the welfare of his country, he also remains one of the earliest examples of an enlightened despot. Russia, in a fundamental way, was a country transformed when Peter died in 1725.

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