

Use this reading to complete part V

Peter the Great

Peter was his father's youngest son and the child of his second wife, neither of which promised great things. Tsar Alexis also had three children by his first wife: Feodor, an invalid; Sophia; and Ivan, a semi-imbecile. When Alexis died in 1676 Feodor became Tsar, but his poor constitution brought an early death in 1682. The family of Peter's mother succeeded in having him chosen over Ivan to be Tsar, and the ten year-old boy was brought from his childhood home at the country estate of Kolomenskoe to the Kremlin.

No sooner was he established, however, than Ivan's family struck back. Gaining the support of the Kremlin Guard, they launched a coup d'etat, and Peter was forced to endure the horrible sight of his supporters and family members being thrown from the top of the grand Red Stair of the Faceted Palace onto the raised pikes of the Guard. The outcome of the coup was a joint Tsar-ship, with both Peter and Ivan placed under the regency of Ivan's elder and not exactly impartial sister Sophia. Peter had not enjoyed his stay in Moscow, a city he would dislike for the rest of his life.

With Sophia in control, Peter was sent back to Kolomenskoe. It was soon noticed that he possessed a penchant for war games, including especially military drill and siegecraft. He became acquainted with a small community of European soldiers, from whom he learned Western European tactics and strategy. Remarkably, neither Sophia nor the Kremlin Guard found this suggestive. In 1689, just as Peter was to come of age, Sophia attempted another coup--this time, however, she was defeated and confined to Novodevichiy Convent. Six years later Ivan died, leaving Peter in sole possession of the throne. Rather than taking up residence and rule in Moscow, his response was to embark on a Grand Tour of Europe. He spent about two years there, not only meeting monarchs and conducting diplomacy but also traveling incognito and even working as a ship's carpenter in Holland. He amassed a considerable body of knowledge on western European industrial techniques and state administration, and became determined to modernize the Russian state and to westernize its society.

In 1698, still on tour, Peter received news of yet another rebellion by the Kremlin Guard, instigated by Sophia despite her confinement to Novodevichiy. He returned without any sense of humor, decisively defeating the guard with his own European-drilled units, ordering a mass execution of the surviving rebels, and then hanging the bodies outside Sophia's convent window. She apparently went mad. The following day Peter began his program to recreate Russia in the image of Western Europe by personally clipping off the beards of his nobles.

Peter's return to Russia and assumption of personal rule hit the country like a hurricane. He banned traditional Muscovite dress for all men, introduced military conscription, established technical schools, replaced the church patriarchy with a holy synod answerable to himself, simplified the alphabet, tried to improve the manners of the court, changed the calendar, changed his title from Tsar to Emperor, and introduced a hundred other reforms, restrictions, and novelties (all of which convinced the conservative clergy that he was the antichrist). In 1703 he embarked on the most dramatic of his reforms--the decision to transfer the capital from Moscow to a new city to be built from scratch on the Gulf of Finland. Over the next nine years, at tremendous human and material cost, St. Petersburg was created.

Peter generated considerable opposition during his reign, not only from the conservative clergy but also from the nobility, who were understandably rather attached to the status quo. One of the most notable critics of his policies was his own son Alexis, who naturally enough became the focus of oppositional intrigue. In fact, Alexis seemed to desire no such position, and in 1716 he fled to Vienna after renouncing his right to the succession. Having never had much occasion to trust in others, Peter suspected that Alexis had in fact fled in order to rally foreign backing. After persuading him to return, Peter had his son arrested and tried for treason. In 1718 he was sentenced to death, but died before the execution from wounds sustained during torture.

Peter himself died in 1725, and he remains one of the most controversial figures in Russian history. Although he was deeply committed to making Russia a powerful new member of modern Europe, it is questionable whether his reforms resulted in significant improvements to the lives of his subjects. Certainly he modernized Russia's military and its administrative structure, but both of these reforms were financed at the expense of the peasantry, who were increasingly forced into serfdom. After Peter's death Russia went through a great number of rulers in a distressingly short time, none of whom had much of an opportunity to leave a lasting impression. Many of Peter's reforms failed to take root in Russia, and it was not until the reign of Catherine the Great that his desire to make Russia into a great European power was in fact achieved.

Catherine the Great

On December 25, 1761, Peter III, a grandson of Peter the Great, was crowned Tsar. Peter was thirty-four, dissolute, and imperceptive. He was accompanied by his wife Catherine, a year younger but far more mature, not dissolute but also no puritan. The couple had been married for eighteen years. Both had been newcomers to the Russian court as teens, and for a few years after their marriage they had been on friendly terms. By 1762, however, their relationship had long since been in name only. Peter had grown into a fool, while Catherine had become a complete success, respected as much for her intellect as for her winning personality. Although the court atmosphere in which they lived was much more cosmopolitan than that inhabited by their royal predecessors, politics was as always a deadly serious pursuit--and everyone knew that Catherine was the more capable politician.

By the following summer the conflict between Peter and Catherine had become quite serious. In only six months of rule, he had managed to offend and outrage virtually the entire court by diplomatic bumbblings and large segments of the population through his hostility to the church and his evident disdain for Russia. Support for Catherine was widespread, and Peter was suspicious. Early on the morning of June 28, Catherine left her estate at Peterhof, outside of St. Petersburg, and departed for the city. Everything had been prepared in advance, and when she arrived she was greeted with cheers by both the troops of her factional supporters and the populace. By the next morning, Peter was confronted with the fact that all wanted his wife to rule--and a prepared declaration of his abdication. A week later, he was dead.

Catherine went on to become the most powerful sovereign in Europe. She continued Peter the Great's reforms of the Russian state, further increasing central control over the provinces. Her skill as a diplomat, in an era that produced many extraordinary diplomats, was remarkable. Russia's influence in European affairs, as well as its territory in Eastern and Central Europe, were increased and expanded. Catherine was also an enthusiastic patron of the arts. She built and founded the Hermitage Museum, commissioned buildings all over Russia, founded academies, journals, and libraries, and corresponded with the French philosophers, including Voltaire, Diderot, and d'Alembert. Although Catherine did in fact have many lovers, some of them trusted advisors and confidants, stories alleging her to have had an excessive sexual appetite are unfounded.

With the onset of the French Revolution, Catherine became strikingly conservative and increasingly hostile to criticism of her policies. From 1789 until her death, she reversed many of the liberal reforms of her early reign. One notable effect of this reversal was that, like Peter the Great, Catherine ultimately contributed to the increasingly distressing state of the peasantry in Russia.

When Catherine the Great died in 1796, she was succeeded by her son Paul I. Catherine never really liked Paul, and her feelings were reciprocated by her son. Paul's reign lasted only five years and was by all accounts a complete disaster. His most notable legacy is the remarkable and tragic Engineer's Castle in St. Petersburg. Paul was succeeded by his son Alexander I, who is remembered mostly for having been the ruler of Russia during Napoleon Bonaparte's epic Russian Campaign.

