

# Peter the great— russian reformer essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The difference of opinions voiced by both the commentators, from the late 18th century, has yet to be resolved to this day.

A minority of historians hold that his liberal reforms in Russia were mostly for the sake of earning the respect of the powers of Western Europe and claim that his despotism outweighs any reforms he made. A greater majority of historians agree that Peter the Great was a despot, but argue that while Peter's progressive reforms (as will be discussed below) had little effect during his reign, they created a firm foundation for the advancement of Russia and defined its future. Peter I (only known as Peter the Great in the latter part of his life) was born on June 9, 1672 to Nataliya Naryshkina, the second wife of tsar Alexei I as one of the tsar's two living sons. Being the son of the tsar's second wife had an enormous impact on Peter's growing up.

Tsar Alexei died when Peter was 4 years old. Peter's half brother, Fyodor III, was named the king but died childless within 6 years without naming an heir. In days after his death, a rebellion broke out concerning the succession of the throne. Fyodor's half brother, Ivan V was next in the blood line to be the king.

However, he was mentally handicapped so that he would not be able to perform the functions of a king. Because of that, many boyars called for Peter (only 10 years old at this time) to be named the king. However, the relatives of Maria Miloslavskaya (the tsar Alexei's first wife) wanted Ivan V to be the king, since they hoped to keep the royal power in their family. This prompted a war between the Boyars of the Duma, who preferred Peter to be

the king), and the Streltsy, members of an elite military corps who backed the Miloslavsky family.

During the conflict many of those with royal connections died. The conflict took place in front of Peter who, more than once, was forced to witness the murder of his relatives. Witnessing the spilling of blood in so early an age took a mental affect. The effect on him would clearly be evident in his cruelties during his reign as the Emperor of Russia. Eventually, the warring factions came to a compromise: Peter I and Ivan V were named the joint rulers of Russia, but since both of them were incapable of handling the State, Sophia Aleksevna, Peter's half sister and a Miloslav, was named the de-facto ruler until Peter was of a more mature age. During Sophia's " reign," Peter traveled to Western Europe for education.

He traveled to various nations, notably Germany, Holland, and Britain, where he studied military and shipbuilding with great curiosity. He continued his travels for a few years, returned to Russia in 1689 and married Eudoxia Lopukhina. By this time, Russia was on the verge of breaking apart. Sophia Aleksevna along with her " chief minister", Pyotr Golitsin had enacted several unpopular measures relating to the suppression of the conservatives of Russian Orthodox Church and starting a disastrous with the Crimean Tartars. Assessing the state of affairs and supported by his mother, Peter decided to assume direct control of Russia.

However, Sophia Aleksevna refused step down from her role as the regent and conspired with the Streltsy to kill Peter. However, the Streltys, who deeply resented her policies, double-crossed her and informed Peter of

Sophia's plans. Peter was able to gain the support of several boyars and managed to overthrow Sophia. However, Peter somewhat unwilling to rule Russia at the age of 17, allowed his mother Nataliya Naryshkina to make important state decisions. He assumed complete control of Russia only when Nataliya Naryshkina died in 1694.

In 1694, when Peter truly took power, he sought to make Russia an imperial power. During that period, Britain was having success expanding its empire thanks to its impressive navy. Peter tried to emulate that by building a navy for Russia—which was literally non-existent. However, he faced a problem: Russia (at the time) only had access to seaports in its north.

However, during the winter these seaports were inaccessible due to the sea freezing and Sweden controlled the Norwegian Sea, which was the only way ships from Archangelsk (the main sea port) could get into the Atlantic Ocean. In search of a warm water port, Peter decided to capture a port on the Black Sea. However, the area around the black sea was firmly controlled by the Ottoman Empire along with several tribes of Tartar. In 1696, he launched river-sailing ships down the river Don and captured the Ottoman fort Azov and promptly took over a port nearby, Taganrog. Realizing that the Ottomans would make attempts to recapture the fort, Peter traveled to Western Europe along with several advisers to seek the help of western nations. His caravan was referred to as the " Great Embassy.

" The " Great Embassy" was a complete failure in one sense. France was an ally of the Ottoman Empire. Austria declined because of nationalist

movements in its colonies in Italy and Greece. Britain was concerned about the imminent civil war in Spain and refused to be bothered by the Ottomans.

While, the embassy was a failure in this sense, it impressed Peter of the advancement of the West. During the journey he visited gun factories (in Germany), docks (in Netherlands and Britain), and centers of social culture (in France and Austria) to learn about western technology and culture. While Peter was traveling, Sophia Aleksevna re-gathered her supporters (primarily the Streltsy old guard) and attempted to take over the crown. Hearing of the rebelling, Peter rushed home and easily crushed the rebellion. Twelve hundred of the Streltsy were executed by quartering and Sophia was forced into being a nun in a convent. After crushing the rebellion, he stayed in Russia fearing that there would be more rebellions.

Once he retook the throne, he enacted his first progressive law (and a shocking one at that): all boyars were required to cut their beards or keep their beard and pay taxes for it. The law was greeted with surprise and anger by the boyars, who viewed their bushy beard as a sign of respect and nobility. Several boyars dared to ignore the law and paid the price for it: several of Peter's agents kidnapped them, sheared their beards, and let them go free. As word of Peter's seriousness got out, many of the boyars agreed to cut their beards. Peter also enacted a law that banned traditional Muscovite dress—instead everyone had to wear western style shirts and pants.

He also abolished the Russian Calendar and adopted the Julian calendar. His reforms enraged many people, one of them being his wife (who had bore him

one living child, Alexei). In response, he divorced her and sent her to a monastery to be a nun. Among these reforms were others that were aimed to strengthening the domestic infrastructure of Russia.

For example, he launched a massive campaign to educate the Russian youth. In 1701, Peter unveiled the School of Navigation and Maths in Moscow, run by instructors imported from Britain. A School of Medicine and a School of Engineering was established in 1707 and 1712 respectively. The point of building schools was to educate the Russian youth so that they would be more indispensable to the nation. Many of the graduates from the schools often went into the Russian army or the navy.

A smarter military, Peter reportedly said, equates to a better army. He also attempted to reform the economy. Like many of the western nations, he adopted the policy of mercantilism. However, Russia had little success with the policy since it did not have colonies or at least areas which produced a vast variety of products. While it was not successful in areas such as agriculture, it did jump start various parts of the economy—primarily the factories.

The fledgling factories that had sprouted up in eastern Russia were constantly fed with metals and minerals, enabling it to produce a vast variety of products. This prompted a great change in the infrastructure of Russia: new bridges were being built, tracks were being laid for train to rumble through, and the military was better equipped thanks to the new-state-of-the-art rifles. However, the increasing success and modernization of Russia made Peter more aggressive in expanding the borders of Russia. In

1700, a war (later dubbed the Great Northern War) started between Poland and Sweden over the succession of the Polish king. Taking advantage of Poland's and Sweden's preoccupation with their war, Peter seized the provinces of Estonia and Latvia thereby encroaching on Swedish territory. Peter had two reasons to seize the two provinces: 1) he wanted a war with Sweden, so if he defeated them, he could gain control of the Baltic Sea, 2) it gave Russia more land and more ports for trading.

In order to secure these provinces, Peter decided to build a fort nearby and he built what is now known as Saint Petersburg. Due to the war, the city was built with haste, which led to many of the workers dying. The fort was completed in 1703. While the city was meant to be a military installation, Peter also envisioned it to be a " Gateway to the West. If he could possibly defeat Sweden and take control of the Baltic, then St. Petersburg would literally be Russia's lone gateway to the west.

However, Peter was never able to completely defeat Sweden. While Russia's army and navy had several spectacular victories, the Swedish military was able to fend off the Russian invasion while successfully defeating Poland. In 1721, Peter, tired of the war, was forced to sign the Treaty of Nystad with Sweden. Russia surrendered most of its possessions in Finland to Sweden and was allowed to keep Estonia and Latvia. The peace treaty effectively ended any Russian expansion to the West.

However, Russia continued to expand over the unclaimed areas in the East until 1744. Soon after the war, at the urging of his advisers, Peter took the title " Emperor of all Russias" and was now Peter " the Great" instead of

Peter After the Great Northern War, Peter the Great did not attempt many other notable reforms other than imposing heavy taxes for the funding of the government. He continued to govern until the winter of 1725, when he was stricken by a bladder disease when (as legend holds) he dashed into cold water in an attempt to rescue people in a sinking boat. Palace physicians performed surgery on him, but, nevertheless, Peter the Great died.

Thus ended the reign of a man who had single handedly reshaped Russia and redefined its future. The building of St. Petersburg is perhaps the only physical legacy that Peter left behind that evidences western influence. The design of the city was planned before it was built—as it was the norm in Western Europe. Furthermore, it was planned for the future, that is, it was laid out so that it could serve multiple purposes.

For example, many of the roads within the city are abnormally wide (compared to the roads of other European cities). The wide roads were to facilitate the movement of troops and carriages during wartime and they also served as a venue for parades during times of celebration. However, today, the wide roads have been taken advantage of by Fate to serve as efficient routes for motorized vehicles. The design of the city, while showing off its beauty, also showcased several modern advances such as better sanitation systems (underground sewers) and hospitals (with a wide variety of doctors and surgeons)<sup>4</sup>. The genius and elegance of its planning made it an exemplar of city design, which many cities attempted to emulate. While the planning and design of St.



Petersburg was striking, so was the death toll due to it. Thousands of peasants died in an effort to build this city that was to be inhabited by the rich. Peter knew that building a city in an unsuitable location would cost Russia many human lives, nevertheless, he disregarded the loss of serf lives (despite opposition of his advisers) and continued to the building of the city. In order to build Petersburg and wage his wars, Peter levied heavy taxes on almost every product imaginable. While this provided funds for the government, it heavily burdened the serfs who were poor anyways. The taxing caused the gap between the rich and the poor grow wider as serfs were made poorer by the taxing.

Furthermore, much of the Russian army consisted of serfs who were sent by their masters to serve in their stead. The heavy casualties of the wars required many of the serfs to move from the farms to the battlefield. Thus, due to the lack of human resources, serfs were not as productive as they were with all their man power. Serfs often kept a small portion of the food they produced.

However, with the heavy taxing, the little food that they were allowed to keep was lessened so much that the population of Russian serfs decreased dramatically. The true industrialization of Russia did not begin until the late 1800s. However, the foundation was laid during Peter's rule in the early 1800s. Thanks to its vast natural resources, Russia was able to lay its foundations quite speedily. However, the need for workers triggered a serf migration from the rural areas to urban areas.

This further exacerbated the agriculture problem faced by the nation: the lack of human resources. The initial success of the industrialization made Peter headstrong and aggressive, leading to the Great Northern War. As little good ever comes out of a war, little good came out of the Great Northern War. Russia lost critical resources due to the war such as the fishing seas of Finland and thousands of human lives, but gained other resources such as access to the Baltic Sea which put Russia in direct contact with the West and revived its maritime trading business.

The Westernization in many ways was beneficial to Russia. For one, the adoption of Western culture put Russia in a fairly equal footing with the Imperial nations of the West (i. e. Britain, France, etc. ). Russia, doing so, was able to forge strong diplomatic ties with the West.

This, in a way, saved them from being colonized by the Western nations since the imperial powers preyed on countries that were technologically backward. This was a rather ingenious move considering the frequent political struggles in Russian history. On the flip side, the Westernization of Russia included the suppression of traditional values. Russia transformed from being a nation with a distinct cultural identity to one that was merely a cheap duplicate of the culture of the west. Luckily, for the most part, many of the Russians preserved their culture while adopting some aspects of the Western culture.