

Russian state essay sample



By 1462 the Moscow State, which has just overthrown Tatars sovereignty, was not larger than the European part of the modern Russia. By 1500 however it already possessed huge territories in Siberia and Asia and was geopolitically identical to that of the XIX and XX centuries. Modern Russia's big territory is among its major advantages. The history of Russia is to a large extent a history of geographical expansion.

For the most part that's true about Moscovian monarchs before 1500. The exploration of the Siberia by Ermak and struggle against the Tatars were on the agenda. After both tasks were successfully accomplished, Moscovian great princes (later, since 1547 – Tzars) considered the improvement of state and centralization of power.

The XVI century meant much in this regard. Marked by the rule of Ivan IV the Terrible, it was a time of bloody struggle in many dimensions. Ivan IV had several principal enemies: nobles and clerics within the country and strong European states on its borders. Using extremely cruel methods, he successfully fought both. His rule was famous for the so-called “ oprichnina”, a system of land distribution that created a state within state – a special regime was created to ensure Tzar's control over his military. With the help of the latter he managed to suppress inner opposition of any kind. It was Ivan IV who made despotism a reality of Russian political tradition for centuries.

External success was not so impressive. The Moscow state continued its offense against the tatars as a result of which Kazan was conquered in 1552. On the other hand a conflict with Sweden was far less successful due to

technological and economical advantages of the latter. Expansion to the West was stopped.

Subsequent period is characterized by unstable political situation in the country. Self-claimed monarchs were too dependent on foreign military aid (primarily on that of Poland), too weak to fight opposition and too little legitimate to continue expansion and strengthening of the state. The next important period starts with the new dynasty of Tzars – the Romanovs, whose rule started in 1613. Almost immediately – in 1617 – the long-lasting conflict with Sweden was ended with Stolbov peace agreement. That was the eve of the Thirty-Years War, in which Moscow State took a very limited part. But that conflict was of some significance for future history of Russia.

First, Poland was among those who lost the war. The weakening of a big and once powerful Polish state had led to a growth of Sweden and the Moscow State. Conflicts between those two became more severe and now it was almost about regional domination. Weakening of Polish power had also an impact on relations between Poles and Ukrainians within the state itself. Created once to unite Polish, Lithuanian and Ukrainian territories, Polish state gradually became unable to do that effectively. The national rebels, first of all that by Ukrainians, have effectively changed the situation in the region. After a number of successive campaigns in 1648 a Ukrainian State was formed on the territories of modern Central Ukraine.

The international situation was rather complicated which made the new state seek for allies. After the end of Thirty Years War there were several regional powers to play that role. Among them are Sweden, Ottoman Empire and the

Moscow State. After a period of hesitation, Ukrainians had chosen The Moscow State to offer them a strategic alliance. That alliance of 1654 had long-lasting consequences. Gradually independence of Ukraine was lost (although some of hetmans continued struggle up the first half of the XVIII century) and Russian influence expanded significantly westward.

After doing so, the Moscow State found itself in more close relations with European States, in particular with Sweden. The enlarged state with growing economy needed trade routes – a common desire of the times. For that end, in particular for trading wheat, furs and whatever with German states, steps were taken to acquire an access to the sea. In the North that had to be the Black Sea, while in the South Moscovites needed to strengthen their strategic positions against Ottoman Empire, their future long-standing foe, by creating bases on the the of Azov and on the Black Sea.

Both tasks were accomplished by Peter I the Great. A Tzar who is famous for founding a new capital of St.-Petersburg in 1703 was also an initiator of vast reforms in Moscow State itself. Formal part of it included renaming a state into Russian Empire in 1721.

After spending some time in the Western Europe Peter I was determined to modernize Russian political and economic systems. It was done by authoritarian methods and led to a further consolidation of Tzar's power. From now on the Emperor had unlimited power both over legislation and executive bodies as well as over the Church. New European-style capital was a contrast to much less European political system (one should take into

account that Peter was primarily visiting Holland, Britain and Germany, whose political systems were in many regards opposite to that of Russia).

A long war against Sweden was initiated to solve Russia's main external problem. It lasted for 21 years (1700-21) and during that time a new Russian military emerged. The first stage of war was overwhelmingly won by the Sweeds, after battle at Narva. Russian army was completely defeated and Swedish had moved into Ukraine. Peter faced a difficult situation, with was also complicated by the fact that Ukrainian hetman Ivan Mazepa took a chance on weaking his dependence on Russian monarch and joined Carl XII of Sweden.

After some considerable reforms and enlargement, Russian army has defeated the Sweeds at Poltava in 1708, which was the decisive battle of the war. Subsequent withdrawal of the Sweeds opened a way for Russian to achieve their objectives on the Baltic sea. A peace signed in 1721 reflected those changes – Russia has become a big Baltic state. Sweden lost its hegemony and after several unsuccessful attempts to regain it in the XVIII century, had limited impact on European affairs.

Peter had also advanced in the South, capturing some territories at the Azov. They were fortified and formed a basis for further offensive up to the capture of the Crimean peninsula by Catherine II the Great in 1775.

Long lasting rule of Peter I turned Russia into a big European power. Now it had interests far outside its western borders and was able to influence major European issues. It had also become strong enough to compete with Ottoman Empire and that constituted another long-lasting conflict which was

on the agenda of Russian foreign policy till the very beginning of the World War I.

After a period of instability and favoritism, which followed the death of Peter in 1727, his daughter, Elizabeth came to power in 1741 after a coup. Some 20 years of her rule were marked by two tendencies: 1) the deepening of a social crisis in the state; and 2) the rise of Russian influence in Europe. The first was primarily the result of unresolved “ rural” problem. Peasants in Russia, who constituted majority of population, were held in limits of feudal order, having no property and no freedom at all. Growing polarization of society, growing demands for money which was the result of developing relations with the European economies, led for an increased pressure on peasants. Big uprisals and rebels marked the rule of Elizabeth and since that time the problem was only worsening up to the law on abolition of serfdom in 1861.

Russian foreign policy was active and quite successful. For quite a long time it was built upon a strategic Alliance with England and Austria to balance that of France and Prussia as well as to deter Turkish initiatives. On the eve of the Seven Years War something had significantly changed. Russian traditional ally, England, was siding Prussia for its seven-years attempt to fight against a coalition of Russia, France and Austria. As a result of that Russia was involved into a conflict which was not so hard to win: Prussian king Frederick II was facing a much bigger military force than he himself had. British help was limited and primarily financial as their primary attention focused on Northern American territories. After winning several of campaigns, Frederick still found himself in a very difficult circumstances,

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much due to Russian participation in war. Especially difficult it was for him in 1760-62 when he lost Eastern Prussia and even had to withdraw from Berlin. Russian offensive was in the move but at this moment Elizabeth died, saving Prussian monarch.

Her nephew, Peter III, was a son of a Schlezwig prince and a fan and a personal friend of Frederick II of Prussia. Among his few decisions there was the one to stop the war against Prussia, to return all territories captured and furthermore to offer Frederick II military help. All that was not for a long, since Peter III was soon overthrown and killed by the initiative of his wife, princess of Angalt-Zerbst and future Russian Empress Katherine II the Great.

Katherine's rule was long and successful. She tried to address some key problems facing Russia in inner politics. Economic and social problems were not resolved but the further consolidation of power gave an opportunity to suppress opposition as it happened during large-scale rebel headed by Pugachev. Katherine II also managed to gain success in foreign politics. She strengthened Russian positions in the South and annexed the Crimean peninsula.

Unlike his mother, Katherine's son Pavel I, who was the Emperor in 1795-1801, had no desire to put much effort into social problems. Marked by several demonstrative reforms, mainly in military sphere, his initiatives were mainly concentrated on "making appearance". The instance may be his decision to fight Napoleon in Italy or to take a position of Master of Malta Knight Order. Apparently Pavel I was killed by the order of his son, Alexander.

The latter became soon known as Alexander I, Russian greatest liberal and a man who defeated Napoleon. Foreign affairs were undoubtedly the most important problem for the first 15 years in power for Alexander I. Napoleonic wars constituted a serious threat for Russia. With virtually all Europe conquered, Napoleon endangered both economic and political interests of Russian state. Alexander's response was peace and alliance initiatives. Two monarchs signed a Treaty of Tilsit, dividing "spheres of influence" in Europe, but soon Napoleon launched an offensive against Russia. The war of 1812 saw the capture of Moscow, Russian former capital, and subsequent withdrawal of French forces. Russian army triumphantly entered Paris at the head of coalition forces to secure for Alexander I a leading position at the Congress of Vienna.

Apart from solving foreign policy tasks, Alexander also was determined to change something in the country. That was reasoned partly by the struggle against Napoleon which was won due to high patriotism of common people, and partly by liberal ideology promoted by Napoleon himself. Alexander could have been influenced by the ideas which were hostile to him by the very nature of Russian state. His projects aimed at elaborating constitution were unrealistic, but for some time he seemed to be sincere about that idea. After all that ended by creating a Holy Alliance aimed at preserving existing ideology "by international means". As all monarchs witnessed ideology was a powerful weapon to be afraid of. Alexander's plans for reforms ended with no practical results.

But there were some results "in theory", which was proved by subsequent organizations of different kinds of plots aiming at political transformation.

The most important of them were “ Dekabristy”, a group of high nobles and officers who planned to raise an uprising and to make a Tzar sign a constitutional document limiting his power. The plan was to be carried out during the coronation of Alexander’s brother who was to become a new Emperor after his death – Nickolay I.

It proved to be impossible. On the very first day of his reign Nickolay proved to be much less liberal than his brother. The following 30 years clearly demonstrated that. Nickolay’s politics is considered to be one of the most cruel and reactionist. He supported oppression of all liberal initiatives by all means. He did that both at home and in Europe, while helping under Holy Alliance to suppress revolutions in Germany in 1848-9. Nickolay’s policy was possible partly because of economic development in Russia with the rising investment, building of infrastructure and so forth.

But his rule was also marked by a huge defeat in foreign policy. Russia lost the Southern (Crimean) War of 1853-56, which considerably reduced its influence and demonstrated shortcomings in military organizations and technological development. A period of isolation ended only at the time of Alexander II.

This Tzar was called Liberator mainly because he abolished serfdom in 1861. But he may also be labeled this way as the one who ended isolation of Russian state in the European international relations. Long lasting limitations imposed on Russia by the Paris Treaty of 1856, were finally over, although the price was high – Russian neutrality in Franco-Prussian war of 1871 which led to unification of Germany.

With Alexander's assassination in March 1881 the period of reforms ended; the period of reaction started with Alexander III. It ended up in 35 years by one of the bloodiest civil wars in history.