

History of peter the great of russia history essay



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Peter the Great, a giant of a man, starting his reign over Russia at a young age, almost single handedly moved Russia from a medieval, isolated culture to be a major European power. He developed a modern military and created a navy. Peter was able to move his society towards a European culture by the force of his will. But much of his reforms were against the grain and tradition of the Russian people; they did not want to be like Europe and viewed the Europeans as heathen and heretics to the Russian Orthodox faith. Even so, Peter forced Russia onto the European stage and his successors kept her there, although never at quite the level as under Peter. Peter also built his cities and his factories on the backs of peasant labor; future Tsars continued to abuse the peasants so that eventually, when given a chance many years later they would rise up and smash the Empire their slave labor built.

Peter Alexeyevich Romanov was born May 30, 1672 deep within the walls of Moscow's Kremlin fortress in the Terem Palace. His father was Tsar Alexis of Russia and his mother, Alexis' second wife, was named Natalya. He was a large baby and would grow to be a huge man, about 6'8," with large appetites and ambition; he was named Peter after the Apostle Peter of the Bible. Unfortunately, his father died when Peter was only four years old. Peter's brother, Feodor, became Tsar. But Feodor was weak and sickly and so the empire was basically managed by Artamon Matveev until Feodor died just six years later when Peter was ten years old. Matveev was one of Peter's tutors and mentors and also head of the Nariyshkin family. Peter had another older brother, Ivan and a sister Sophia, both part of the Miloslavsky family through their mother who died before Tsar Alexis married Peter's mother, a

Nariyshkin. The Russian Council of Nobles, the Boyar Duma, chose Peter to be the new Tsar, since Ivan was sickly and retarded; the choice was ratified by the people. But Sophia and her family lead a coup with the help of the Streltsy, an elite army unit that served as the Kremlin's guard, that prevailed; Peter was forced to watch some of his men and friends killed. Ivan and Peter were now co-rulers and Sophia was the regent. In order to protect herself, Peter's mother fled and Peter soon followed her to an estate outside Moscow. Peter rarely went into Moscow leaving the running of the government to Sophia and her ministers, but when he was in Moscow, he and Ivan held public court with Sophie sitting in behind them (a hole was cut out of the throne chair for her) giving advice and making decisions.

Even though co-ruler Peter basically grew up out of Moscow where he played soldier and learned to sail. In fact he developed a lifelong passion for sailing and the sea during his childhood when he restored an old boat and then learned to sail it. He also developed his play mates into play armies that marched up and down and had mock battles. Many of these play soldiers grew up to be the core of Peter's future army. His country home was close to the foreign colony and Peter often walked over to meet the people and to learn trades and skills; several of these new friends became leaders in his military and government later on. He whetted his appetite for European ways and knowledge and skills at this time and learned some of their languages.

As he turned 17, Nataliya arranged a marriage for her son, but the marriage was a failure, and later, when all powerful, Peter annulled it and had his wife join to a convent as a nun. At this time Peter began to move against Sophia, but she conspired with the Streltsy to assassinate Peter; but he was

forewarned by the same Streltsy and fled to the monastery of Troitsky. There he gathered together an army and moved against Moscow and Sophie. Peter prevailed and Sophie was forced to give up her titles and retire to a convent. But since he was still a minor, his mother held power until she died in 1694. Peter then became defacto leader although his brother didn't die until 1696. At age 24 Peter became Tsar of all Russia.

Peter the Great believed from the outset of his reign that Russia was going to lose place in the world if could not make several changes; he basically spent the rest of his life working on these reforms. The reforms or changes included: the development of a standing army; the development of a navy for both military and trade purposes; the development of safe sea passage to both the North and the South; internal changes in Russian society and Russian culture; the development of an efficient and knowledgeable central government bureaucracy; and greater communication and rapport with Europe. Peter's reforms were the heart of his reign and very important to Russia; Peter moved Russia into the mainstream of European history and increased the wealth of Russia. However, Peter's style was often crude or rough or even cruel. Many of his reforms conflicted with the traditional Russian Orthodox Church and the traditional nobility, but Peter was relentless and forceful; but some of his reforms did not outlast his life or lasted for only a few years after his death. One of his sons was caught up in the conflict caused by his reforms and lost his life to his father's wrath and tortures. Even as a youth his friendships rubbed the Church and the traditionalists the wrong way particular since his foreign colony friends were often Roman Catholic or Protestant. But to Peter the Europeans seemed

more scientific, more sophisticated and more civilized than his Russian friends, even though the Russians considered the foreigners to be heretics.

So early on he sought to open a port to the South by annexing the port of Azov from the Turks on the Black sea. While still a co-regent in 1665 he had tried to capture Azov from the Turks by land, but was unsuccessful. The campaign against Azov was lead by three generals, two whom he met in the foreign colony; Peter made himself a common soldier and went along on the campaign. But after 14 weeks of futile siege he returned home to build a better army and try again. He also set about to build a navy and came back with about 30 ships in 1696 and was able to capture the town. Immediately he began to build a navy on the Black Sea and sent ministers into Europe to gain expertise and artisans. In 1698 he founded the first Russian Navy base, Taganrog. Peter had a lifelong love and interest in ships and sailing. As noted, he loved to sail himself. He developed the navy with passion. He wanted experts from around the world to build and master his ships; he even worked at shipbuilding himself. He required all Russians to have a boat and to sail, but sailing was considered an oddity and unbecoming to the land locked Russian soul; most people resisted his demands, but everybody did have even a little dingy when he forced them. But to be safe to the South, Russia needed more than a few ships and one town. Russia needed to contain Turkish power and contest with Turkey for territory. Russia needed allies. Since Peter wanted to turn to Europe anyway and wanted European expertise for most of his reforms, he decided to tour Europe and recruit allies for his ambition against the Turks. Very early in his career, in 1697, he

assembled a large number of experts, nobles and bureaucrats to join him on a two year tour of Europe that they called The Embassy.

The Embassy lasted about 18 months from March of 1698, and during that time Peter toured Sweden, Prussia, and German states, Holland, England, Austria, Saxony and Poland. Curiously he tried to disguise himself as a nobleman, Peter Mikhailov. The Europeans were amused by his height, calloused hands and unskilled ball room dancing, but enjoyed him for his cheerfulness and eagerness to learn their culture and skills. He visited with writers, artists, sculptors, physicians, dentists, politicians and philosophers, trying to learn as much about Europe as he could. He spent four months in a Dutch shipyard even working on a ship himself as a laborer that was later delivered to him. While in Holland he often lived in common housing, once even in a village hut, that later made a shrine for Napoleon, who admired Peter. He spent another four months in England and befriended the Bishop Bennett who hoped he might return to Russia to lead a protestant reformation, but who also was surprised that he was Tsar at all given Peter's homespun, rough personality. He met with navy and military leaders. He learned about city building and modern construction techniques. He personally studied geometry, botany, physics, dentistry, astronomy and architecture. His visits with the Protestants in England were severely criticized by the Russian Orthodox Church. However, he came away from Europe without a treaty to target the Ottoman Turks, but he also came away with awe for European technology and culture. He wanted to take home as much of that culture and technology as he could and sent caravans of materials back to Moscow. His argument to his detractors was that his intent

was to learn from the Europeans so that later he could return to conquer the heretics.

His European tour was cut short by a revolt of the Streltsy, but by the time he had returned to Moscow the revolt had been suppressed and the soldiers met him on bended knee to ask forgiveness. But he used this revolt and their move to return Sophia to power to remove the Streltsy; about 1000 were executed, some by Peter personally, and the rest disbanded. He also used the revolt and his return from Europe to initiate some of his changes. His reforms were both internal and external. Many of them were considered irreligious since the Russian culture was so entwined with the Russian Orthodox Church. In fact Peter intended to reform the Orthodox Church itself. In 1700 he did not replace the Patriarch of Moscow but instead the Patriarch Coadjutor was allowed to discharge the duties of the Patriarch. In order to encourage young men to join the army or the bureaucracy he prohibited men from joining a monastery before age 30, although few men actually even lived past 50. Both priest and layman thought a beard was a sign of holiness and piety and in fact the Patriarch Adrian had condemned the shaving of the beard as unpatriotic and heretical. Peter legislated against beards to the great shock of the population. Beards were taxed in order to encourage their removal; some men preserved their shorn beards so that they could face God with their beard after death. He also took on traditional Russian dress. He cut off the long sleeves of his army officer's uniforms. In 1700 he ordered all officials and nobles to adopt Western European dress. Anybody coming into Moscow or going out had to pay a fine if they were in traditionally Russian dress and their clothes were cut to the new length.

Apparently the woman went along more readily than the men. Women in fact he moved to higher and more public stature across Russia. He encouraged women to travel, to come to parties, to remove their veils, to dance and make music and to get an education. He forbade arranged marriages unless the couple consented. The Church protested his social changes and pointed out that the illegitimacy rate went up some. Although most Orthodox priests went along with the social changes, particularly since Peter did not try to change their theology, some tried to resist him. The Dissenters urged the people to disobey the new edicts and not to pay the taxes nor change their dress and beards. But he stamped out Church dissent as ruthlessly as he did the Streltsy with death and banishment, although the Church fathers were generally left alone, even the Dissenters, if they did not engage in politics.

Peter's reforms were deeper than dress and appearance. He also moved to restructure the social order of Russia. He substituted the State for the Church. He not only lessened the influence of the Orthodox Church, but he also allowed free worship by Roman Catholics and Protestants. St Petersburg had Calvinist, Lutheran and Catholic churches. He protected most Catholic monks although he disallowed the Jesuits for their aggressiveness. The Orthodox Church had established a calendar thought to have gone back to the creation of man (or the world) with a New Year in September; Peter changed it to match the West with the Roman Julian calendar with its New Year in January. However, by that time most of the West was using the Gregorian calendar, although of Roman Catholic origin. But the Gregorian calendar also removed ten days from the Julian calendar and these days coincided with the ten most Holy Saints days in the Orthodox Church. Even

Peter the Great could not remove those holy days. He also worked to change the Russian alphabet to suit the business class and printing; the new alphabet used the Greek form. Peter ordered that all books be printed in the new alphabet and then went about to bring in printing presses to start newspapers and libraries. He also sought to bring the Nobility under more government control. He created a new nobility from the army, the navy and the bureaucracy. Social rank was more oriented to service rather than to birth or land holdings. A Senate was appointed by the Tsar of only nine men, later increased to 20. The 12 governors of the provinces reported to the Senate as did the councils that ruled the major cities; city councilors could only be merchants or professionals although the electorate also consisted of teachers and craftsmen. The wage earners and adorers could not vote. But all taxpayers could take part in town meetings. A major chore for the council was tax collection and later poll tax collection. The bureaucracy was divided into 9 colleges or departments for taxation and revenue, expenditure, audit and control, commerce, industry, foreign relations, war, navy and law.

The largest Russian reforms Peter undertook were of the military and of the economy. Shortly after his early loss to the Turks, he began to reform the army and even more so after returning from the Embassy. Beyond his own forces the Russian army was composed of the Stretlsi, foreign mercenaries and units organized by noblemen officers often using their private soldiers or peasants. Peter moved to remove all of them. He developed a standing army of up to 210, 000 men through conscription of the peasants by taking one man from each of twenty peasant households. They were loyal to the Tsar and the government and not to a corps or individual officer. He dressed them

in uniforms and made them drill and learn Western war tactics. The peasants were forced to serve for life. He also added 100, 00 Cossacks to form a new elite corps. Much of the equipment was imported from Europe until Russia could develop its own factories. The officers were promoted from the ground up from among the ranks and not from nobility, although noblemen could compete for position. As far as Peter was concerned a modern efficient and effective army was key to developing Russia and opening up access to the South and holding the North. He also needed a navy if Russia were to keep trade routes open north or south. He brought in sailors, officers and craftsmen from Europe to help develop the new navy. Using all sorts of water access places he built all around Russia over eight hundred new ships and 48 large men-of-war ships. He was able to man the navy with 28, 000 sailors. But unfortunately his grand navy was not well built; the ships broke apart and the beams rotted prematurely and much of the navy disappeared after his death.

Economic reform was crucial to paying for and maintaining the new military. And so Peter had to create industry in Russia. Traditionally Russia had an agrarian culture and economy blessed with natural resources such as iron, timber and water. But exporting commodities and paying for industrial goods could only lead to subjugation by other States. Peter did help to make agriculture more efficient and productive, but concentrated on developing industry. To promote agriculture he stopped the burning of forests for fertilizer, he introduced new crops and livestock breeding. But he took the serfs off the farm and put them into the army and the factory. He made mine owners rich in order to encourage them to expand. He brought in European

mangers to organize, build and run factories. Textiles and shoe manufacturing were forced on the people and they were forbidden to wear foreign textiles; eventually even silks were made in Russia. He helped to develop 233 new factories; often the government would start the factory and then sell it to private business men with state subsidies. However, in order to provide revenue beyond taxation the government continue to own monopolies in salt, tobacco, tar, fats, potash, resin, glue, rhubarb, caviar and oak coffins until they were abolished after the Great Northern War. Tariffs protected the local industries from foreign competition. The workers were conscripted from the farms and had to be trained; unfortunately, a permanent industrial serfdom developed. He raised the status of merchants to encourage commerce for the buying and selling of the new industrial goods. He developed a series of canals to facilitate transport of raw materials to factory and finished goods to market.

With growing and successful industry and commerce Peter then moved to extract revenue from the new system for his military. At one point about 75% of all tax went to support the military. The tax authority of the bureaucracy was large and devised new ways to tax and to collect tax. They taxed all kinds of things from hats to rooms and chimneys. The tax structure also contributed to poverty; furthermore many of the peasants were not well paid or not paid at all, which also lead to more poverty. As taxes rose so did corruption and cheating. Corporal punishment did little to stop the corruption and so eventually the beatings and hangings for corruption were stopped.

The key achievement of Peter the Great, the action that captured the Spirit of his reforms the most, was the building of St Petersburg. He built the city in <https://assignbuster.com/history-of-peter-the-great-of-russia-history-essay/>

new territory captured from Sweden, so it could be near the Baltic, serve as a port, but also be Westward of Moscow, as if it were Russia's "window on the West." St Petersburg was a kind of defiance to the established Russian order to build a new city that would eventually be his capital; it was a physical symbol of his reforms and his determination to make them work and endure. St Petersburg was defiant of the Church, of the Kremlin, of the Nobility and of Russia's tradition. His dress codes were strictly enforced in the new city. All the nobles' buildings had to be of stone and stone as a building material was proscribed elsewhere in Russia to make sure there was enough supply for St Petersburg. He eventually moved the government to St. Petersburg, named after his patron saint, St Peter, not Peter himself. First he forced lesser nobility to move with their families, then merchants and their families and finally the Senate and most of the nobility. Because it was on water, it was designed to be like Amsterdam with rivers and canals; pilings were used to raise buildings out of the marsh and mud. About 200,000 peasants were conscripted to build the city; thousands died. Swedish prisoners were also used as workers and many of them died. Lacking wheelbarrows the workers carried all equipment and materials by hand. Peter himself built a modest house of wood on the Dutch model, but built several summer palaces to the south and one for his new wife, Catherine. He made it his capital in 1707 to the disgust and fury of much of Russia and particularly Moscow. The Russians did not like the climate there and the proximity to the sea. They resisted the change and returned the capital to Moscow as soon as they could (but not until 1917). The Church complained that it was too close to Europe and half-heathen as Peter had also encouraged religious freedom in St Petersburg with the construction of

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Protestant churches. Peter wanted his capital to be a major port and a base for the Northern Fleet and a center of European trade; however it was icebound at least five months of the year.

Peter's reforms were never popular in Russia. The peasants were wrenched from their homes and families to build St Petersburg or work in factories; wages were low and taxes raised; poverty increased so that beggars on the city streets became common and crime became violent and common place. Even the peasants did not like the West and did not want to be Westernized. They mistrusted the Tsar for visiting with foreigners and bringing heathen ideas into Russia. Unfortunately Peter's successors did little to change the life of the peasant so that over time they became eager for Revolution and joined in the Revolution that did come in 1917. But the nobles hated him for forced service and for rising up the business class to their level. The churchmen hated him maybe be more than all the rest. They called him the Beast of the Book of Revelation in the Bible who had made the Church the servant of the State. Revolts broke out but the people were afraid of his cruelty so that after 1707 the Empire was mostly at peace. His reforms also lead to tragedy in his own family. His heir Alexis grew up to hate his father, although Peter intended to pass him the Empire. Alexis grew up loving books and the Church. He was not a man of action like his father. He did not like travel, war or bloodshed. He was like his mother, not his father. While Peter built St Petersburg, Alexis stayed in Moscow and became close to the Orthodox priests. He came to hate his father and even his Confessor said that all people wished for Peter's death. But Peter sent him to the German states to study and there he married a German princess Charlotte; but she

would not give up her Lutheran faith and Alexis came to hate her, taking on mistresses. In fact he went to see his new born child with a prostitute in tow. His life style degenerated into debauchery and drunkenness after his wife's death in childbirth. His father demanded he either support Peter and take up government work or retire to be a monk. Alexis gave up his rights to the Empire and fled to Europe to hide from his father, but Peter found him and offered him sanctuary back at home. But on his return Alexis was arrested after the confession of his mistress that Alexis rejoiced at each rebellion and intended to undo his father's reforms once he was Tsar. Alexis was tortured probably even by his father and died in prison. Catherine's children all died before Peter so that Peter died without an heir. On his deathbed he was said to say or write " I pass the Empire to..." and died without the ending ever being known.

Peter the Great's reforms changed Russia and along with that the world. Russia was always a large land mass and of course on the border of Europe. But Russia was only occasionally involved in European affairs before Peter. Even in his time the Russians in general considered themselves the people of the land and peoples of Asia. Since Russia has a much longer border with Asia and the Indian subcontinent, that is where the Russian peoples felt the most affinity. Even though the Vikings settled into Russian territory and may have even founded Moscow, the Russians still had affinity with Asia. So moving Russia closer to Europe was a very important achievement of Peter's. Russian involvement with Europe has continued to be important to this very day. Russia was involved in the wars of the Seventeen Hundreds and Eighteen hundreds - the War of Austrian Succession, , the Seven Years

War, and the Polish-German-Austrian wars. Russia was a major player in the Napoleonic wars when Napoleon like Sweden's Charles XII before him attacked Russia only to be defeated by severe weather, a scorched earth policy and unmanageable supply lines. And even later Hitler's Germany did the same thing. Russia was a magnet for European Empire Builders, and Peter the Great started most of it. Peter has encouraged and increased flow of information, materials and ideas between Russia and Europe. Peter's Russia also became important trade partners for Europe, trade that persevered even after Peter although somewhat less.

Russia resisted Peter's reforms and even reversed some of them after his death. But St Petersburg remains; an effective Army remains; access to the Baltic remains; Western styles remain, at least from Moscow westward; a business class remains; and trade and commerce with Europe remains - in the modern era Europe even depends on Russia for much of its energy and raw materials. Eventually, Russia would probably have moved parallel with Europe even without Tsar Peter, but there is doubt of the impact at the time of what Peter did in Russia. Ironically, the greatest change or impact on history of what Peter did may have been in the distant future. What Peter started with the Army, the middle class and the peasants, had direct impact on the future of Russia. Peter moved the peasants into the army and into factories and kept them subservient; his successors did the same. Eventually these peasants' descendents would provide the manpower for the Russian Revolution and its eventual turn to Communism and expansionism under the banner of the Soviet Union.

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