

Absolutism in Russia

Russia from the 15th to the 17th Century

The Russian state developed in the 15th and 16th centuries from various principalities* which had liberated themselves from the rule of the Mongols.* The ruler of one of them – the Grand Duke* of Moscow – managed to add more principalities and to create a centralized state. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, he was regarded as the successor of the Byzantine emperors and called himself
5 czar* (from the Russian word for *Caesar*).

Ivan the Terrible* became czar in 1547. He expanded the territories of Russia to the east as he had found westward expansion blocked by the powerful Swedish and Polish states. He formed new trading connections for example exchanging furs with English merchants from a port on the River Narva* built to overcome Russia's isolation from sea trade.

10 Ivan was also successful in securing the sovereignty of the czar against opposing forces inside Russia. He fought against the boyars*, assassinating some of them and restricting their right to hold land if they refused to serve him in his military campaigns and at his court. He also introduced the first laws obliging peasants to stay on their lords' land, a restriction which would eventually lead to serfdom.*

15 In the 16th and 17th century, Russia was an agrarian state with only a few scattered towns whose population was controlled by an upper class of landed aristocracy. Merchants could not move freely without a permit from the government in Moscow. All this prevented the formation of an autonomous middle class. Thus, not only trade and industry, but education as well, was only poorly developed, e. g. there were no universities in Russia until 1755. The czars opposed western influence with the help of
20 the Orthodox Church until the reign of Peter the Great* who accelerated the process of westernization.

Peter the Great

Peter was born in 1672. After his brother's death, Peter became the czar of Russia. He was the first Russian ruler to go on an educational trip to the West. In 1697, he travelled incognito to Europe where he not only visited manufactures, barracks, and schools, interviewed scientists and technicians, but even worked in a shipyard for four months. After his return in 1698, he was determined to modernize
25 his country to make Russia a great power.

Peter's first priorities were his army and the Russian navy. He employed Europeans and Russians as officers in his army, whereas the enlisted men were peasants who had to serve for 25 years. Thus, he created a standing army which comprised 300,000 men at the end of his reign. The Russian navy was founded in 1696, but not until after the Czar's trip to the West did the Russians possess the necessary
30 knowledge to build strong, seagoing ships. British specialists helped to build a fleet in the Baltic Sea* that was more powerful than the Swedish and the Danish forces.

The fleet was put to a test when Peter sought dominance over the Baltic Sea in the Great Northern War.* The Baltic Sea had been controlled by Sweden which was opposed by the states on its borders, such as Denmark or Lithuania. After the Battle of Narva,* the Swedish king decided to concentrate his
35 forces against the Poles and the Lithuanians, allowing Peter to start building Saint Petersburg as his window to the west. The construction of this city cost the lives of many peasants due to poor sanitary

conditions and extremely hard work. There were harsh punishments for workers who tried to escape from the construction site. Despite all these problems, the city was finished during Peter's reign.

Nevertheless, he managed to continue his wars, and, after several battles and defeats, the Russians and their allies were able to drive the Swedish king into exile. In 1721, the Treaty of Nystad finally ended the war against Sweden. Russia obtained Estonia* and more lands near Saint Petersburg which had become the Russian capital in 1714. Russia also gained access to a warm-water-port at the Black Sea for easier trading with the western part of Europe and now dominated the Baltic Sea. Soon after the peace treaty, Peter was acclaimed "Emperor of All Russia" and recognized by some of his fellow monarchs such as the Prussian king Frederick William I and Augustus II of Poland.

Before this success, Peter had to overcome obstacles inside his own country. First, he fought back the influence of the Church. The Russian Orthodox Church had been led by the Patriarch of Moscow since 1453. During the reign of Peter the Great, Patriarch Adrian had been an outspoken critic of Peter's reforms. The czar favored the idea of a national church under his authority as supreme bishop. He argued that a council of several clergymen would be more appropriate to govern the church than a single patriarch, so the Patriarchate was abolished after Patriarch Adrian's death in 1700 and the Holy Synod* created in 1721, consisting of clergymen and laymen. It was led by a layman who represented the interests of the czar and secured his effective domination of the church.

A famous woodcut shows Peter's efforts to modernize Russia which affected even the private lives of the Russians. He introduced Western customs, practices, and manners to Russia and therefore demanded a book of etiquette to teach Western manners. Peter also wanted to change the outer appearance of his subjects, so he had their beards shaved and their long coats cut off at the knees. This reform was enforced by Peter himself at his court and by barbers and tailors at town gates where everyone who left or entered was subject to this treatment. In other respects the punishment for not obeying the czar was even more severe: Old Believers* who didn't accept the church reform were executed.



Image 1: Cutting the beard of an "old believer", 17th century caricature.

The reforms of Peter the Great were not only unpopular, but also expensive. The czar needed money for his army and navy which cost about 80 per cent of the money the state earned. Therefore, Peter adopted a mercantilistic* approach; he tried to increase exports and to become less dependent on imports. At the same time, he wanted to exploit Russia's resources like the iron mines in the Urals.* But his need for money was too great and he finally raised taxes, burdening the peasants even more.

Conclusion

Peter's reforms turned Russia into a great military power and into an important member of the European state system, but his attempt to modernize Russia was not completely successful. Only the upper classes embraced Western culture, while the masses of the Russian people rejected Western civilization because they had to pay for the reforms and they were forced into modernization. Their situation had become even worse than before. They had to pay a poll tax, whereas the nobility did not have to. In many respects, Peter the Great was a typical absolute monarch who did not care about his subjects, but on the other hand he introduced Russia into the European power system. Peter died in

75 1725, leaving behind some unanswered questions, such as his succession,* or Russia's relation to the West. However, he had laid the foundations for a modern state in Russia.

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