

The Reforms of Peter I of Russia

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Peter I was tsar of Russia from 1682 until 1725. He introduced significant changes in the practice and policy of nearly every aspect of the Russian state and is generally seen as having reformed Russian society. His was a practical rather than an ideological revolution though; Peter's real contribution to Russia was the implementation of his reforms, often inspired more by practical necessity than by idealism. Such concrete action and Peter's incorporation of contemporary European theory and practice into Russian affairs contributed in large part to Russia's modernization and her integration into Europe's economic and political systems.

When Peter came to power as a child, Russia was in an unstable state of disorganization. Co-tsar with his step-brother Ivan and marginalized by his step-sister Sophia who was acting as regent, Peter felt threatened by the Streltsi, Russia's riotous royal musketeers who had already murdered several of Peter's supporters.¹ He fled with his mother to Preobrazhensky, but he could not be given a tsarevich's usual education there and he spent his childhood fascinated by military affairs. Peter assembled a mock army of manservants and nobles' sons and relentlessly pushed them through military drills, even constructing elaborate fortifications to defend and attack. Because of his distrust of the Streltsi and the poor state of the Russian army, Peter recruited German officers to train his troops. He began building ships and running naval training exercises, also under foreign leadership as Russia had no navy to speak of.² He was keenly interested in technology, mathematics, and other contemporary developments for improving military performance.

As Peter continued to drill his forces at Preobrazhensky, they gradually developed into a real military force with personal loyalty to Peter. In 1689, a plot spearheaded by Sophia to

1 Voltaire. *Russia Under Peter the Great*, translated by M.F.O. Jenkins (Toronto: Associated University Presses, Inc., 1983), 74-5.

2 Peter's youth and the development of the Russian army and navy are described in Voltaire, 84-5 and Klyuchevsky, Vasili. *Peter the Great*, translated by Liliana Archibald (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1961), 8-15.

have Peter killed was foiled and Sophia was sent to a convent. Peter's mother Natalia became regent and Peter's authority was at last uncontested.³ He continued experimenting with new military techniques and weaponry, and in 1696 both branches of his military defeated the Turkish forces at Azov, gaining Peter a port on the Black Sea.⁴

Although he had gathered around him foreign experts in many fields who were living in Russia, Peter wanted to learn military crafts directly from European masters, so in 1697 he departed for a tour of Europe, disguised as a member of a Russian diplomatic mission. He studied carpentry in Holland and naval architecture in England, and was amazed by the efficiency and precision of Europe's factories and workshops.⁵ Peter was eager to apply his new knowledge to Russia's military, but had first to deal with a Streltsi revolt which forced him to return early from his tour in 1698. The army had already put down the revolt, which was supported by conservative boyars and Old Believers, by the time Peter arrived in Moscow, but he disbanded the Streltsi and had many of its leaders killed to discourage further revolt⁶. The incident further steeled Peter against traditional Russian customs; he forced the clergy to take an oath of allegiance to himself and introduced legislation forcing Russian nobles to adopt European social customs.⁷

Russia was slow to respond to Peter's constant push for military improvement. In spite of his foreign officers and training exercises, Peter suffered a crushing defeat to Sweden at Narva in which much equipment was lost and many Russian soldiers deserted the army in their flight from the battlefield.⁸ In the South, he was forced by the Turks to abandon his fleet at Azov, as well as the harbour and shipyard that he had been constructing there.⁹ The Russian army was clearly unprepared for war with powerful modern states. Peter therefore

3 Voltaire, 79. Klyuchevsky, 16-7.

4 Voltaire, 89.

5 Voltaire, 95. Klyuchevsky, 26-8.

6 Voltaire, 99. Cracraft, James. *The Revolution of Peter the Great*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 33.

7 Voltaire, 101 and 103.

8 Voltaire, 107. Klyuchevsky, 62-3(?).

9 Klyuchevsky, 60-1.

increased recruitment, allowing peasants and serfs to serve in the Russian military for the first time. He brought in more foreign officers and developed domestic industry to provide armaments and other necessities of war for the army and navy.¹⁰

These improvements paid off: Peter was able first to cut off the invading Swedes' supply lines at Lesnaya, and then to win a major army victory over them at Poltava. He pushed forward the advantage this gave him, expelling the Swedish forces from both Russia and Poland. In 1714 his navy all but destroyed the Swedish fleet at Hängo, establishing Russian naval dominance on the Baltic Sea and giving Russia ownership over the valuable northern ports.¹¹ Although the Northern War dragged on until 1721, these battles paved the way to Russian victory and gave Peter control over the war's direction.

The requirements of an army and navy at war as well as Peter's determination to improve Russia's general economy prompted him to begin a process of significant economic reform. This reform required a more efficient civil service to administer, which in turn demanded a better educational system to provide competent administrators and bureaucrats. Thus Peter's military buildup led to a program of reform which encompassed all aspects of the state. Many of the measures taken by Peter in the early part of his reign were conceived and implemented haphazardly; not until his later years did Peter's reforms begin to show signs of coherence and planning.¹² In fact, because many of his changes were implemented on so large a scale, their real effects were often not apparent until after Peter's death.

To financially support his growing military and its constant warring, Peter reformed especially two aspects of Russia's economy: he manipulated the taxation system and the social hierarchy to ensure sufficient revenues to support the military, and he supported and

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 79. Voltaire, 111.

¹¹ Voltaire, 139, 144-5. Klyuchevsky, 67, 60, 71. Stevens, Carol B. "Modernizing the Military: Peter the Great and Military Reform". In *Modernizing Muscovy: Reform and Social Change in Seventeenth-Century Russia*, Jarmo Kotilaine and Marshall Poe, eds., 247-262 (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 255.

¹² Klyuchevsky, 74-6 describes the mutual dependence of Peter's reform programs and their gradual cohesion. Cracraft, 58 agrees that most of Peter's reforms were motivated by military demands.

extended Russia's fledgling manufacturing industries to reduce trade dependence on foreign powers and thus protect revenues by shrinking the trade deficit. Peter, lacking the well-rounded education typically given to future tsars due to his tumultuous childhood, was generally a poor financial administrator who failed to predict his policies' effects on the populace.¹³ He hired merchants to act as "projectors" and "revenue-finders", charged with devising new taxes to be levied. Taxes were applied to such things as facial hair and traditional dress; these absurdities only angered the population and impelled Russians to evade taxation.¹⁴ Peter debased the currency in 1700, causing rampant inflation.¹⁵ In spite of ever-increasing taxes and financial tricks, though, Russia's military still consumed all available revenue.

To reduce foreign trade dependence, Peter turned in part to Russia's emerging merchant class, and also to foreign merchants operating in Russia as there was a severe domestic shortage of both capital and expertise. Companies were often created with foreign experts leading a Russian workforce.¹⁶ He extended the practice of using state monopolies to develop industries, using such monopolies to expand the mining operations in the Urals and to establish factories producing armaments and textiles for the military, as well as some luxury items for the nobility. He made conditions ideal for industrialists: Russian manufacturing ventures received handsome financial backing from the state and labour costs were minimal: state-dependent peasants were assigned to work in various factories, and factory owners could buy up entire villages of peasants to gain a labour force. Serfdom in Russia was expanded from agriculture to industry as merchants became landowners.¹⁷

Peter's attempts to raise money for his military were hindered by the Russian

¹³ Klyuchevsky, 43, 53, 157.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 159-64.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 140-2, 145-6. Anisimov, Evgenii V. *The Reforms of Peter the Great: Progress through Coercion in Russia*, translated by John T. Alexander (New York: M.E. Sharp, 1993), 73-4.

¹⁷ Falkus, M.E. "The Beginnings of Industrialization". In *Peter the Great Transforms Russia*, ed. James Cracraft, 115-120 (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Co., 1991), 116, 118-9.

landowners' tendency to underestimate the number of serfs and peasants on their land.¹⁸ (This number was directly related to the amount of tax they would pay). To combat such tax evasion, Peter in 1717 introduced the so-called "soul tax", demanded that a more accurate census be taken, and combined several classes of peasants and serfs into a single taxation group. The soul tax was applied to every person rather than every household as was customary; tax collectors and bureaucrats did not understand the tsar's new policies, and greedy landowners used the vestiges of medieval Russian society to pass their losses onto the peasantry so that the peasants and serfs, already overworked to support Peter's wars, had further financial and service obligations thrust upon them. As the new universal tax was uniformly applied to workers, children, and the elderly, a family's few working members were expected to pay tax for those relatives unable to work due to age or infirmity.¹⁹

Rampant corruption in the government exacerbated the inequitable taxation. It was accepted practice for civil servants to steal a portion of any government revenues passing through their office, so eliminating corruption and promoting efficient work serving Russia's best interests became the two main tenets of Peter's administrative reform.²⁰ He tried to transform the Russian government, managed for so long as a patronage machine, into a meritocracy where not only wealthy aristocrats, but any capable peasant could rise through the civil service ranks. To facilitate this transformation, Peter decreed that any soldier who was made an officer became a member of the aristocracy, and he introduced a "Table of Ranks" in 1722, codifying the various ranks one might attain in the army, navy, and civil service. Service in one of these bodies was made mandatory for every noble.²¹ Peter created some social flexibility while formalizing the government's structure to reduce the arbitrary granting of offices that characterized the old system.

18 Klyuchevsky, 113-4, 115-7.

19 Klyuchevsky, 169-70. Bushkovitch, Paul. *Peter the Great*. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2001), 151-2.

20 Cracraft, 62.

21 *Ibid.*, 35. Bushkovitch, 152. Klyuchevsky, 100-1.

Realizing that his preoccupation with military affairs left him unable to properly manage Russia's finances, Peter decentralized the taxation system. He divided Russia into 9 provinces between 1707 and 1711, with each province further divided into regions called *dolia* which each paid the same amount of tax. Financial administration was also decentralized so that taxes collected locally were to be used for local projects.²² Confusion amongst the provincial administrators as to who had authority over which jurisdiction, though, and the reluctance of the provincial nobility to form supervisory bodies led to infighting and slow progress. Corruption continued at a provincial level and Peter was without any means of detecting it since there was no centralized organization overseeing the Provincial governors.²³

To counteract this continuing corruption, Peter gave the Senate greater authority over Russia. It managed the day-to-day affairs of law and order while Peter traveled around Russia dealing with military matters.²⁴ However, the Senate itself was rife with corruption, and Peter established a number of "fiscal" posts, spreading a network of administrative watchdogs throughout the civil service. These informants were especially protected by Peter as they were often commoners willing to report the Senators' activities and were thus universally despised by traditional civil servants.²⁵ So adamant was Peter that corruption be stamped out that he encouraged all Russians to act as government informants, offering as a prize any property confiscated as a result of a guilty verdict. Even these measures proved insufficient, though; Russia's bureaucracy was filled with incompetent administrators, and accurate record-keeping was impossible due to provincial and municipal misreporting.²⁶

In 1718, Peter embarked on a more fundamental administrative reform, adopting the collegiate system used in countries such as Sweden. Several colleges were established, each

22 Klyuchevsky, 192-3, 196, 191.

23 *Ibid.*, 202.

24 *Ibid.*, 203.

25 *Ibid.*, 206-7.

26 *Ibid.*, 208-9.

under the authority of a committee rather than a single bureaucrat.²⁷ Each college was responsible for a particular area of governance (for example, the army, the navy, trade and commerce, etc.) and worked in conjunction with provincial college branches. The colleges took control of many of the affairs previously handled by the Senate, and Peter hoped that this separation of power would reduce corruption. Because there were so few qualified Russian administrators, Peter typically recruited foreigners for leadership positions at the Colleges. He gained by these appointments both competent administration and a means by which Russians could be trained in the skills needed by a modern civil service.²⁸ Peter extended this Colleges' committee-based principles to municipal governments as well: urban taxpayers were expected to form trade associations and various municipal councils responsible for a town's local affairs, and although these councils were slow to produce results because of the upper class' reticence to abandon their traditional ways of managing society, they are clearly a move toward a more modern governmental system.²⁹ Even the Russian church was organized along conciliar lines when Peter replaced the traditional Patriarchate with a Synod council under his authority, effectively making himself head of the church.³⁰

Peter also relied on foreign influence for his education programme. He had early on established mandatory training schools for seamen and soldiers under the tutelage of foreign officers, and he frequently sent young Russian men abroad to study such trades as carpentry and shipbuilding with European masters, as well as enticing foreigners with generous grants to establish and teach their trades in Russia.³¹ This foreign education applied to all aspects of Russian life: military, administrative, manufacturing, and even agricultural practices were

27 Stevens, 260. Cracraft, 34. Klyuchevsky, 209-10.

28 Klyuchevsky, 214, 210-1, 241-2.

29 *Ibid.*, 232-4.

30 Kartashev, A.A. "Church Reform". In *Peter the Great Changes Russia*, Marc Raeff, ed. (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath and Co., 1972), 103. Bushkovitch, 151. Cracraft, 62.

31 Cracraft, 34. Falkus, 118.

infused by Peter with foreign technology and theory. In 1724, Peter established the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg; more books, often trade manuals or other educational material, were published in Russia during Peter's reign than in the previous 150 years.³² Peter was dedicated to improving the general welfare of Russian society and used foreign expertise however he could to help catch Russia up to the leading European powers.

Although many Petrine reforms helped lead the way to a modern Russian state, many of his projects were, at best, misguided, and, at worst, disastrous. Many thousands of peasants were killed during the construction of St. Petersburg and the abortive canal system he planned to build between the Baltic, Black, and Caspian Seas.³³ The new taxation system was incomprehensible and peasants were overtaxed and overworked to provide for Peter's constant warfare. His wars were often poorly managed and the Northern War in particular was protracted far longer than it need have been.³⁴ Although he attempted to compile a new code of laws and to complete an accurate census, both projects failed during his lifetime. He was despised by many Russians for apparently abandoning traditional Russian customs and there were several revolts during his reign.³⁵ Abroad and in Russia, his reckless behaviour at social gatherings led many to speculate that he was not fit to rule.³⁶

On the whole though, Peter is generally seen as one of Russia's greatest leaders, and his reign provides a convenient line dividing medieval from modern Russia. His reforms of all aspects of the government, although not bound together by some grand scheme, were designed by necessity to support each other and dramatically improved the quantity and quality of Russian industry. His military victories and extensive foreign travels gave Russia a place in European politics, and the emergence of Russia as a trading nation gave her a place in the European economy. By exploiting innovations abroad and bringing them to Russia,

32 Cracraft, 62, 97-8.

33 Voltaire, 112. Klyuchevsky, 61, 69.

34 Voltaire, 235. Stevens, 253. Klyuchevsky, 71.

35 Cracraft 115-7, 122-3 summarizes some of these revolts.

36 *Ibid.*, 127-8. Klyuchevsky, 28-30.

Peter rapidly transformed his state from an isolated Eastern empire to a prominent European monarchy, and his reforms had a long-lasting impact on Russian society.

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