

## Russia and the West in the Eighteenth Century

After two centuries of Mongol rule ended in the late 1400s, Russia embarked on a period of remarkable expansion in which the tsars consolidated their control of European Russia, then extended their authority eastward across the Urals into Siberia. By the 1630s Russia stretched all the way to the Pacific and was the largest nation in the world.

Russia's western border, however, remained insecure. The Livonian War (1558-1582), involving Poland and Sweden, resulted in territorial losses, and during the period of political breakdown known as the Time of Troubles (1604-1613), Poland and Sweden sent armies deep into Russian territory. In 1612 the Russians drove out the invaders, and for the next several decades the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) diverted European rulers from Russian adventures. The Turks remained a threat, however, and in the late 1600s the Poles and the Swedes resumed their pressure.

Russia's inability to translate its enormous size into military victories against the Ottomans, Poles, and Swedes underscored the extent to which Russia lagged behind the states to its south and west in almost every activity that affects state power. Manufacturing was negligible, commerce was limited to small amounts of trade in amber, furs, and timber, and agricultural productivity was constrained by long Russian winters and inefficiencies inherent in a rural order based on the labor of serfs. With little economic development and an ineffective system of tax collection, Russia lacked the resources to match the weaponry and training of its rivals' armies. In the 1600s Russia seemed destined to exist in a state of permanent military and technological inferiority to the nations of Europe to the west and Persia and the Ottoman Empire to the south.

How to respond to their nation's perceived vulnerability and weakness deeply divided the Russian people in the eighteenth century. Some Russians, most notably Tsar Peter 1, also known as Peter the Great (r. 1682-1725), advocated a range of strategies and actions that came to be known as Westernization. Peter and his supporters were convinced that Russia could pull itself out of its backwardness only by adopting the institutions, customs, and attitudes of the technologically superior, wealthier, and ostensibly more successful nations of Western Europe. Inevitably, this would mean discarding much of Russia's distinctive past, but in Peter's view Russia had no choice. Many Russians disagreed. They treasured Russia's uniqueness and believed that in certain respects their country was superior to the nations of Western Europe. These lovers of Russia's Slavic traditions (later known as Slavophiles) argued that abandonment of Russia's past was too high a price to pay for Europeanization.

Variations of Russia's Westernizer-Slavophile debate later appeared among many peoples of Asia and Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As Europeans forced themselves into their lives, these people too had to ask themselves how willing they were, if at all, to abandon cultural and religious traditions for the lure of Western science, military power, and material gain. They, like the Russians, would find no easy answer to this question.

### Peter the Great's Blueprint for Russia

#### *Peter the Great*, EDICTS AND DECREES

*Peter the Great stands out as one of history's most significant figures during the past 300 years. This remarkable ruler developed an interest in Western Europe when as a boy he spent hours smoking and drinking in the German quarter, the Moscow district where visiting Europeans resided. His fascination grew in 1697 and 1698 during his visit to Western Europe, where Dutch and British commerce and naval technology especially impressed him.*

*But the urgency of Peter's efforts to Europeanize Russia indicates that he was motivated more by his sense of Russia's military vulnerability than a personal admiration of things European. The onset of the Great Northern War (1700-1721) with Sweden, especially Russia's early defeat at the Battle of Narva, spurred him into action. With characteristic energy and single-mindedness he embarked on a campaign to transform Russia, issuing in the next twenty-five years no fewer than 3,000 decrees on everything from the structure of government to male shaving habits. Several examples are included here.*



## LEARNING FROM EUROPE

### *(Decree on the New Calendar {1699})*

It is known to His Majesty that not only many European Christian lands, but also Slavic nations which are in total accord with our Eastern Orthodox Church ... agree to count their years from the eighth day after the birth of Christ, that is from the first day of January, and not from the creation of the world,' because of the many difficulties and discrepancies of this reckoning. It is now the year 1699 from the birth of Christ, and from the first of January will begin both the new year 1700 and a new century; and so His Majesty has ordered, as a good and useful measure, that from now on time will be reckoned in government offices and dates be noted on documents and property deeds, starting from the first of January 1700. And to celebrate this good undertaking and the new century ... in the sovereign city of Moscow ... let the reputable citizens arrange decorations of pine, fir, and juniper trees and boughs along the busiest main streets and by the houses of eminent church and lay persons of rank.... Poorer persons should place at least one shrub or bough on their gates or on their house.... Also,... as a sign of rejoicing, wishes for the new year and century will be exchanged, and the following will be organized: when fireworks are lit and guns fired on the great Red Square, let the boyars,' the Lords of the Palace, of the Chamber, and the Council, and the eminent personages of Court, Army, and Merchant ranks, each in his own grounds, fire three times from small guns, if they have any, or from muskets and other small arms, and shoot some rockets into the air.

### *(Decree on the Invitation of Foreigners {1702})*

Since our accession to the throne all our efforts and intentions have tended to govern this realm in such a way that all of our subjects should, through our care for the general good, become more and more prosperous. For this end we have always tried to maintain internal order, to defend the state against invasion, and in every possible way to improve and to extend trade. With this purpose we have been compelled to make some necessary and salutary changes in the administration, in order that our subjects might more easily gain a knowledge of matters of which they were before ignorant, and become more skillful in their commercial relations. We have therefore given orders, made dispositions, and founded institutions indispensable for increasing our trade with foreigners, and shall do the same in the future. Nevertheless we fear that matters are not in such a good condition as we desire, and that our subjects cannot in perfect quietness enjoy the fruits of our labors, and we have therefore considered still other means to protect our frontier from the invasion of the enemy, and to preserve the rights and privileges of our State, and the general peace of all Christians....

To attain these worthy aims, we have endeavored to improve our military forces, which are the protection of our State, so that our troops may consist of well-drilled men, maintained in perfect order and discipline. In order to obtain greater improvement in this respect, and to encourage foreigners, who are able to assist us in this way, as well as artisans profitable to the State, to come in numbers to our country, we have issued this manifesto, and have ordered printed copies of it to be sent throughout Europe.... And as in our residence of Moscow, the free exercise of religion of all other sects, although not agreeing with our church, is already allowed, so shall this be hereby confirmed anew in such manner that we, by the power granted to us by the Almighty, shall exercise no compulsion over the consciences of men, and shall gladly allow every Christian to care for his own salvation at his own risk.

### *(An Instruction to Russian Students Abroad Studying Navigation {1714})*

1. Learn how to draw plans and charts and how to use the compass and other naval indicators.
2. Learn how to navigate a vessel in battle as well as in a simple maneuver, and learn how to use all appropriate tools and instruments; namely, sails, ropes, and oars, and the like matters, on row boats and other vessels.
3. Discover ... how to put ships to sea during a naval battle .... Obtain from foreign naval officers written statements, bearing their signatures and seals, of how adequately you are prepared for naval duties.
4. If, upon his return, anyone wishes to receive from the Tsar greater favors, he should learn, in addition to the above enumerated instructions, how to construct those vessels [aboard] which he would like to demonstrate his skills.
5. Upon his return to Moscow, every foreign trained Russian should bring with him at his own expense, for which he will later be reimbursed, at least two experienced masters of naval science. They the returnees will be assigned soldiers, one soldier per returnee, to teach them what they have learned abroad....

## CREATING A NEW RUSSIAN

### *(Decree on Western Dress {1701})*

Western dress shall be worn by all the boyars, members of our councils and of our court ... gentry of Moscow, secretaries ... provincial gentry, gosti,' government officials, streltsy,' members of the guilds purveying for our household, citizens of Moscow of all ranks, and residents of provincial cities ... excepting the clergy and peasant tillers of the soil. The upper dress shall be of French or Saxon cut, and the lower dress . . . - waistcoat, trousers, boots, shoes, and hats - shall be of the German type. They shall also ride German saddles. Likewise the womenfolk of all ranks, including the priests', deacons', and church attendants' wives, the wives of the dragoons, the soldiers, and the streltsy, and their children, shall wear Western dresses, hats, jackets, and underwear undervests and petticoats - and shoes. From now on no one of the above-mentioned is to wear Russian dress or Circassian' coats, sheepskin coats, or Russian peasant coats, trousers, boots, and shoes. It is also forbidden to ride Russian saddles, and the craftsmen shall not manufacture them or sell them at the marketplaces.

*(Decree on Shaving {1705})*

Henceforth, in accordance with this, His Majesty's decree, all court attendants ... provincial service men, government officials of all ranks, military men, all the gosti, members of the wholesale merchants' guild, and members of the guilds purveying for our household must shave their beards and moustaches. But, if it happens that some of them do not wish to shave their beards and moustaches, let a yearly tax be collected from such persons; from court attendants.... Special badges shall be issued to them from the Administrator of Land Affairs of Public Order ... which they must wear.... As for the peasants, let a toll of two half-copecks 6 per beard be collected at the town gates each time they enter or leave a town; and do not let the peasants pass the town gates, into or out of town, without paying this toll.

## MILITARY AND ECONOMIC REFORMS

*(Decree on Promotion to Officer's Rank {1714})*

Since there are many who promote to officer rank their relatives and friends - young men who do not know the fundamentals of soldiering, not having served in the lower ranks - and since even those who serve [in the ranks] do so for a few weeks or months only, as a formality; therefore ... let a decree be promulgated that henceforth there shall be no promotion [to officer rank] of men of noble extraction or of any others who have not first served as privates in the Guards. This decree does not apply to soldiers of lowly origin who, after long service in the ranks, have received their commissions through honest service or to those who are promoted on the basis of merit, now or in the future....

*(Statute for the College of Manufactures' {1723})*

His Imperial Majesty is diligently striving to establish and develop in the Russian Empire such manufacturing plants and factories as are found in other states, for the general welfare and prosperity of his subjects. He [therefore] most graciously charges the College of Manufactures to exert itself in devising the means to introduce, with the least expense, and to spread in the Russian Empire these and other ingenious arts, and especially those for which materials can be found within the empire....

His Imperial Majesty gives permission to everyone, without distinction of rank or condition, to open factories wherever he may find suitable....

Factory owners must be closely supervised, in order that they have at their plants good and experienced [foreign] master craftsmen, who are able to train Russians in such a way that these, in turn, may themselves become masters, so that their produce may bring glory to the Russian manufactures....

By the former decrees of His Majesty commercial people were forbidden to buy villages [i.e. to own serfs], the reason being that they were not engaged in any other activity beneficial for the state save commerce; but since it is now clear to all that many of them have started to found manufacturing establishments and build plants, . . . which tend to increase the welfare of the state ... therefore permission is granted both to the gentry and to men of commerce to acquire villages for these factories without hindrance....

In order to stimulate voluntary immigration of various craftsmen from other countries into the Russian Empire, and to encourage them to establish factories and manufacturing plants freely and at their own expense, the College of Manufactures must send appropriate announcements to the Russian envoys accredited at foreign courts. The envoys should then, in an appropriate way, bring these announcements to the attention of men of various professions, urge them to come to settle in Russia, and help them to move.



Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. What do these decrees reveal about Peter the Great's motives for his reforms?

2. What can be learned from these decrees about Russian social relationships and the state of the Russian economy?

3. Why do you think Peter believed it was necessary for Russians to change their dress, shaving habits, and calendar?

4. What evidence do these edicts provide about opposition or indifference to Peter's reforms on the part of his subjects?

5. What do these edicts reveal about Peter's views of the state and its relationship to his subjects?

6. What groups within Russia might have been most likely to oppose Peter's reforms? Why?