

RUSSIAN CZARS INCREASE THEIR POWER

From Ivan to the Romanovs

Ivan IV of Moscow, called Ivan the Terrible, came to the throne in 1533 when he was only three years old. His young life was disrupted by struggles for power among Russia's landowning nobles, known as boyars. The boyars fought to control young Ivan. When he was 16, Ivan seized power and had himself crowned czar. The title meant "Caesar," and Ivan was the first Russian ruler to use it officially. He also married the beautiful Anastasia, related to an old boyar family, the Romanovs. The years from 1547 to 1560 are often called Ivan's "good period." He won great victories, added lands to Russia, gave Russia a code of laws, and ruled justly.

Rule by Terror

Ivan's "bad period" began in 1560 after Anastasia died. Accusing the boyars of poisoning his wife, Ivan turned against them. He organized his own police force, whose chief duty was to hunt down and murder people Ivan considered traitors. The members of this police force dressed in black and rode black horses. Using these secret police, Ivan executed many boyars, their families, and peasants who worked their lands. Thousands of people died. Ivan seized the boyars' estates and gave them to a new class of nobles, who had to remain loyal to him or lose their land. Eventually, Ivan committed an act that was both a personal tragedy and a national disaster. In 1581, during a violent quarrel, he killed his oldest son and heir. When Ivan died three years later, only his weak second son was left to rule.

The Rise of the Romanovs

Ivan's son proved to be physically and mentally incapable of ruling. After he died without an heir, Russia experienced a period of turmoil known as the Time of Troubles. Boyars struggled for power, and heirs of czars died under mysterious conditions. Several imposters tried to claim the throne. Finally in 1613, representatives from many Russian cities met to choose the next czar. Their choice was Michael Romanov, grandnephew of Ivan the Terrible's wife Anastasia. Thus began the Romanov dynasty, which ruled Russia for just over 300 years (1613-1917).

Peter the Great Takes the Throne

Over time, the Romanovs restored order to Russia. They strengthened government by passing a law code and putting down a revolt. This paved the way for the absolute rule of Czar Peter I. At first, Peter shared the throne with a feeble-minded half-brother. However in 1696, Peter became sole ruler of Russia. He is known to history as Peter the Great because he was one of Russia's biggest reformers. He also continued the trend of increasing the czar's power.

Russia's Differences from Europe

When Peter I came to power, Russia was still a land of boyars and serfs. Serfdom in Russia lasted much longer than it did in Western Europe. Serfdom continued in Russia into the mid-1800s. When a Russian landowner sold a piece of land, he sold the serfs with it. Landowners could give serfs away as presents or to pay debts. It was also against the law for serfs to run away from their owners. Most boyars knew little of Western Europe. In the Middle Ages, Russia had looked to Constantinople, not to Rome, for leadership. Then Mongol rule had cut Russia off from the Renaissance and the Age of Exploration. Geographic barriers also isolated Russia. Its only seaport, Archangel, was choked with ice much of the year. The few travelers who reached Moscow were usually Dutch or German, and they had to stay in a separate part of the city. Religious differences widened the gap between

Western Europe and Russia. The Russians had adopted the Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity. Western Europeans were mostly Catholics or Protestants, and the Russians viewed them as heretics and avoided them.

Peter Visits the West

In the 1680s, people in the German quarter of Moscow were accustomed to seeing the young Peter striding through their neighborhood on his long legs. (Peter was more than six and a half feet tall.) He was fascinated by the modern tools and machines in the foreigners' shops. Above all, he had a passion for ships and the sea. The young czar believed that Russia's future depended on having a warm-water port. Only then could Russia compete with the more modern states of Western Europe. Peter was 24 years old when he became sole ruler of Russia. In 1697, just one year later, he embarked on the "Grand Embassy," a long visit to Western Europe. Peter's goal was to learn about European customs and industrial techniques. With him were 200 servants and 55 boyars. Never before had a czar traveled among the Western "heretics." On his journey, Peter insisted on keeping his identity a secret. He went to the Netherlands in the plain clothes of an ordinary worker and labored as a ship's carpenter for four months. However, a Russian giant in a Dutch seaport attracted attention. Word of his identity soon spread. Yet if a fellow worker addressed him as "Your Majesty" or "Sire," he would not answer. After all, he was just plain "Carpenter Peter." Peter also visited France, England, and Austria before returning home.

Peter Rules Absolutely

Inspired by his trip to the West, Peter resolved that Russia would compete with Europe on both military and commercial terms. Peter's goal of westernization, of using Western Europe as a model for change, was not an end in itself. Peter saw it as a way to make Russia stronger.

Peter's Reforms

Although Peter believed Russia needed to change, he knew that many of his people disagreed. As he said to one official, "For you know yourself that, though a thing be good and necessary, our people will not do it unless forced to." To force change upon his state, Peter increased his powers as an absolute ruler. Peter brought the Russian Orthodox Church under state control. He abolished the office of the patriarch, head of the church. He set up a group called the Holy Synod to run the church—under his direction. Like Ivan the Terrible, Peter reduced the power of the great landowners. He recruited able men from lower-ranking families. He then promoted them to positions of authority and rewarded them with grants of land. Because these men owed everything to the czar, they were loyal to him alone. To modernize his army, Peter hired European officers, who drilled his soldiers in European tactics with European weapons. Being a soldier became a lifetime job. By the time of Peter's death, the Russian army numbered 200,000 men. To pay for this huge army, Peter imposed heavy taxes.

Westernizing Russia

As part of his attempts to westernize Russia, Peter introduced potatoes, which became a staple of the Russian diet, started Russia's first newspaper and edited its first issue himself, raised women's status by having them attend social gatherings, and ordered the nobles to give up their traditional clothes for Western fashions. Peter also believed education was a key to Russia's progress.

A New Capital

To promote education and growth, Peter wanted a seaport that would make it easier to travel to the West. Therefore, Peter fought Sweden to gain a piece of the Baltic Coast. After 21 long years of war, Russia finally won the “window on the sea” that Peter wanted. In 1703 he began building a new city on Swedish lands occupied by Russian troops. Although the swampy site was unhealthful, it seemed ideal to Peter. Ships could sail down the Neva River into the Baltic Sea and on to Western Europe. Peter called the city St. Petersburg, after his patron saint. To build a city on a desolate swamp was no easy matter. Every summer, the army forced thousands of luckless serfs to leave home and work at St. Petersburg. An estimated 25,000-100,000 people died from the terrible working conditions and widespread disease. When St. Petersburg was finished, Peter ordered many Russian nobles to leave the comforts of Moscow and settle in his new capital. For better or for worse, Peter the Great had tried to reform the culture and government of Russia. To an amazing extent he had succeeded. By the time of his death in 1725, Russia was a power to be reckoned with in Europe.

Catherine the Great

Among Russia’s most admired rulers was Catherine II, known as Catherine the Great. She ruled Russia from 1762-1796. The well-educated empress read the works of the *philosophes*, and she exchanged many letters with Voltaire. She ruled with absolute authority, but she also took steps to modernize and reform Russia. In 1767, Catherine formed a commission to review Russia’s laws. She presented it with a brilliant proposal for reforms based on the ideas of Montesquieu and Beccaria. Among other changes, she recommended allowing religious toleration and abolishing torture and capital punishment. Her commission, however, accomplished none of these lofty goals. Catherine eventually put in places limited reforms, but she could do little to improve the life of Russian peasants. Her thinking about enlightened ideas changed after a massive uprising of serfs in 1773. With great brutality, Catherine’s army crushed the rebellion. Catherine had previously favored an end to serfdom. However, the revolt convinced her that she needed the nobles support to keep her thrown. Therefore, she gave the nobles absolute power over the serfs. As a result, Russian serfs lost their last traces of freedom.

Catherine Expands Russia

Peter the Great had fought for years to win a port on the Baltic Sea. Likewise, Catherine sought to access to the Black Sea. In two wars with the Ottoman Turks, her armies finally won control of the northern shore of the Black Sea. Russia also gained the right to send ships through Ottoman-controlled straits leading from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. Catherine also expanded her empire westward into Poland. In Poland, the king was relatively weak, and independent nobles held most of the power. The three neighboring powers—Russia, Prussia, Austria—each tried to assert their influence over the country. In 1772, these land hungry neighbors each took a piece of Poland in what is called the First Partition of Poland. In further partitions in 1793 and 1795, they grabbed up the rest of Poland’s territory. With these partitions, Poland disappeared from the map of Europe. It did not reappear as an independent country until after World War I. By the end of her remarkable reign, Catherine had vastly enlarged the Russian empire.

Russia Reforms Its Society

Russia in the 1800s had yet to make its leap into the modern industrialized world. Under Russia’s feudal system, serfs were bound to the nobles whose land they worked. And nobles enjoyed almost unlimited power over them. By the 1820s, many Russians believed that serfdom must end. In their eyes, the system was morally wrong. It also prevented the empire from advancing economically.

The czars, however, were reluctant to free the serfs. Freeing them would anger the landowners, whose support the czars needed.

Defeat Brings Change

Eventually, Russia's lack of development became obvious to Russians and to the whole world. In 1853, Czar Nicholas I threatened to take over part of the Ottoman Empire in the Crimean War. However, Russia's industries and transportation system failed to provide adequate supplies for the country's troops. As a result, in 1856, Russia lost the war against the combined forces of France, Great Britain, Sardinia, and the Ottoman Empire. This was a humiliating defeat for the czar. After the war, Nicholas's son, Alexander II, decided to move Russia toward modernization and social change. Through his reforms, Alexander and his advisers believed that Russia would compete with Western Europe for world power.

Reform and Reaction

The first and boldest of Alexander's reforms was a decree freeing the serfs in 1861. The abolition of serfdom went only halfway. Peasant communities, rather than individual peasants, received about half the farmland in the country. Nobles kept the other half. The government paid the nobles for their land. Each peasant community had 49 years to pay the government for the land it had received. So, while the serfs were legally free, the debt still tied them to the land.

Political and social reforms ground to a halt when terrorists assassinated Alexander the II in 1881. His successor, Alexander III tightened czarist control on the country. Alexander III and his ministers, however, encouraged the industrial development to expand Russia's power. A major force behind Russia's drive toward industrial expansion was nationalism. Nationalism also stirred the other ethnic groups. During the 1800s such groups were uniting into nations and building industries to survive among other nation states.

CZARIST RUSSIA READING GUIDE

Directions: On a separate piece of paper, answer the following questions while reading RUSSIAN CZARS INCREASE THEIR POWER

1. Who were the boyars?
2. How did the Romanovs come to power?
3. Describe serfdom as it was when Peter came to power.
4. Identify three ways that Russia was different from Western Europe at the beginning of Peter's reign.
5. Describe Peter's trip to the West and the impact it had on him.
6. Identify specific examples of how Peter increased his powers as a ruler in each of the following areas:
 - a. the role of the church:
 - b. land owning:
 - c. the military:
7. What was the "window on the sea?" Why was it so important to Peter?
8. What do you think was Peter's best quality or change he made? What was his worst? (read "history makers" sidebar, too)
9. Why do you think some philosophers liked Catherine?
10. Describe Catherine's relationship with the serfs.
11. How did Catherine expand Russia? From whom did she take territory? Be specific.
12. What were the conflicting ideas about ending serfdom?
13. How much did Russian society change after Alexander II abolished serfdom?
14. What happened to Alexander II shortly after he freed the serfs?