Ivan III, also known as Ivan the Great, had come to power as the Grand Prince of Moscow in 1462. During his reign of 43 years, he extended Moscow's control over a large area, annexing land from other city-states and from the Poles, Lithuanians, and Mongols.

The government was centralized and Ivan asserted his influence over the church. He surrounded himself with the splendor and ceremony befitting an emperor and adopted as the symbol of the czar the Byzantine symbol of the double eagle. Ivan's reign laid the foundation for the later Russian state.

**Ivan IV**

Ivan IV, also known as Ivan the Terrible, reigned from 1533 to 1584. He greatly expanded Russia’s borders, extending Russian rule throughout the Volga River Basin to the Caspian Sea and pushing across the Ural Mountains into Siberia. His attempt to win a foothold on the Baltic Sea was less successful. The Swedes and Poles defeated the Russian forces.

Ivan earned his nickname because of his cruelty. He was initially called “Ivan the Terrible” because he terrified his enemies, but later he also began to terrify his own people. Indeed, he became one of history’s most famous examples of the paranoid tyrant. Convinced that enemies and intrigue surrounded him, Ivan IV was suspicious of everyone. He established the Oprichniki, a group of special guards, to search out traitors among his subjects. They acted like secret police and wore black uniforms. These policemen could throw people in jail or torture them on the slightest suspicion of disloyalty. Ivan the Terrible also had a terrible temper. One day in a fit of anger, he hit his eldest son so hard that he killed him.

Ivan also established the Zemski Sobor, or land assembly, to act as an advisory body to the czar. It was the first national assembly of Russians ever convened. However, Ivan IV was even more autocratic than Ivan III had been. In an effort to rid himself of any threat from the boyars, who were hereditary aristocrats, he had many of them accused of treason. He then seized their lands and divided the lands among a new class of landholders that he created. In return for land, these men owed the czar military service when he asked for assistance. The service was to be performed by peasants supplied by the new nobility. In effect, Ivan created a feudal system in Russia.

**Peter the Great**

Peter the Great ruled Russia from 1689 to 1725. Like his predecessors, Peter was an autocratic ruler. Unlike them, he was fascinated by western Europe, its culture, its sciences, and its growing industries.

Only 17 when he became czar, Peter had an immense curiosity about people, ideas, and things. His appetite for information matched his size. He was 6 feet 9 inches tall and weighed close to 300 pounds. As a young man, he spent time in the German Quarter of Moscow, where not only Germans but also Scottish, English, and Dutch artisans lived. Although previous czars had been generally suspicious of foreigners, some had been allowed to settle in special zones of the city, but their contact with Russians was limited to people the czars trusted.
VI. Russia: Early Growth and Expansion

Wanting to see for himself, Peter took two trips to western Europe during 1697 and 1698, and during 1716 and 1717. Among the places he visited were shipyards, universities, art galleries, and the British Parliament. He was an eager student and learned about shipbuilding, medicine, military science, manufacturing, and the educational systems of the countries he visited. He returned to Russia with a group of European experts that he had hired to help him transform Russia.

Modernizing and Westernizing Russia

When Peter returned from his first European tour, he set about changing how Russians looked and what they did for a living. Peter decreed that Russian men were henceforth to be beardless, because that was the fashion in western Europe. Men found wearing beards were at risk of having them shaved off on the spot. A man could get around the decree by paying a tax for a beard license. Peter also decreed that the long coats of Russian men were to be shortened and that everyone above the rank of peasant was to adopt western clothing.

Peter established a navy and modernized the army. No longer would the czar have to depend on peasant soldiers supplied by the nobility. He established a standing army by introducing conscription (forced service) and equipped it with new weaponry from the west. He also established military-technical schools and required that the sons of the nobility be sent to train as officers. Peter used government subsidies to encourage the development of manufacturing, shipbuilding, mining industries, and international trading companies.

In part to make the government more efficient, and in part to further lessen the influence of the nobility, Peter introduced reforms into the government. He established a committee system to run government operations. Each committee had eleven members who were to oversee a particular area, such as agriculture and foreign affairs, similar to our government departments. To strengthen his position, the czar personally appointed many officials, including the members of the new advisory body of nobles, called the Senate, and the governors of provinces.

Peter built on the idea of the service nobility, initiated by earlier czars. According to this concept, service to the state was a requirement for admission to the nobility. Peter established the Table of Ranks, which listed 14 civil and military ranks, covering all positions in the government and military. As one advanced up the ranks and reached a certain level, one automatically became a noble. As more men entered the nobility, the old landed aristocracy—the boyars—became a smaller percentage of the nobility. Through this maneuver, Peter continued to lessen the influence of the boyars.

Search for a Warm-Water Port

One of Peter's great ambitions, as it had been for previous czars, was to secure a warm-water port for trade. Most Russian ports were located in the far north and froze up for part of the year. By increasing the amount of Russia's international trade, Peter believed he would also increase its wealth and power. His first efforts were aimed at wresting territory on the Mediterranean from the Ottoman Turks, as Ivan IV had tried to do, but Peter was unsuccessful in finding allies and abandoned the idea.
Peter then set his sights on land along the Baltic Sea. He declared war on Sweden in 1700 and ultimately won his warm-water port. He built St. Petersburg on the Gulf of Finland, an arm of the Baltic, and moved the capital there from Moscow. His new city was as grand as any capital in western Europe. It is called Peter’s “Window on the West,” not only because it was a port that allowed Peter to trade with the west year-round, but also because the city was built in the European style, with canals and stately palaces like the ones Peter had seen on his trips to western Europe. Peter encouraged western Europeans to come to Petersburg and required many Russians nobles to build houses in his new capital.

Ever since Peter the Great, Russians have often found themselves divided between two groups. One group, the so-called “westernizers,” has argued, in the tradition of Peter the Great, that Russia needs to be more like the countries of western Europe. On the other side are the “Slavophiles,” who think Russia is better than western Europe and should stick to its traditional Slavic ways. For the most part, the westernizers have gravitated to St. Petersburg, with its European style, while Slavophiles have preferred Moscow, built in the old Russian style.

Catherine the Great

Catherine the Great was actually not Russian, but German. She was chosen to marry Peter, Duke of Holstein, a grandson of Peter the Great. As Czar Peter III, the Duke initiated a series of policies that angered powerful nobles. He entered into an alliance with Prussia, a long-time rival, expanded religious freedom, and closed down the secret police. Catherine and the czar were not well suited for each other and theirs was an unhappy marriage. Catherine—who had become thoroughly Russian after almost twenty years in Russia—joined in a plot against Peter. The conspirators removed him from the throne and made Catherine sole ruler.

Catherine greatly expanded Russian territory, adding more of the Baltic region and Ukraine. She also warred against the Ottoman Turks and seized portions of their empire. When European powers partitioned Poland in 1772, 1793, and 1795, she gained the largest part for Russia. It was during her reign that Russian exploration and colonization of Alaska began.

Like Peter the Great, Catherine was interested in the west. When she began her reign, she intended to make a number of reforms to ease the life of serfs (peasants), promote education, and limit land acquisitions by nobles. However, the peasant revolt led by Pugachev [POO-ga-chov] between 1773 and 1775 and the French Revolution soon caused Catherine to become as autocratic as earlier czars. The peasant uprising was a bloody and brutal revolt that resulted in the death of thousands of wealthy Russian landowners, priests of the Russian Orthodox Church, and merchants. Not wishing to antagonize the nobility, Catherine increased the privileges of the nobility and decreased the freedom of peasants.

Reforms of Peter and Catherine and the Peasants

The reforms of Peter and Catherine had little effect on the peasants—except to bind them to the land as serfs. By the time of Peter, many peasants already had no personal freedom of movement. A peasant family could not decide to move from one landed estate to another because the second landowner offered better working terms.