

## 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.

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.

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## **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 Russian 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.