



# UNIT 5

## Peter the Great and the Westernization of Russia

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Peter I became czar of Russia in 1683 and ruled until 1725. His reign is viewed as a turning point for his nation; the long-term results of his rule are still debated today. When Peter was born, Russia was a nation very different from Europe. It had strange and crude customs, primitive technology, a huge peasant population falling further into serfdom, and a church that feared learning and advancement. A Russian bishop was reported to have declared, "Abhorred of God is any who loves geometry; it is a spiritual sin."<sup>1</sup>

As a young man, Peter was impressed with western Europe. He often mixed with foreigners living in Russia. He also traveled to western Europe, spending over a year mostly in Holland and England. He visited workshops, military fortifications, shipbuilding facilities (where he worked as a carpenter), and any other institution where he could gain knowledge about European technology and political and economic structures. Standing 6 feet 8 inches tall, Peter dressed and acted like a common laborer. He often left his living spaces in shambles, but he learned quickly. Peter recruited over 1,000 experts to come to Russia to help modernize the state. His motives appear to have been not so much to bring European civilization to Russia as an end in itself, but to create a new Russia that could defend itself against the West and expand its territory to include warm-water ports.

From the beginning, Peter's "reforms" and his reign caused controversy. While he was in western Europe, his elite guard in the

army, the *streltsy*, rebelled. Peter returned to Russia and savagely put down the rebellion, killing five of the insurgents himself. A major defeat by the Swedes in 1700, when a Swedish force of 8,000 routed 40,000 Russians, further convinced Peter that he needed to rebuild his army. This he did. His modernized army was eventually able to defeat the Swedes in 1709. This enabled Peter to secure a section of the Baltic coast, where he built a new capital city modeled on cities in western Europe. He named it St. Petersburg.

Peter embarked on other reforms, in particular dismantling the structure of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Church had undergone some changes in the 1650s, mainly to correct some mistranslations in the Russian version of the Bible. Some had opposed these changes; they became known as the Old Believers and were particularly numerous among the peasants. Peter opposed both the Old Believers and the reformers. He put the church under the control of a committee of bishops called the Holy Synod, and he put that body under a government official called the Procurator of the Holy Synod. This basically secularized the church, making the czar its head instead of the traditional patriarch.

The traditional Russian nobility, or *Boyar* class, was subjected to mandatory state service under Peter's rule. A Table of Ranks replaced the status of nobility by birth with a nobility based on state service. Peasants fell into a form of serfdom that was more like chattel

slavery, since they could be bought and sold without their land. To force Russians to behave more like western Europeans, Peter held classes in etiquette. He forbade men to wear beards, made the nobles send their sons to school, and edited the first Russian newspaper. When his son made it clear that when he

became czar he would not continue his father's reforms, Peter had him tortured to death.

By the time of Peter's death, Russia was much more part of western Europe than it had been, but questions still remain about the human cost of this rapid westernization.

<sup>1</sup> From R. R. Palmer and Joel Colton, *A History of the Modern World*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1995, eighth edition, p. 236

### Critical-Reading Questions

Keep these questions in mind as you read the primary-source documents.

- What were the conditions in Russia (social, political, economic) before the reign of Peter the Great? In what areas did Russia lag behind western Europe?
- What traditional institutions did Peter the Great see as impediments to progress in Russia?
- How did Peter's personality affect the way in which he instituted reforms? Compare the description of Peter in Document A with that in Document F. How do they differ?
- Was it necessary for the reforms to take the form they did?
- Were Peter's changes truly reforms for the betterment of Russia, or were they forced westernization or Europeanization for the expansion of Russian territory and power?
- What segments of Russian society were most affected by the changes of Peter the Great?
- In what ways was Russia better off after the reign of Peter the Great?
- Were there any negative results of Peter's changes?

### Mock Trial

**Here are the charges against Peter the Great (the defendant):** Peter I, czar of Russia, is charged with the suppression of the traditional liberties of his people, especially in his acts against the Boyars, Old Believers of the Russian Church, and serfs.

## Document A

## Bishop Burnet's Impressions of Peter the Great in 1698 (Excerpts)

(From James Harvey Robinson, *Readings in European History*. Boston: Ginn, 1906, pp. 388–390.)

I mentioned in the relation of the former year [1698] the tsar's coming out of his own country; on which I will now enlarge. He came this winter over to England and stayed some months among us. I waited often on him, and was ordered both by the king and the archbishop and bishops to attend upon him and to offer him such informations of our religion and constitution as he was willing to receive. I had good interpreters, so I had much free discourse with him. He is a man of a very hot temper, soon inflamed and very brutal in his passion. He raises his natural heat by drinking much brandy, which he rectifies himself with great application. He is subject to convulsive motions all over his body, and his head seems to be affected with these. He wants not capacity, and has a larger measure of knowledge than might be expected from his education, which was very indifferent. A want of judgment, with an instability of temper, appear in him too often and too evidently. . . .

He was desirous to understand our doctrine, but he did not seem disposed to mend matters in Moscovy. He was, indeed, resolved to encourage learning and to polish his people by sending some of them to travel in other countries and to draw strangers to come and live among them. He seemed apprehensive still [i.e., ever] of his sister's [i.e., the Princess Sophia's] intrigues. There was a mixture both of passion and severity in his temper. He is resolute, but understands little of war, and seemed not at all inquisitive that way. . . .

He went from hence to the court of Vienna, where he purposed to have stayed some time, but he was called home sooner than he had intended upon a discovery, or a suspicion, of intrigues managed by his sister. The strangers, to whom he trusted most, were so true to him that those designs were crushed before he came back. But on this occasion he let loose his fury on all whom he suspected. Some hundreds of them were hanged all around Moskow, and it was said that he cut off many heads with his own hand; and so far was he from relenting or showing any sort of tenderness that he seemed delighted with it. How long he is to be the scourge of that nation God only knows.

## Document B

### An English Engineer, John Perry, Describes Russia and the Changes That Peter the Great Brought to His Country

(From John Perry, *The State of Russia Under the Present Czar*. As found in Putnam, Peter, ed., *Seven Britons in Imperial Russia, 1698–1812*. Copyright © 1952 by Princeton University Press. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press. As found in Leon Bernard and Theodore Hodges, eds., *Readings in European History*. New York: MacMillan, 1958, pp. 298–301.)

It was a very rare thing in Russia before this present Czar's time to have found any man, even among the highest and the most learned of the clergy, to have understood any language but their own; and as they were themselves void of learning, so they were wary and cautious to keep out all means that might bring it in, lest their ignorance should be discovered . . . for which reason the learning of foreign languages and books were always formerly discouraged; even as they are to this day in the Turkish Empire. . . .

There came once a press and letters out of Poland to Mosco, where a printing-house was set up with approbation of one of the former Czars; but long after the house was fir'd in the night-time, and the press and letters were burnt, as was thought by the procurement of the priests, they looking upon all other books except the history of their own country, and the exploits and victories of their Czars, and the lives and miracles of their saints, to be as dangerous as witchcraft.

This ignorance was not so much to be wonder'd at when it is consider'd that they neither suffer'd their sons to travel, nor was there ever any university in the country, or considerable school of any learning, till this Czar's time. . . .

. . . notwithstanding their pretended purity in keeping their fasts, and abstaining from flesh, there is nothing more common than to have both the people and the priest, too, go to church on a holiday in the morning, and get drunk in the afternoon long before night; especially the greater the holiday, the more it is excusable, and the custom, to be drunk. It is very ordinary at such times, if you ride through Mosco in the evening on a great holiday, to see the priests, as well as other men, lie drunk about the streets. . . .

It had been the manner of the Russes, like the Patriarchs of old, to wear long beards hanging down upon their bosoms, which they comb'd out with pride, and kept smooth and fine, without one hair to be diminish'd. . . . The Czar, therefore, to reform this foolish custom, and to make them look like other Europeans, ordered a tax to be laid, on all gentlemen, merchants, and others of his subjects (excepting the priests and common peasants, or slaves) that they should each of them pay a hundred rubles per annum, for the wearing of their beards, and that even the common people should pay a copeck at the entrance of the gates of any of the towns or cities of Russia. . . .

The Czar . . . gave orders that all his boyars and people whatsoever, that came near his court, and that were in his pay should . . . equip themselves with handsome cloathes made after the English fashion. . . . And next he commanded, that a pattern of cloathes of the English fashion should be hung up at all the gates of the city of Mosco, and that publication should be made, that all persons (excepting the common peasants who brought goods and

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provisions into the city) should make their cloathes according to the said patterns; and that whosoever should disobey the said orders, and should be found passing any of the gates of the city in their long habits, should either pay two grevens (which is 20 pence) or be obliged to kneel down at the gates of the city, and to have their coats cut off just even with the ground. . . .

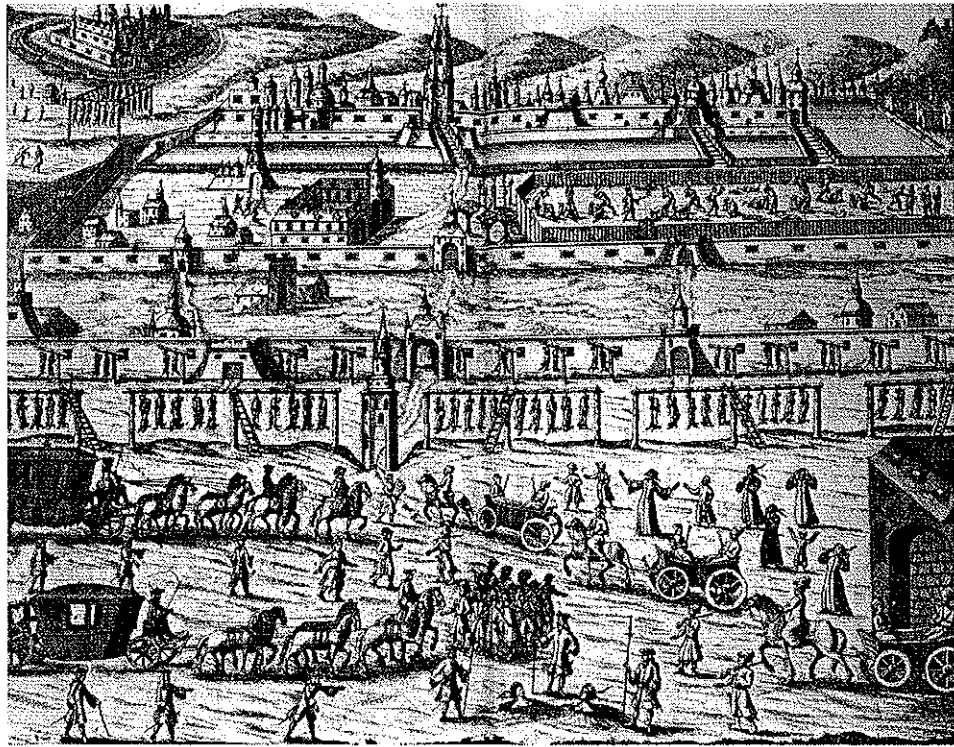
. . . . It [is] a thing common in Russia to beat wives in a most barbarous manner, very often so unhumanly that they die with the blows; the wives being thus many times made desperate, murther [murder] their husbands in revenge for the ill usage they receive; on which occasion there is a law made, that when they murther their husbands, they are set alive in the ground, standing upright, with the earth fill'd about them, and only their heads left just above the earth, and a watch set over them, that they shall not be relieved till they are starved to death; which is a common sight in that countrey, and I have known them live sometimes seven or eight days in that posture.

. . . among some other causes, one of the chief which makes the generality of the nobility at present uneasy, is, that the Czar obliges them against their will, to come and live at Petersburgh, with their wives and their families, where they are oblig'd to build new houses for themselves, and where all manner of provisions are usually three or four times as dear, and forage for their horses, etc. at least six or eight times as dear as it is at Mosco; which happens from the small quantity which the countrey thereabouts produces, being more than two thirds woods and bogs; and not only the nobility, but merchants and tradesmen of all sorts, are oblig'd to go and live there.

## Document C

### Engraving of the State Executioners Torturing the *Streltsy* for Rebelling Against Peter the Great While He Was Traveling in Western Europe, 1698

(Used by permission of the British Library, London.)



## Document D

### An Account of the Torture of the *Streltsy* by Johann Georg Korb, an Austrian Official at the Court of the Czar

(From Johann Georg Korb, *Diary of an Austrian Secretary of Legation at the Court of Tsar Peter the Great*, Vol. I. Translated and edited by Count MacDonnel. London: Frank Cass, 1968, p. 243. Used by permission of Frank Cass Publishers. As found in Robert K. Massie, *Peter the Great: His Life and World*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981, pp. 254–255.)

While one accomplice or rebel was being tied to a rack, . . . his lamentations gave rise to a hope that truth might be pressed from him by torments; but no, for as soon as his body began to be stretched with the rope, besides the horrible cracking of his members which

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were being torn from their natural sockets, he remained mute, even when twenty strokes of the knout were superadded, as if the accumulation of his pain were too great to afflict the senses. All believed that the man must be crushed with excess of calamity to such a degree that he must have lost the power of moaning and of speech. So he was loosed from the infamous rack and rope, and then asked if he knew the persons present in the torture chamber. To the astonishment of all, he enumerated every one of them. But when they put a fresh question about the treason, once more he became utterly dumb, and did not break silence during the whole quarter of an hour, while he was roasted by a fire at the Tsar's command. The Tsar, tired at last of this exceedingly wicked stubbornness, furiously raised the stick which he happened to have in his hand, and thrust it so violently into his jaws—clenched in obstinate silence—to break them open, and make him give tongue and speak. And these words too that fell from the raging man, "Confess, beast, confess!" loudly proclaimed how great was his wrath.

## Document E

### Description of Peter the Great's Reform of the Russian Orthodox Church

(Translation © 1993 by M. E. Sharpe Inc. From Evgenii V. Anisimov, *The Reforms of Peter the Great: Progress Through Coercion in Russia*, translated by John T. Alexander. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1993.) Reprinted with permission.

His Imperial Majesty, attending a meeting of archbishops and observing the increased desire of several for the selection of a patriarch, which had been proposed by the clergy more than once, pulled out of his pocket with one hand the Spiritual Regulation prepared for such an instance and dispatching it, told them threateningly: "You ask for a patriarch, here is a spiritual patriarch for you, and to those who think otherwise (he unsheathed a dirk with his other hand and struck the table with it) here's a steel patriarch for you!" Then he stood up and left. After that the proposal to select a patriarch was abandoned and the Most Holy Synod was established. In agreement with Peter the Great's intention to establish a Spiritual College were Stefan Yavorsky and Feofan Prokopovich who had been helping His Majesty in writing the Regulation. Peter designated the former chairman of the Synod and the latter he made vice-president, whereas he himself became head of the church of his own state and once, recounting the disputes of Patriarch Nikon with the tsar, his parent Aleksei Mikhailovich, he said: "It's time to constrain the authority not proper to the old man [i.e., the patriarch]; God willing, it is for me to reform the laity and the clergy, for them I am both master and patriarch."