

Modern History Sourcebook:
Peter the Great and the Rise of Russia, 1682-1725

Bishop Burnet, *Peter the Great 1698*

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 by both the king and the archbishops and bishops to attend upon him and to offer him such information 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 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 is mechanically turned, and seems designed by nature rather to be a ship carpenter than a great prince. This was his chief study and exercise while he stayed here. He wrought much with his own hands and made all about him work at the models of his ships. He told me he designed a great fleet at Azov and with it to attack the Turkish empire. But he did not seem capable of conducting so great a design, though his conduct in his wars since this has discovered a greater genius in him than appeared at this time.

He was desirous to understand our doctrine, but he did not seem disposed to mend matters in Muscovy. 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 of his sister'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.

After I had seen him often, and had conversed much with him, I could not but adore the depth of the providence of God that had raised up such a furious man to so absolute an authority over so great a part of the world. David, considering the great things God had made for the use of man, broke out into the meditation, "What is man, that you are so mindful of him?" But here there is an occasion for reversing these words, since man seems a very contemptible thing in the sight of God, while such a person as the tsar has such multitudes put, as it were, under his feet, exposed to his restless jealousy and savage temper.

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 Moscow, and it was said

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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.

Von Korb, *Diary 1698-99*

How sharp was the pain, how great the indignation, to which the tsar's Majesty was mightily moved, when he knew of the rebellion of the Streltsi [*i.e.*, the Muscovite Guard], betraying openly a mind panting for vengeance! He was still tarrying at Vienna, quite full of the desire of setting out for Italy; but, fervid as was his curiosity of rambling abroad, it was, nevertheless, speedily extinguished on the announcement of the troubles that had broken out in the bowels of his realm. Going immediately to Lefort (almost the only person that he condescended to treat with intimate familiarity), he thus indignantly broken out: Tell me, Francis, son of James, how I can reach Moscow by the shortest way, in a brief space, so that I may wreak vengeance on this great perfidy of my people, with punishments worthy of their abominable crime. Not one of them shall escape with impunity. Around my royal city, which, with their impious efforts, they planned to destroy, I will have gibbets and gallows set upon the walls and ramparts, and each and every one of them will I put to a direful death." Nor did he long delay the plan for his justly excited wrath; he took the quick post, as his ambassador suggested, and in four week's time he had got over about three hundred miles without accident, and arrived the 4th of September, 1698---a monarch for the well disposed, but an avenger for the wicked.

His first anxiety after his arrival was about the rebellion---in what it consisted, what the insurgents meant, who dared to instigate such a crime. And as nobody could answer accurately upon all points, and some pleaded their own ignorance, others the obstinacy of the Streltsi, he began to have suspicions of everybody's loyalty. . . No day, holy or profane, were the inquisitors idle; every day was deemed fit and lawful for torturing. There were as many scourges as there were accused, and every inquisitor was a butcher. . . The whole month of October was spent in lacerating the backs of culprits with the knout and with flames; no day were those that were left alive exempt from scourging or scorching; or else they were broken upon the wheel, or driven to the gibbet, or slain with the axe. . .

To prove to all people how holy and inviolable are those walls of the city which the Streltsi rashly meditated scaling in a sudden assault, beams were run out from all the embrasures in the walls near the gates, in each of which two rebels were hanged. This day beheld about two hundred and fifty die that death. There are few cities fortified with as many palisades as Moscow has given gibbets to her guardian Streltsi. (In front of the nunnery where Sophia [Peter's sister] was confined) there were thirty gibbets erected in a quadrangle shape, from which there hung two hundred and thirty Streltsi; the three principal ringleaders, who tendered a petition to Sophia touching the administration of the realm, were hanged close to the windows of that princess, presenting, as it were, the petitions that were placed in their hands, so near that Sophia might with ease touch them.

General Alexander Gordon, *History of Peter the Great, 1718*

This great emperor came in a few years to know to a farthing the amount of all his revenues, as also how they were laid out. He was at little or no expense about his person, and by living rather like a private gentleman than a prince he saved wholly that great expense which other monarchs are at in supporting the grandeur of their courts. It was uneasy for him to appear in majesty, which he seldom or never did, but when absolutely necessary, on such occasions as giving audience to ambassadors or the like; so that he had all the pleasure of a great emperor and at the same time that of a private gentleman.

He was a lover of company, and a man of much humor and pleasantry, exceedingly facetious and of vast natural parts. He had no letters; he could only read and write, but had a great regard for learning and was at much pains to introduce it into the country. He rose early; the morning he gave to business till ten or eleven o'clock at the farthest; all the rest of the day, and a great part of the night, to diversion and pleasure. He took his bottle heartily, so must all the company; for when he was merry himself he loved to see everybody so; though at the same time he could not endure habitual drinkers, for such he thought unfit for business. When he paid a visit to a friend he would pass the whole night, not caring to part with good company till past two o'clock in the morning. He never kept guards about his person. . . . He never could abide ceremony, but loved to be spoke to frankly and without reserve. . . .

In the year 1703 the tsar took the field early, cantoned his troops in the month of March, and about the 20th of April brought the army together; then marched and invested another small but important place called Neva-Chance, which surrendered on the 14th of May. The commodious situation of this place made the tsar resolve to erect on it a considerable town, with a strong citadel, consisting of six royal bastions, together with good outworks; this he soon put into execution and called it St. Petersburg, which is now esteemed so strong that it will be scarcely possible for the Swedes ever to take it by force.

As he was digesting the scheme of this, his favorite town, which he designed not only for the place of his residence but the principal harbor of his shipping, as having a communication with the sea by the river Neva; having duly observed and sounded it all over, he found it would be a very natural project to erect a fort in the isle opposite to the island of Ratusary; which for a whole league over to the land is not above four feet deep. This is a most curious work scarcely to be matched. He went about it in winter, in the month of November, when the ice was so strong that it could bear any weight, causing it to carry materials such as timber, stone, etc. The foundation was thus laid: trees of about thirty feet in length and about fifteen inches thick were taken and joined artfully together into chests ten feet high; these chests were filled with stones of great weight, which sunk down through the sea, and made a very solid foundation, upon which he raised his fort, called Kronstadt.

Jean Rousset de Missy, *Life of Peter the Great, c. 1730*

The tsar labored at the reform of fashions, or, more properly speaking, of dress. Until that time the Russians had always worn long beards, which they cherished and preserved with much care,

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allowing them to hang down on their bosoms, without even cutting the moustache. With these long beards they wore the hair very short, except the ecclesiastics, who, to distinguish themselves, wore it very long. The tsar, in order to reform that custom, ordered that gentlemen, merchants, and other subjects, except priests and peasants, should each pay a tax of one hundred rubles a year if they wished to keep their beards; the commoners had to pay one kopek each. Officials were stationed at the gates of the towns to collect that tax, which the Russians regarded as an enormous sin on the part of the tsar and as a thing which tended to the abolition of their religion.

These insinuations, which came from the priests, occasioned the publication of many pamphlets in Moscow, where for that reason alone the tsar was regarded as a tyrant and a pagan; and there were many old Russians who, after having their beards shaved off, saved them preciously, in order to have them placed in their coffins, fearing that they would not be allowed to enter heaven without their beards. As for the young men, they followed the new custom with the more readiness as it made them appear more agreeable to the fair sex.

From the reform in beards we may pass to that of clothes. Their garments, like those of the Orientals, were very long, reaching to the heel. The tsar issued an ordinance abolishing that costume, commanding all the *boyars* [*i.e.*, the nobles] and all those who had positions at court to dress after the French fashion, and likewise to adorn their clothes with gold or silver according to their means. As for the rest of the people, the following method was employed. A suit of clothes cut according to the new fashion was hung at the gate of the city, with a decree enjoining upon all except peasants to have their clothes made on this model, upon penalty of being forced to kneel and have all that part of their garments which fell below the knee cut off, or pay two *grives* every time they entered the town with clothes in the old style. Since the guards at the gates executed their duty in curtailing the garments in a sportive spirit, the people were amused and readily abandoned their old dress, especially in Moscow and its environs, and in the towns which the tsar often visited.

The dress of the women was changed, too. English hairdressing was substituted for the caps and bonnets hitherto worn; bodices, stays, and skirts, for the former undergarments. . . The same ordinance also provided that in the future women, as well as men, should be invited to entertainments, such as weddings, banquets, and the like, where both sexes should mingle in the same hall, as in Holland and England. It was likewise added that these entertainments should conclude with concerts and dances, but that only those should be admitted who were dressed in English costumes. His Majesty set the example in all these changes. . .

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