

Snapshot of an Empire: Russia

Relevant Key Concepts:

Role of gunpowder, Peter the Great's military reforms (4.3.II.)

Rulers used religion to justify rule: Third Rome, Ivan IV's "crusade" against Kazan (4.3.I.B.)

Power of elites fluctuates: fate of the boyars under Ivan IV (4.3.II.B.)

Reform of Russia's taxations system under Peter the Great (4.3.I.E.)

Frontier Settlements in Russian Siberia (4.2.I.A.)

Rulers used art to display power, St. Basil's Basilica (4.3.I.A.)

During this era the Russians broke free from Mongol domination and began a period of territorial expansion and government reform. They embarked on an aggressive program of westernization in order to leap forward and make up for their backwardness vis-à-vis the West. The forced imposition of European culture on the aristocracy of Russia created a wide cultural difference between the upper class and the peasants, a situation that only exacerbated the social tensions between serfs and nobles that was already present.

The first significant leader in this process was Ivan III, also known as Ivan the Great. In a carefully calculated political move, Ivan married the niece of the last Byzantine Emperor and claimed continuity with imperial Rome and the Byzantine Empire. He proclaimed Moscow the "Third Rome" (Constantinople had been the "Second Rome") and exploited his close ties to the Orthodox Church to give legitimacy to his wars of territorial expansion. All in all, Ivan III increased the power of the central Russian government and drew more land under his control. But another Ivan, Ivan IV, would push these advancements to new levels.

Ivan IV (The Terrible) extend the Russian empire by defeating the Mongol stronghold city of Kazan. He motivated his soldiers by telling them they were marching as soldiers of Christ (the Mongols had converted to Islam). To commemorate this victory he commission the building of St. Basil's Cathedral, an architectural symbol of the union of church and state.

Ivan's most important contribution to the development of Russia is how he dealt with the powerful class of Russia's aristocrats, the Boyars. If you remember, aristocrats have always been a problem for kings and emperors trying to centralize rule over large territories. Ivan held deep suspicions toward the Russian boyars and simply had many of them killed. Others he forced from their homes to different areas, an action that weakened their class by stripping them from the local connections that had given them power and influence. Consequently, Tsars in Russia would become true autocrats, unhindered by the pressures and influence of aristocracies. For example, even the absolute monarchy of Louis XIV in France was partially limited by the will of the nobles. But in Russia titles of nobility could be conferred or withdrawn arbitrarily by the Tsar. Thus the Russian nobility was kept in subservience to the state and would never emerge as

a counter force to the monarch's power. Their traditional power over local affairs was striped and the power of Russian Tsars would truly be absolute.

In no Tsar was this absolute power more obvious than Peter the Great. As a young man he took the first of several trips to Europe, where he studied shipbuilding and other western technologies, as well as governing styles and social customs. He returned to Russia convinced that the empire could only become powerful by imitating western successes, and he instituted a number of reforms that revolutionized it:

The Petrine Reform

Military reform - He built the army by offering better pay and also drafted peasants for service as professional soldiers. He also created a navy by importing western engineers and craftsmen to build ships and shipyards, and other experts to teach naval tactics to recruits. He introduced modern firearms, and gunpowder did much to bring success to Russian military campaigns, as it did with so many other empires during this era.

Building the infrastructure - The army was useless without roads and communications, so Peter organized peasants to work on roads and do other service for the government. He also borrowed the Mongol concept of a postal service (the arrow messengers) to facilitate rapid communication across the empire

Expansion of territory - The Peter gained Russian territory along the Baltic Sea by defeating the powerful Swedish military. To gain warm weather ports, he tried to capture access to the Black Sea, but he was soundly defeated by the Ottomans who controlled the area. He pushed the empire far to the east in Siberia, reaching the Bering Strait across from Alaska.

Reorganization of the bureaucracy and taxation - In order to pay for his improvements, the government had to have the ability to effectively tax its citizens. The bureaucracy had been controlled by the boyars, but Peter replaced them with merit based employees by creating the Table of Ranks, eventually doing away with titles of nobility. In terms of taxation, Peter reformed the tax system. Instead of a tax on each household (which peasants would avoid by registering several families at a single household) Peter taxed on a per-person basis. Although very unpopular, it generated the income to fund his ambitions.

Relocation of the capital - Peter moved his court from Moscow to a new location on the Baltic Sea, his "Window on the West" that he called St. Petersburg. The city was built from scratch out of a swampy area, where it had a great harbor for the navy. Its architecture was European, of course. The move was intended to symbolically and literally break the hold that old Russian religious and cultural traditions had on government.

Note that Peter's reforms borrowed very selectively from Europe. He was not at all interested in Parliamentary governments or movements toward social reform. In this sense, he was much more concerned with the benefits of the Science Revolution than with the ideas of the Enlightenment philosophies; those things that directly benefited military progress and his own autocratic rule most interested him. Yet he did force European rules of etiquette and culture on his nobles. Beards, long considered a sign of religious piety and respect, had to be shaved off. He even forced the Russian upper class to practice European manners and appropriate French as the language of social life. In short, he did much to strengthen Russia into a modern imperial power but at the expense of fostering of a distinctly Russian identity. When Peter died, he left a transformed Russia, an empire that a later ruler, Catherine the Great, would further strengthen. But he also left behind a new dynamic in Russian society: the conflicting tendencies toward westernization mixed with the traditions of the Slavs to turn inward and preserve their own traditions.

To secure the new frontier settlements to the east that had growing since Ivan IV, Russian Czars encouraged peasants to migrate to Siberia. They were provided with incentives, such as grain, seeds, and farming tools. Many peasants sought to create a better and more independent life for themselves by moving east. Fur trappers push to the east as well to take advantage in the profitable trade in furs. For the most part, however, the eastern frontier was settled by peasant migrations who were encouraged by migrate by the Russian government.

