

The Early 18th Century

Peter the Great



After decades of famine and political turbulence, in 1613 Michael Romanov was named Tsar of Russia. The Romanov dynasty would reign until a revolution in 1917 ended imperial rule.

When Peter I (Peter the Great) ascended to the throne at the end of the 17th century, Russia was a backward land that stood outside the political affairs of Europe. Superstition, distrust of foreigners, and conservatism characterized most of the society. The economy was based on primitive agriculture and the military organization was sorely out of date. The reign of Peter I (1682–1725) was a turning point in Russian history. He was determined that Russia become and remains a great European power and carried forward the Westernizing policies in a radical and uncompromising manner.

Early in his reign, Peter travelled across northern Europe to learn the skills that Russia needed to grow and prosper. He visited shipyards, workshops, and factories, gaining knowledge of shipbuilding, clock-making, copper engraving, and dentistry. Peter returned with 260 chests filled with weapons, scientific instruments, tools, and a stuffed crocodile. He also recruited a large number of military and technical experts, who would teach their skills to Russians. He would also remodel the armed forces and bureaucracy along European lines and impose new taxes that dramatically increased the state's revenues.

The construction of St. Petersburg, Peter the Great's grand legacy, was begun in 1703 on marshy territory won from Sweden. Foreign architects directed the project, and thousands died from the toil of building a new capital city from scratch.

This cultural and economic transformation demanded both ingenuity from the tsar and even greater sacrifice and suffering from the population. In 1649 a code of laws effectively divided the society into ranks and occupational classes from which neither the individual nor his or her descendants could move. The laws imposed on peasants froze not only social status but also residency and imposed a harsh form of serfdom and despotic rule.

Peter I, who would come to be known as Peter the Great, set the foundation for a new culture conceived in imitation of Western Europe. Art forms that had been forbidden by the medieval Russian Orthodox Church - such as portraiture, instrumental music, and dramatic productions - entered the mainstream of the nation's cultural life. By the mid-18th century Russians were producing ballets, operas, chamber music, baroque architecture, and novels. Under Peter I's rule, artists were sent abroad to study, and painters from Western Europe were brought to work in Russia. When Peter died in 1725 Russia was more respected and feared in Europe than ever before.