

Y12 Summer Work European History

- 1) Create a timeline of the key events in Russian History 900-1682 - You must include at least 30 events. You must include Social, Political, Economic and Religious events.
- 2) What was Russia like before Peter the Great?

Read p10-p17 Peter the Great, John Swift

In 500 words explain Russia's main weaknesses in 1682

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The Tsarist Inheritance

POINTS TO CONSIDER

What was Russia like when Peter ascended the throne? This chapter will discuss the long-standing weakness of Russia and the scale of the problems Peter faced as ruler. Try to assess what Russia's long-term problems were and how well prepared Peter was to tackle them.

KEY DATES

- 1672** Birth of Peter.
- 1676** Death of Alexei.
- 1682** Death of Fedor III, revolt of the *streltsy*. Peter and Ivan made co-tsars under regency of Sophia.
- 1687** Golitsyn's first campaign against Crimea.
- 1688** Golitsyn's second campaign against Crimea.
- 1689** Peter married to Eudoxia Lopukhina, fall of Sophia.
- 1690** Tsarevich Alexis born, Drunken Synod formed.
- 1694** Tsaritsa Natalya dies.

It is commonly assumed that seventeenth-century Russia, before Peter the Great assumed the throne, was isolated, weak and backward. The outside world knew little of it and cared less. It was a nation which could not hope to challenge its aggressive neighbours. Swedes, Poles and Crimean Tatars alike held Russia in utter contempt and enriched themselves at its expense. The arts and technology which western Europe was rapidly developing were unknown in Russia. It is central to Peter's claim to greatness that he was personally responsible for changing this. But as historians we cannot allow such assumptions to pass untested. Was Russia really in such a pathetic plight? Was Peter in any way adequately raised and educated to tackle Russia's problems? It is through such questions that we can begin to make a reasoned analysis of Peter's reign.

1 Russia's Isolation

KEY ISSUE What in Russia's history and traditions separated it from the west?

a) The growth of the Russian State

It is certain that Russia before Peter the Great had experienced a

great deal of isolation. Yet this had not always been the case. The first Russian state, based on Kiev, was powerful and well known from the ninth century. But impoverished by a shift in trade routes, and further weakened by wars of succession, its greatness was short-lived. In the thirteenth century Russia was easily conquered by the subdivision of the Tatar (or Mongol) empire known as the Golden Horde. This conquest was achieved with a ferocity which left an enduring impression on the Russians – a brutal reminder of the cost of weakness and division. Nor were others slow to take advantage of Russia's misfortunes. Almost immediately Swedes, Finns, Lithuanians and the Livonian and Teutonic knights attempted to seize Russian territory. Vanquished by the Tatar khans, and hemmed in by enemies to the west, the Russians went through a long period of cultural and economic isolation.

Tatar rule was not, however, disastrous for all Russians. The rulers of the small city of Moscow were quick to see the advantages to be reaped by being the most effective collaborators with their Tatar overlords. Successive Muscovite rulers won the title of 'Grand Prince' from the Tatar khans. For example, they aided a Tatar sack of the rival city of Tver. For such servility they won power and wealth, which allowed them greatly to expand the territory of Moscow, by purchase and conquest. As internal disputes weakened Tatar control, it was possible for Moscow to begin to assert its independence. In the fifteenth century the Golden Horde was fractured into the Khanates of Kazan, Astrakhan and Crimea. As a result, in 1480 Ivan III (the Great) (reigned 1462–1505) ceased paying tribute, formally ending a 'Tatar Yoke' which had been ineffective for decades. Furthermore, when Constantinople fell to the Turks, he took the opportunity to marry Sophia, the only surviving imperial princess. He also adopted the imperial emblem of the two-headed eagle. Clearly he was making a claim for the imperial status of his realm, as the inheritor of Byzantium's glory. Russia was therefore by no means short of the pretensions of power. But was there any substance to these pretensions?

The Russian army did have some successes, and Russia expanded its frontiers considerably. Ivan IV (the Dread or Terrible), who adopted the title of Tsar (or Caesar) of Russia, undertook an army reform in 1550 which saw the establishment of the *streltsy* regiments – a new elite force. His modernised army conquered the Khanates of Astrakhan and Kazan, and his successes opened the way for Russian expansion into Siberia. But for Russia the Crimean khan still remained a formidable enemy, capable of launching massive raids deep into Russian territory which carried off vast numbers of Russians into slavery. Indeed even when Peter came to the throne Russia paid the khans not to launch such raids, and the khans insisted that these payments were tribute. But it was against western European forces that Russian weakness was most obvious. When Ivan IV became embroiled in a war with Poland-Lithuania and Sweden (1558–83), he met complete and humiliating failure.

Even worse were the dreadful humiliations Russia suffered during the *Smutnye Vremia* – the Time of Troubles (1598–1613). The extinction of the ruling dynasty, the resulting attempts by leading nobles to seize the throne, peasant revolts and the appearance of pretenders to the throne all reduced Russia to chaos. Such weakness was an invitation to Swedish and Polish intervention. The Swedes seized Novgorod, and the Poles even held the Kremlin for a time. In short, the Time of Troubles was marked by social upheaval, civil strife, serf and Cossack risings, foreign intervention, major Tatar raids, and famine – all of which nearly resulted in the extinction of the Muscovite state. The lesson was clear. Even with a strong central authority Russia could not defeat its western neighbours, and without that central authority Russia was absolutely incapable of defending itself. Furthermore the new Romanov dynasty had to make major concessions to end foreign intervention, ceding the Baltic coastline to Sweden and Smolensk to Poland – concessions which the Russians never intended to be permanent.

Tatar rule and later the powerful and hostile states on Russia's frontier did much to separate Russia from the outside world. The resulting economic and cultural isolation was intensified by religious differences. Unlike the west, the Russians had embraced the Greek Orthodox Church in the tenth century. After Constantinople fell to the Turks in the fifteenth century, Moscow began to see itself as the third, and last, Rome. With the Rome of St Peter (Rome itself) and the Rome of Constantine (Constantinople) fallen to heathens, it was held that Moscow inherited the guardianship of Christianity. It was the sole remaining bastion of the true Christian faith, and could not be replaced. The Greek Church, by being directly subject to Moslem Turkish rule, had lost much of its moral authority. To Russians the Roman Church – and later Protestant sects – were heretics who must never be allowed to corrupt the pure Russian faith. Russians believed that they – and they alone – held the true faith, and their hope of salvation depended on maintaining its purity. Any contact with heretical westerners endangered their souls. Western ideas, arts and technology were therefore automatically viewed with hostility. The Russian Orthodox Church was undoubtedly therefore a strong force of ultra-conservatism and xenophobia.

b) The first steps out of Isolation

But Russian isolation was certainly not complete. Travellers visited Russia and established commercial links which the tsars were eager to encourage. The tsars sent embassies abroad. Yet the conduct of these embassies, which were ignorant of the behaviour that western courts had come to expect, did not necessarily improve Russia's prestige. Also Russia still did not conduct permanent diplomatic relations with western powers. Nor was Russia involved in the international alliance system. The western powers did not see the need to

cultivate Russia's favour. In the diplomatic settlements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Russian interests went unheard and unheeded.

But if the west had little interest in Russia, there were Russians who were interested in the west. Western technology, despite its suspect origins, was too important to ignore. In 1655 tsar Alexei (r. 1645–76) recaptured Smolensk and later Kiev. These successes were, however, due more to the now terminal decline of the Polish state rather than to Russian prowess. Russian arms, furthermore, remained unmatched by the Swedes, against whom they fought yet another exhausting and completely unsuccessful war (1656–61). It was such failures which drove Russia's rulers to overcome their distaste for the west and attempt to copy its successes. Determined efforts were made to import the expertise necessary for Russia to redress its weakness: nearly 20,000 mercenaries and technical advisers were hired by Russia before Peter's reign. Alexei also expanded diplomatic and cultural contacts with the west. There were Russians sympathetic to western contacts. A few *boyars* (nobles) even adopted western fashions such as shaving, a fashion which Peter embraced as a youth. Alexei even showed a slight interest – novel for Russia – in the sea, and had a ship built, the *Orel* (Eagle), which was unfortunately destroyed soon after. Such facts are crucial evidence to those who argue that tsar Peter's later reforms were by no means revolutionary in nature.

Despite these moves, basic attitudes had not changed. Despite the influx of foreigners as advisers and mercenaries, there was still virulent xenophobia. Foreigners were required to live in the *neimenskaya stoboda* – the German suburb – so as not to contaminate Russians with their heretical beliefs. Nor was Russia an attractive employer to foreigners. Even by the standards of the day, foreigners found Moscow to be crude, squalid and violent. The comments of visitors showed deep contempt for the Russians. Adam Olearius, the scholar and diplomat from Holstein, wrote of his visits during the 1630s and 1640s, in his *Voyages and Travels*, that if:

- 1 a man consider the natures and manner of life of the Muscovites, he will be forced to avow, that there cannot be anything more barbarous than that people. ... They never learn any art or science, nor apply themselves to any kind of study: on the contrary, they are so ignorant, as to think, a man cannot make an almanac unless he be a sorcerer, nor foretell the revolutions of the moon and eclipses, unless he have some communication with devils. ... This aversion I discovered in the Muscovites, took off that little inclination I sometime had to embrace that employment, which was offered me. ...
- 10 They are all much given to quarrelling, insomuch that in the streets they will rail at, and abuse one another like fish-wives, and that with such animosity, that those who are not acquainted with their humour think they will not part without fighting: but they seldom come to those

extremities, or if they fight, it is with their fists ... and the height of their rage is kicking, as much as they can, in the belly and about the sides.

It was never yet known that any Muscovite fought with sword or pistol.¹ Furthermore, those with valuable skills, such as the Scottish mercenary General Patrick Gordon, found that they would never be permitted to leave Russian service. He soon longed to leave a country where:

- 1 I perceived strangers to be looked upon as a company of hirelings, and, at the best ... [as a necessary evil]; no honours or degrees of preference to be expected here but military, and that with a limited command, in the attainment whereof a good mediator ... and a piece of money or other bribe, is more available as the merit or sufficiency of the person ... no marrying with natives, strangers being looked upon by the best sort as scarcely Christians and by plebeians as mere pagans ... the people being morose and niggard, and yet overweening and valuing themselves above all other nations; and worst of all, the pay small.²

Still, despite the difficulties, foreigners were going to Russia, and there was a section of the Russian elite who favoured much closer contact with the west. Russia by the end of the seventeenth century was clearly beginning to move out of its isolation.

There were also signs that Russia's diplomatic isolation may have been drawing to a close. In 1683 the Turks undertook a disastrous siege of Vienna. In the following years, under Polish, Venetian and Austrian pressure, it appeared that their position in Europe could collapse totally. The Poles wanted Russian support for this war and were prepared to offer a price which the Russians could not refuse – Kiev. In a treaty of 1667 Russia had promised to return Kiev to Poland in two years. It was a promise that Russia never kept. Kiev, the capital of the first Russian state, was of so much emotional value that the Russians could not bear to do so. Now the Poles offered to withdraw their claims on the city if Russia went to war with the Turks and their Crimean Tatar vassals. For the Poles this was a very heavy price to pay. What then could Russia offer to make such a price worthwhile? Russia, after all, had scarcely proved a formidable enemy to the Poles: was it not too weak to prove a worthwhile ally?

2 Russia's Weakness

KEY ISSUES How urgently did seventeenth-century Russia need western ideas and technology, and how successful were Peter's predecessors in gaining them?

a) Political backwardness

That Russia had been lagging behind the west in a number of areas is

clear. These included political backwardness. Western Europe in the seventeenth century was no stranger to absolute monarchy. But not even Louis XIV exercised the arbitrary, despotic powers of the tsars. Even the greatest Russian *boyars* (nobles) debased themselves before the tsar and referred to themselves as his *ibololops* – his slaves. In theory there were no limits to the autocratic powers of the tsar. Russia itself was seen as his *volchina* – his personal property. From the greatest to the lowest, property, privileges and even life itself depended on the whim of the tsar. There were, it is true, representative bodies within Russia. There was the *boyar duma* of the nobles and the *zemsky sobor* (assembly of the land), which included representatives from the provinces (in 1613 even some peasants). The tsar could summon and consult these bodies. Indeed, after the Time of Troubles tsar Michael consulted them frequently. But they did not develop into bodies which could curtail autocratic power. Basically, they lacked any corporate identity – their common interests were not as important to them as their differences. They never had the control over state finances which gave the English Parliament its power. They also had no conception of the growing representative bodies in the west. They therefore never sought the role of limiting the authority of the sovereign. As the Romanov dynasty became secure, they became irrelevant. The tsars remained arbitrary and despotic rulers who governed by decree.

Restraints upon the conduct of the tsars did, however, exist in the form of tradition and the Church. Elaborate and time-consuming rituals governed much of their lives. They were generally deeply pious men. Alexei spent several hours a day in prayer, and lived a life very similar to that of a monk. The tsars were certainly not above demanding 'loans' from the Church which they never repaid, nor would they tolerate criticism from the priesthood, but they were generally willing to be guided by the patriarch. At times they allowed the patriarch a status of equality with themselves. Thus this extremely conservative institution had enormous influence over the tsars. This could have its disadvantages. Alexei loyally supported Nikon, the Patriarch (1652–66), who was determined to correct a number of errors which had entered Russian liturgy and ritual during centuries of isolation, and to make Russia conform with the original Greek doctrine. Yet his arrogance alienated even the deeply pious tsar by 1658, and he lost effective power over the Church several years before he was formally deposed, but by then the damage had been done. Nikon's reforms included that Christ's name must be written as 'Iesus' instead of 'Isus', and that Russians were to cross themselves with three, instead of two, fingers. For the illiterate laity, who only participated in the religious life of the Church through its ritual, these were monstrously sacrilegious ideas – especially as they had long been told that only Russia had the pure faith. Many felt that the reforms would doom their souls. The result was a permanent schism (perhaps involving up to 20 per

cent of the population) within the Church, which had made the reforms, and defiance of the state, which attempted to enforce them. These rebels were known as either the Old Believers (the *starovery*) or as schismatics (*raskolniki*). In the face of repression the Old Believers chose either mass migration to the periphery of Russia, or mass suicide (in 1684–90 alone perhaps 20,000 burned themselves to death). Subsequent attempts to suppress this defiance were all frustrated by the fanaticism of the Old Believers.

Thus in Russia constraints on the tsar were few and the highest in the land could be brought down on the tsar's whim. For the bulk of the population there was no protection from exploitation, for along with political backwardness there was a great deal of social backwardness. The condition of the peasantry had been deteriorating for some time. From the reign of Ivan IV the Russian expansion into Siberia had been causing problems for the *boyars*. Access to this new territory gave peasants the opportunity to abandon impoverished homes and uncongenial overlords for new lands. The entire economic security of the *boyars* was being undermined. This led to the first moves to impose serfdom on the peasantry – denying them the right to migrate to protect the interests of the *boyars*. Serfdom was extended in 1649 with a new legal code – the *Ulozhenie* – which gave legal status to the institution. The interests of the *boyars* were indeed being protected, but only at the price of raising severe social tensions. Serfdom was bitterly resented by the peasantry. As the revolt of Stenka Razin, which ran from 1667 to 1671, showed – attracting as it did Cossacks, fugitive serfs and slaves, non-Russians and malcontents of all kinds – these social tensions were not eased by the passage of time.

b) Economic backwardness

As is often the case, alongside political and social backwardness there was economic backwardness, with which was associated technological backwardness. Agriculture remained an extremely backward sector of the Russian economy. The best soil was in the south, the black earth of the steppe, which had been for much of Russia's history under foreign occupation, and still suffered Tatar raids. Russian agriculture mostly developed in the north, where the soil quality was poor, rainfall uncertain and the harsh climate allowed only a brief growing season. Yields were therefore low. No reliable surplus existed of a size to attract investment. Farming techniques therefore remained primitive. Ploughs which only scratched the earth instead of turning it over were the norm, as was an inefficient three-field system, by which one-third of the land lay fallow each year. At the end of Peter's reign Russia had a population of roughly 14 million, of whom 97 per cent lived in the countryside. The peasantry could, despite occasional crop failures and even famine, generally support itself. But there were, as we shall see (page 94), rigid limits to what the state could extract in taxation.

There was also absent from Russia any sign of a class which might have developed into a significant middle class or bourgeoisie. There was certainly a lot of interest in trade and manufacturing, and Russian merchants astonished foreigners with their sharp practice and dishonesty. But few could become rich through trade. If a profitable trade was developed by Russian entrepreneurs, the tsars, eager for more revenue, would declare it a royal monopoly. The crown, for example, made royal monopolies on trade in a long list of goods including cereals, vodka, caviar and leather. Such merchants who still managed to earn great wealth would often be conscripted into the ranks of the *gosti*, an honoured merchant class – in short made servants to the crown and dependent upon royal favour. Nor was there much opportunity for the development of an independent and wealthy class of manufacturers. There was plenty of activity in manufacturing. The limitations of agriculture required many Russians to supplement their income through activities such as leather tanning, weaving and distilling salt. Thus a great volume of manufacturing took place, but it remained very small scale and primitive: cottage industries and tiny workshops supplied the limited needs of the locality. What little larger scale production existed, which until the seventeenth century was largely limited to iron, salt and coarse cloth, was again controlled by the tsar.

c) Attempts to remedy Russia's backwardness

But just as the tsars had been unable to avoid accepting the superiority of western military expertise, so they were driven to accept that western technology and industry were an essential part of that superiority. They realised that they must establish the industries needed to complement their military reforms. Thus in 1682 western experts established iron works at Tula in the Urals. When Peter was born in 1672, 20 small private and state-owned iron foundries existed in Russia. Thus Russia had taken its first faltering steps in the direction of industrialisation before his succession. But these steps were noteworthy especially for the almost complete absence of Russian capital, management and skilled workforce. If Russia was to address its economic and technological backwardness, a truly enormous amount of work remained to be done.

While it is, therefore, realistic to speak of Russia's isolation, weakness and backwardness, it is still clear that these problems were not as great as they had been by the time Peter came to the throne. In most areas the reform of Russia had begun – even if only in the most tentative manner. If Russia was to benefit from the efforts of his predecessors, the new tsar would have to press on with this process of reform. It remains to be seen how well suited Peter was to bear such a responsibility.