PETER THE GREAT

Death toll: 3 million
Rank: 30
Type: despot
Broad dividing line: Peter against the past
Time frame: ruled 1682–1725
Location: Russia
Who usually gets the most blame: Peter I

Peter the Great was larger than life in so many ways. Standing at a full two meters (six feet seven inches), he is the tallest major player in this book, and he stands out from the pages of history as a man who accepted no limits and shaped the world to fit his vision. Peter rudely dragged Russia into the modern world, no matter who resisted or how badly it hurt. He shuffled populations from where they were to where he wanted them, created a new capital at Saint Petersburg, and boosted his army to unprecedented levels. He fought almost continuous wars with his neighbors.

Modernism

When he first came to the throne upon the death of his father in 1682, the ten-year-old tsar Peter I had to share the throne with his half-witted older brother Ivan, while his mother ruled as regent. It wasn’t until after these two died (brother in 1696 and mother in 1694, both—surprisingly for the Russian court—of natural causes) that Peter was free to do as he pleased.

Peter wanted most of all to make Russia a world-class power. It hardly seemed right that tiny countries like Holland and Denmark had more clout than gigantic Russia. He set off on a grand tour of the West, where he investigated and tested every aspect of its culture. He worked in a Dutch shipyard under a false name. He dined with scholars in England.

Peter started his improvements with superficial modernization, figuring that if the Russians looked civilized maybe they would act it. Traditionally, Orthodox Russians wore long beards with religious pride; God had put beards on men’s faces, and it was impious and vain to shave them off. Upon his return from the West, Tsar Peter immediately ordered all Russians to shave and look more Western. He himself often pulled out a razor
and forcibly shaved bearded men in the street. Eventually he relented and allowed the stubbornly religious to pay a beard tax instead, but even then, they had to wear a visible beard permit as a medallion or risk being shaved. *

Peter studied every technology he could get his hands on. He especially liked dentistry, and if anyone even hinted at a toothache in Peter’s presence, the poor suffering soul would be held down while Peter whipped out his pliers and yanked out the offending tooth.

**Power**

While Peter was off in western Europe trying to learn its clever ways, his half sister Sophia raised a rebellion among the strelsky (palace guards). Peter hurried home and bloodily reasserted control. Over a thousand ringleaders were publicly executed by humiliating and agonizing torture, while Sophia was stashed in a convent.

While concentrating all power into his own hands, Peter tried to break the power of the Russian church and confiscate its wealth for the state. When the patriarch (head of the church) died in 1700, Peter prevented the church from electing a new one. He stalled long enough for the church leadership to get used to the idea of being without a patriarch, and in 1721, Peter turned the church into a branch of the Russian civil service under the authority of the tsar. He also changed the Russian year 7208 (after creation) to 1699 (after Christ), and moved New Year’s Day from September 1 to January 1 to bring it in line with the Western calendar.

Originally, Russian boyars ranked in importance according to the prestige of their ancestry, but Peter imported Western-style feudalism in which the nobility was assigned equal privileges or obligations across the class. The boyars were abolished as a class in 1711 and reordered with Western titles.

About the same time, Peter refashioned the Russian system of free peasants and household slaves into Western-style serfdom, which elevated the slaves but degraded the peasantry. The ex-slaves were now subject to taxation, while a whole string of new Russian laws forbade peasants from traveling without a passport or signing contracts without government approval.

Every year, a new levy replenished the ranks of his army, and each new census helped Peter utilize every last citizen he could get his hands on. Noblemen were required to pro-

* There’s a tendency by later generations and by foreigners at the time to treat Peter’s beard laws as a joke, but hair and clothing are key expressions of culture. Forty years ago, long hair on a male was a stomping offense in some places, and more recently I heard that “a Nevada school district agreed to pay $400,000 to a Muslim girl and her friend over allegations that other students threatened to kill her in the stairwell for wearing a religious head scarf and the staff did nothing to stop it.” (Fox News, April 8, 2009)
vide one soldier per 100 inhabitants of their lands and one cavalryman per every 150 inhabitants. Before Peter, the Russian government had counted only households, but the new census tried to count individual taxpayers, a category that was expanded by the addition of several previously exempt classes.

War

When Peter began his rule, Russia's only seaport was Archangel on the White Sea just below the Arctic Circle, which froze half of the year. Peter soon launched Russia's endless quest for a warm-water port. He constantly tried to expand northward against the Swedes, who held the Baltic coast, and southward against the Turks, who held the Black Sea coast.

Every year saw a war (usually bungled) somewhere. He fought the Turks over Azov on the Black Sea in 1695 and 1696. He fought them again on the Pruth River in 1711-12, but the offensive went badly, as usual. In 1722-23, Peter fought the Persians south of the Caspian Sea. Meanwhile, revolts needed to be put down and Siberia needed to be brought under control. In each of these wars, Peter relied on what would come to be the characteristic strength of the Russian army—the stubborn ability to absorb incredible punishment and staggering loss of life to simply outlast their opponents.

Even in peacetime, soldiers weren't allowed to idle away in forgotten garrisons. Conscripted labor, both soldiers and civilians, dredged rivers and built roads, factories, and canals all over Russia. This is probably where Peter racked up his biggest body count. Peter's relentless maintenance of a huge standing army was just as deadly as his wars. Disease, malnutrition, neglect, and brutal discipline cut through his troops; so did the frigid cold of an empire that stretched all the way across the north of Asia. The draft was so dreaded that peasants mangled themselves to be ineligible. They knocked out their own teeth so they couldn't bite open cartridges to load their muskets. They severed their own toes so they couldn't march and fingers so they couldn't shoot.

Peter's attempt to open an outlet to the Baltic Sea was bloody enough to earn a chapter all by itself (see "Great Northern War"), but he didn't wait for the war to be settled in his favor to start building a new coastal capital as his gateway to the west. He rounded up criminals, prisoners, and peasant conscripts, and moved construction teams to the coast to begin building Saint Petersburg on land that technically still belonged to Sweden. He forbade the construction of stone buildings throughout Russia in order to leave all of the masons in the country free to work on his new city. When the first 40,000 workers died of fevers in the swamps, he rounded up another 40,000 to replace them. Those died as well, so he found more. All in all, as many as 100,000 workmen were sacrificed in the building of Saint Petersburg.
And Peace

To maintain his enormous army in peacetime, Peter dispersed his soldiers throughout Russia and shifted the cost of their upkeep to local taxpayers. In 1718, to determine how many soldiers each community could support, Peter decreed a new census to be taken the next year. Anyone who ducked this census would have all of his property confiscated and turned over to whomever informed on him.

Local citizens panicked whenever a new convoy of officials approached and needed to be fed and housed at local expense. Soldiers billeted in the community served as police, informers, and enforcers for Peter's officials. Peter's soldiers and agents were a constant drain on local resources, and the only useful task they performed for the local nobility was keeping peasants from escaping.²

Favors were issued to any investor who voluntarily helped with Peter's projects. To promote industry, Peter allowed investors to buy entire villages and put the peasants to work in factories, bound by all of the duties of serfdom toward their new masters. Most peasants were still tied to the land as serfs and hunted down if they ran away, but now Peter exempted runaways who found work in factories. They could stay at their new jobs.³

If Peter felt that any resource was not being thoroughly put to use, he simply decreed that it would be developed. The state took control of it; workers were rounded up and resettled. Among the new communities Peter founded, Yekaterinburg, named after his empress and built in the Urals by 25,000 drafted serfs, became the center of the iron industry.⁴

Anyone who tried to hide assets from the tax collector would have that property seized. In fact, wealth was so easily seized by government officials and landlords on one pretext or another that most Russians hid their assets. Peasants buried whatever cash they had, which inhibited commerce. Any gold and silver that Peter's agents discovered being hoarded rather than invested was declared a parasitical drain on the economy and grabbed by the state, and the cycle began again.⁵

Court Life

Peter was ostentatiously relaxed around all people regardless of rank—peasants, priests, servants, soldiers, boyars, foreigners, and so on—and he didn't hold with strict protocol; however, he became sulky when he felt he was offended, and was prone to cruel and ribald practical jokes, many involving dwarfs. He expected his courtiers to drink as enthusiastically as he did, although no one had his stamina. He disliked pomp and luxury and happily dined on the simplest food and slept in the humblest beds. He was proud of being able to endure any hardship he inflicted on his own soldiers and sailors.⁶
Peter groomed his son Alexis for the succession, but Alexis snapped under the pressure from his hyperactive father. After Alexis took a peasant girl as his full-time mistress and shot himself in the hand to avoid military duty, Peter turned cold toward his son. Expecting punishment for his disobedience to arrive at any moment, Alexis fled Russia, taking refuge in Austria first, then Italy. Peter tracked him down and ordered him to return, promising to forgive him if he came back, but to hunt him forever if he didn't. Alexis fell for it and returned.

For a while all seemed well, until Peter had a chance to brood over his son's betrayal. Who in the palace had aided Alexis's escape? Who would have disobeyed the tsar? He had Alexis seized and tortured into revealing the names of his accomplices. Then under Peter's personal supervision Alexis was whipped bloody and raw for several days until he died in agony.

Nobody stayed on Peter's good side forever. In 1724 one of Peter's principal advisers, Willem Mons, fell from favor and was accused of taking bribes. He was tortured into confessing and publicly cut apart as punishment. According to legend, however, Mons's real crime was having an affair with Peter's second wife, Catherine, so Peter had his freshly severed head put in a jar of alcohol, which was placed on her bedside table to keep her company. For many years, Mons's pickled head and that of his sister Anna (the alleged matchmaker in the affair) could be seen in the cabinet of curiosities at the Kunstkamera, Peter's science museum, along with Peter's dwarf collection.