

Documents on Peter the Great, His Travels to Europe, and Subsequent Reforms

When Peter the Great (r. 1682–1725) came to power, the territory of Russia (or Muscovy, as it was then called) had expanded from 17,800 to nearly 6 million square miles. Although Russia had imported technology and ideas from Western Europe over the previous few centuries, Peter attempted to completely Westernize his empire. In a series of reforms, he attempted to change all aspects of Russian life: from the military, church, and time-keeping, to education and even the style of clothes that his people had to wear. As part of these reforms, Peter forced the sons of Russia's nobility to go to Europe for advanced study and training, as he himself had done.

In the first two readings below, we hear the voice of Peter himself. These readings have been reproduced from *A Source Book for Russian History From Early Times to 1917*, vol. 2, pp. 313 and 323.

X:2. PETER'S ACCOUNT OF HIS SOJOURN IN HOLLAND, 1697-1698

The following account of Peter's sojourn in Holland and England in 1697-98 is taken from the preamble to the Naval Service Regulations of 1717. The passages in italics were inserted by Peter himself.

Reference: Nikolai G. Ustrialov, *Istoriia tsarstvovaniia Petra Velikogo*, 5 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1858-63), 2:400-01.

Thus he [Peter] turned all his thoughts to building a fleet; and when, on account of the Tatar attacks, Azov had been besieged, and later successfully taken, he could not bear to deliberate long over his unalterable desire but quickly set about the work. A suitable place for shipbuilding was found on the river Voronezh just below the city of that name, skilled shipwrights were called in from England and Holland, and a new enterprise was started in Russia in 1696—the building of ships, galleys, and other boats—at a great expense. So that this work would be established in Russia forever, he decided to introduce this art among his people. For this purpose he sent a large number of noble-born persons to Holland and to other states to study naval architecture and seamanship.

And what is even more remarkable, the monarch, as if ashamed to lag behind his subjects in this art, himself undertook a journey to Holland, and in Amsterdam, at the East India shipyard, he devoted himself, together with his other volunteers, to learning naval architecture; in a short time he perfected himself in what a good ship's carpenter should know, and with his own labor and skill he built and launched a new ship.

Then he asked Jan Pool, the master shipwright of that shipyard, to teach him the proportions of ships, which he showed him in four days. In Holland, however, this art is not perfected in accordance with the principles of geometry but is guided by a few rules only, and for the rest it is based on practical experience of long standing; the above-mentioned master shipwright also told him this and said that he was incapable of showing him everything on a draft; then he felt disgusted that he had undertaken such a long journey without attaining the desired aim. Several days later His Majesty happened to be at a gathering at the country house of the merchant Jan Tessingh, where he sat very unhappy for the reason mentioned. When, in the midst of the conversation, he was asked why he was so gloomy, he explained the reason. Among those present there was an Englishman who, upon hearing this, said that in England naval architecture had been perfected as much as any other and that it was possible to learn it in a short time. His Majesty was overjoyed at these words, and without delay he went to England, where he mastered this science within four months; and, returning from there, he brought with him two master shipwrights—John Deane and Joseph Ney.

X:7. PETER HENRY BRUCE ON PETER THE GREAT, CA. 1711-1715

Peter Henry Bruce (1692-1757), a soldier of fortune of Scottish origin, began his military career in the Prussian army in 1706; from 1711 to 1724 he served in the Russian army, where he enjoyed the protection of his distant relative, Count James ("Iakov Vilimovich") Bruce (1670-1735), Peter the Great's chief of artillery, to whom he refers in his *Memoirs* as "the General" or "General James." Bruce wrote the English version of his *Memoirs*, which had originally been written in German, in 1755.

Reference: *Memoirs of Peter Henry Bruce, Esq.* (Dublin, 1783), pp. 50-53, 136-40, 155-57, 175-77, 179, 180-82. (There is also a 1772 edition, published in London.) The edition of 1783 was recently reprinted (N.Y: Da Capo, 1968).

[In 1714] the Czar . . . addressed the following discourse to his senators: "Brethren, who is the man among you, who, twenty years ago, could have conceived the idea of being employed with me in shipbuilding here on the Baltic, and to settle in those countries conquered by our fatigues and bravery? Of living to see so many brave and victorious soldiers and seamen sprung from Russian blood? And to see our sons coming home accomplished men from foreign countries? Historians place the ancient seat of all sciences in Greece; from whence being expelled by the fatality of the times, they spread into Italy, and afterwards dispersed themselves all over Europe; but by the perverseness of our ancestors, they were hindered from penetrating any farther than into Poland; the Poles, as well as the Germans, formerly groped in the same darkness in which we have hitherto lived, but the indefatigable care of their governors at length opened their eyes, and they made themselves masters of those arts, sciences, and social improvements, which formerly Greece boasted of. It is now our

turn, if you will seriously second my designs, and add to your obedience voluntary knowledge. I can compare this transmigration of the sciences to nothing better than the circulation of the blood in the human body; and my mind almost prognosticates that they will, some time or other, quit their abodes in Britain, France, and Germany, and come and settle, for some centuries, among us; and afterwards, perhaps, return to their original home in Greece. In the mean time, I earnestly recommend to your practice the Latin saying, *Ora et labora* (pray and work); and in that case be persuaded you may happen, even in your own life-time, to put other civilized nations to the blush, and raise the glory of the Russian name to the highest pitch." The senators heard this harangue of their monarch with a most respectful silence; and answered, that they were all disposed to obey his orders and follow his example. Whether they were sincere in their declaration is another question.

The following readings include decrees that Peter issued upon his return from traveling abroad. They include a decree on establishing a new-style calendar (with the new year beginning on January 1), encouragements for Russian students to study shipbuilding and navigation abroad, and a decree to create European-style universities so that students could study subjects like math and science. The following readings have been taken from *Imperial Russia, A Source Book, 1700-1917*, 2nd edition, pp. 13-20.

*A Decree on a New Calendar,
December 20, 1699*

The Great Sovereign has ordered it declared: the Great Sovereign knows that many European Christian countries as well as Slavic peoples are in complete accord with our Eastern Orthodox Church, namely: Wallachians, Moldavians, Serbs, Dalmatians, Bulgars, and subjects of our Great Sovereign, the Cherkessy [Ukrainians] and all Greeks from whom we accepted our Orthodox faith—all these peoples number their years from eight days after the birth of Christ, that is from January 1, and not from the creation of the world. There is a great difference in those two calendars. This year is 1699 since the birth of Christ, and on January 1 it will be 1700 as well as a new century. To celebrate this happy and opportune occasion, the Great Sovereign has ordered that henceforth all government administrative departments and fortresses in all their official business use the new calendar beginning January 1, 1700. To commemorate this happy beginning and the new century in the capital city of Moscow, after a solemn prayer in churches and private dwellings, all major streets, homes of important people, and homes of distinguished religious and civil servants should be decorated with trees, pine, and fir branches similar to the decoration of the Merchant Palace or the Pharmacy Building—or as best as one knows how to decorate his place and gates. Poor people should put up at least one tree, or a branch on their gates or on their apartment [doors]. These decorations are to remain from January 1 to January 7, 1700. As a sign of happiness on January 1, friends should greet each other and the New Year and the new century as follows: when the Red Square will be lighted and shooting will begin—followed by that at the homes of boyars, courtiers, and important officials of the tsar, military and merchant classes—everyone who has a musket or any other fire arm should either salute thrice or shoot several rockets or as many as he has. . . .

*An Instruction to Russian Students Abroad Studying Navigation**

1. Learn [how to draw] plans and charts and how to use the compass and other naval indicators.
 2. [Learn] how to navigate a vessel in battle as well as in a simple maneuver, and learn how to use all appropriate tools and instruments; namely, sails, ropes, and oars, and the like matters, on row boats and other vessels.
 3. Discover as much as possible how to put ships to sea during a naval battle. Those who cannot succeed in this effort must diligently ascertain what action should be taken by the vessels that do and those that do not put to sea during such a situation [naval battle]. Obtain from [foreign] naval officers written statements, bearing their signatures and seals, of how adequately you [Russian students] are prepared for [naval] duties.
 4. If, upon his return, anyone wishes to receive [from the Tsar] greater favors for himself, he should learn, in addition to the above enumerated instructions, how to construct those vessels aboard which he would like to demonstrate his skills.
 5. Upon his return to Moscow, every [foreign-trained Russian] should bring with him at his own expense, for which he will later be reimbursed, at least two experienced masters of naval science. They [the returnees] will be assigned soldiers, one soldier per returnee, to teach them [what they have learned abroad]. And if they do not wish to accept soldiers they may teach their acquaintances or their own people. The treasury will pay for transportation and maintenance of soldiers. And if anyone other than soldiers learns [the art of navigation] the treasury will pay 100 rubles for the maintenance of every such individual. . . .
-

*A Decree on the Founding of the Academy,
January 28, 1724*

His Imperial Majesty decreed the establishment of an academy, wherein languages as well as other sciences and important arts could be taught, and where books could be translated. On January 22, [1724], during his stay in the Winter Palace, His Majesty approved the project for the Academy, and with his own hand signed a decree that stipulates that the Academy's budget of 24,912 rubles annually should come from revenues, from custom dues and export-import license fees collected in the following cities: Narva, Dorpat, Pernov and Arensburg. . . .

Usually two kinds of institutions are used in organizing arts and sciences. One is known as a University; the other as an Academy or society of arts and sciences.

1. A University is an association of learned individuals who teach the young people the development of such distinguished sciences as theology and jurisprudence (the legal skill), and medicine and philosophy. An Academy, on the other hand, is an association of learned and skilled people who not only know their subjects to the same degree [as their counterparts in the University] but who, in addition, improve and develop them through research and inventions. They have no obligation to teach others.

2. While the Academy consists of the same scientific disciplines and has the same members as the University, these two institutions, in other states, have no connection between themselves in training many other well-qualified people who could organize different societies. This is done to prevent interference into the activity of the Academy, whose sole task is to improve arts and sciences through theoretical research that would benefit professors as well as students of universities. Freed from the pressure of research, universities can concentrate on educating the young people.

3. Now that an institution aimed at the cultivation of arts and sciences is to be chartered in Russia, there is no need to follow the practice that is accepted in other states. It is essential to take into account the existing circumstances of this state [Russia], consider [the quality of Russian] teachers and students, and organize such an institution that would not only immediately increase the glory of this [Russian] state through the development of sciences, but would also, through teaching and dissemination [of knowledge], benefit the people [of Russia] in the future.

4. These two aims will not be realized if the Academy of Sciences alone is chartered, because while the Academy may try to promote and disseminate arts and sciences, these will not spread among the people. The establishment of a university will do even less, simply because there are no elementary schools, gymnasia or seminaries [in Russia] where young people could learn the fundamentals before studying more advanced subjects [at the University] to make themselves useful. It is therefore inconceivable that under these circumstances a university would be of some value [to Russia].

5. Consequently what is needed most [in Russia] is the establishment of an institution that would consist of the most learned people, who, in turn, would be willing: (a) to promote and perfect the sciences while at the same time, wherever possible, be willing (b) to give public instruction to young people (if they feel the latter are qualified) and (c) instruct some people individually so that they in turn could train young people [of Russia] in the fundamental principles of all sciences.

6. As a result, and with only slight modifications, one institution will perform as great a service [in Russia] as the three institutions do in other states. . . .

7. Because the organization of this Academy is similar to that of Paris (except for this difference and advantage that the Russian Academy is also to do what a university and college are doing [in Paris]), I think that this institution can and should easily be called an Academy. Disciplines which can be organized in this Academy can easily be grouped in three basic divisions: The first division is to consist of mathematical and related sciences; the second of physics; and the third of humanities, history and law. . . .

This final reading is an excerpt from a contemporary observer, Jean Rousset de Missy. The excerpt describes the sweeping expanse of Peter's Westernization efforts, which went so far as to mandate how men and women should dress and wear their hair. This text has been reproduced from *Readings in European History, Vol. 2*, pp. 303-312.

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, 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 precious, 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. . .
