Peter the Great and the Westernisation of Russia?

Tom Blowers

University of Essex

Abstract

The reign of Peter the Great was exceptional as a period of transformation. It combined all the conflicting tendencies that had marked Russian development for years: the seemingly incompatible extremes of Russia balanced between Europe and Asia, between Muscovite traditional culture and Western civilisation, and between Eastern despotism and European Enlightenment. Thus, it is the intention of this work to determine the extent to which Peter the Great achieved a genuine 'westernisation' of Russia in implementing his unprecedented programme of reform *consciously* based upon western design. Utilising the diverse wealth of secondary literature concerning this subject, this work will seek to establish a balanced understanding of Petrine westernisation, one that desirably accommodates areas of both *'revolutionary'* transformation, when placed in their Russian context, but also those areas of *limited* change. Alexander Chubarov states that 'this debate touches the centrality of what Russia was and is' (1999: 35). Thus, the controversy surrounding Peter the Great's transformation of Russia continues to represent a debate about the Russian nation, its roots, identity, and place in the wider world.

Keywords: Peter the Great; Russia; westernisation.

Essay

The reign of Peter the Great (1682-1725) represents one of the most significant and contentious periods of pre-Soviet Russian history. Indeed, his extensive programme of reform and the resulting transformation of Muscovite Russia had an undoubtedly profound effect upon both contemporaries and later historiography concerning this matter, to the extent that an 'intellectual and political controversy over Peter's legacy has been raging for nearly two centuries and shows no signs of abating' (Chubarov, 1999: 31). Inherited by Peter in 1682, Muscovite Russia was best characterised by its relative 'backwardness', of which the Grand Embassy to Europe from 1697-1698 had made Peter himself all too aware. Whilst it is possible to argue that Muscovite Russia was 'rapidly developing' prior to the rule of Peter the Great (Anderson, 1995: 19), Russia in 1682 displayed few of the characteristics that had come to define the early modern 'westernised' state – characteristics that according to James Cracraft (2003: 75) included a 'military revolution' in technology, strategy and bureaucracy, a rationalisation of the governing system and cultural Enlightenment to name a few. As such, the scope of Petrine reform within Russia's political, economic, social, and cultural spheres requires a protracted consideration. First however, it is necessary to briefly comment upon the process of 'westernisation', potentially a problematic term. Importantly, it was the developed nations of early modern Europe, in particular, though not exclusively, France and Britain, which represented the ideal model of 'western' modernity during the period in question. It is therefore important to recognise in the context of this investigation that the processes taking place in Russia - 'Europeanization', 'Westernisation' and also 'Modernisation' - all in essence represent interchangeable concepts and therefore the same voluntary or enforced adoption of western values, norms and designs.

Representing a fundamental aspect of Russia's relative 'backwardness' at the end of the seventeenth century, Muscovite Russia displayed few if any of the characteristics that had come to define the great military powers of the western world. Best characterised by a dependence upon foreign mercenaries, a reliance upon outdated Streltsy, feudal cavalry and artillery units, alongside a lack of a regular standing army and trained officers, Muscovite Russia at the beginning of Peter's reign in fact possessed a military capability that at best 'bore comparison with those of leading European states dating to a century and more before' (Cracraft, 2003: 33). Conversely, Matthew Anderson (1987: 262-3) argues that in a dramatic turnaround, the Russian military that, to the powers of Europe for much of the seventeenth century had been considered a negligible force, by the time of Peter's death, had been transformed and effectively westernised to the extent that 'she was feared by her neighbours and courted as a military…equal by the greatest powers of Europe'.

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Substantiating Anderson's argument, the St. Petersburg College of War (1718) designed with European principles in mind, established for the first time in Russia centrally managed offices to govern and coordinate military activities. Mirroring military bureaucracy of the West, there consequently emerged the principles of a more efficient system of central control and command. This in turn led to improved recruitment, organisation and training of units, and increased coordination in deployment and supply (Cracraft, 2003: 33-4). In technology and strategy, the westernisation of Russian military capabilities is equally apparent. The reign of Peter the Great saw the introduction of separate mobile artillery, firearm and engineering units, the effectiveness of each made all the more great by the establishment of respective training schools in both St. Petersburg and Moscow. Furthermore, with the translation and study of French, German and Dutch military textbooks, invaluable sources of western military tactics and strategy, 'systematic training', characteristic of leading western military forces, was taking shape (Bushkovitch, 2002: 36). Considered alongside the dramatic increase in manpower of the standing army to some 200,000 men by 1725 – a military force numerically *equal* to the peacetime standing army of France – it is evident that Russia's conventional military force by the time of Peter's death had become 'trained, uniformed and equipped to the better or best of contemporary European standards' (Cracraft, 2003: 34). Finally, Peter's personal creation, the Russian Navy that by 1725 consisted of 48 major warships and around 28,000 men was designed and built exclusively to British standards, arguably the greatest naval power of the contemporary western world (Riasanovsky, 1969: 254). Furthermore, Peter's navy represented a genuine force that 'few if any ships in the world [were] able to wrong' (Cracraft, 2003: 48). Whilst it should not be overlooked that Russian military innovation did take place during this period, notably for example in the form of unprecedented use of the bayonet in combat, it remains that to a greater extent, Peter's military transformation of Russia was not only 'imitative' of the West but also genuinely successful in bringing Russia into line with contemporary western capabilities and standards (Riasanovsky, 1969: 254).

The extent to which the Russian system of government was westernised by Peter the Great is, as Georgi Plekhanov (1963: 91) demonstrates, more open to historiographical debate. According to Plekhanov, in carrying out his innovations, Peter had relied upon the hitherto traditional methods of Russian government, 'oriental despotism', the features of which included state compulsion, direction and oppression. With Petrine Russia characterised by a population in its entirety deprived of state-granted rights and freedoms – the serf population in particular were treated as property of

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the state, whilst Peter was able to dispose of the property of *any* of his subjects at will – this argument at first glance appears valid (Plekhanov, 1963: 91). Importantly, Plekhanov (1963: 91) brings to our attention that these methods acted in stark contrast to the absolute monarchies that governed the majority of contemporary Western European states, the actions of which over their subjects were bound by limits of both law and custom. As such, the extent to which Peter westernised or initiated a departure from tradition in Russian politics appears minimal.

In my view however, the available evidence weighs more strongly in favour of a quite different historical perspective. Mikhailovich Bogoslovskii (1963: 22) contends that instead, 'Peter's concept of government was modern and dynamic…the state [acted] as leader and driving force in transforming the country and its people, [signalling] a move away from the traditional and passive approach of the Muscovite administration.' Similarly and directly challenging Plekhanov's thesis, Alexander Chubarov (1999: 23) states that the Petrine transformation actually signalled the establishment of a new socio-political system in Russia, absolutism - the western concept of the reorganisation of the political system based upon 'rational foundations'. In support of this perspective, the Table of Ranks established in 1722 combined traits such as lineage, rank, merit and years of service to define the status of a civil or military servant in Russian society. Not only did this innovation signal a degree of 'democratisation' within the ruling elite and a departure from the outdated governmental system of subordination based on privilege, it also 'signified greater systematisation and unification of the administrative service and thus its rationalisation', mirroring the traits of government common in Western Europe (Chubarov, 1999: 23).

Similarly, the rationalisation of the financial administration saw progress with the creation of the *Ratusha* in 1699, an innovative institution of local government coordination and centralisation that sought to develop trade, industry and control in Russian towns (Anderson, 1969: 21). Finally, based on the system that existed in Sweden and other parts of Europe, the replacement of Muscovite Chancelleries (*Prikazy*) by a network of administrative colleges, saw the establishment of modern government departments in which the business of government was conducted 'on a proper legal basis of norms and regulations' (Chubarov, 1999: 24). Overall therefore, it is clear that Peter's programme of governmental reform was guided by the principle of rationality in the context of hierarchy and organisation, the increased coordination and centralisation of government

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institutions, and the desire to increasingly base the system upon a legal basis of norms and regulations. Each of these developments was characteristic of a modern and therefore western style system of government and bureaucracy. Thus, far from 'primitive' and 'despotic' in nature, the Russian governmental system under Peter the Great demonstrated *convincing* elements of 'catch up' with the West and therefore a considerable extent of westernisation in terms of its organisational and structural characteristics.

According to James Cracraft, the most dramatic process of change in Russia under Peter the Great was the 'cultural revolution', the essence of which was 'a rapid and sweeping Europeanization of Russian ways of thinking and doing things, and of thinking and talking about them' (2003: 158). It is clear that the Russian nobility indeed underwent a process of profound cultural change whereby they 'caught up' with the West in more ways than one (Hughes, 2006: 67). Under Peter, the adoption of western dress, manner, etiquette, and social 'norm' were compulsory. Peter himself removed the beards of his leading courtiers, therefore removing their 'ancient symbol of Orthodox manhood' in favour of a more 'western' look. Following the precedent set in western societies, the traditional exclusion of noblewomen from elite social gatherings was also abandoned, leading to a rapid increase in the frequency of mixed gender parties, masquerades, parades and regattas (Acton, 1995: 60). Similarly, the elite arts were subject to an obvious process of westernisation. Increasingly, the western novelty of instrumental music entertained court function, while the Moscow Academy's staging of school dramas and shows such as 'Russia's Glory' signalled the arrival of theatre to Russia which was 'an integral part of the Western cultural scene' (Hughes, 2006: 73).

In terms of architecture, St. Petersburg, founded by Peter the Great in 1703, was constructed according to a regular plan, with straight streets, broad boulevards, brick construction, bright colours, and features such as window surrounds; it thus took on a genuinely western look and became 'the centre of European architecture in Russia' (Cracraft, 2003: 83). Equally, the *geographically* western location of St. Petersburg is explicable only in terms of Peter's vision of making Russia an integral part of Europe. The shift of the seat of government from Moscow to the new Russian capital represented a *conscious* symbolic departure from the Asiatic conservatisms and traditions of Moscow (Cracraft, 2003: 83). Finally, the adoption of thirty-eight Cyrillic letters based on modern designs for Latin characters alongside the translation of technical handbooks, scientific discourse, etiquette manuals and history books from Latin, German, Dutch and Italian originals,

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demonstrates the extent of westernisation upon Russian language and non-fiction literature respectively (Hughes, 2006: 75). As the evidence demonstrates, in terms of noble culture, a conscious westernisation of cultural norms expectations and practice can be credited to the reign of Peter the Great. However, it is, in my view, necessary to question the extent to which this westernisation of exclusively *elite* culture can be seen to have represented the westernisation of Russian culture in society as a *whole*.

Indeed, there exists substantial evidence to suggest that in reality 'a mere fraction of the population shared in the cultural revolution' and westernisation of Peter the Great (Acton, 1995: 60). Matthew Anderson (1969: 28) hints at a degree of historiographical consensus on this point, concluding that cultural westernisation 'made little impression except on a thin layer at the top of Russian society…the great mass of the population remained almost completely immune to all foreign influences'. This perspective is substantiated by the emergence of the so-called "Dual Russia" or the widening of the social 'gulf' in Russian society. The nobility and the peasantry were already separated by rigid social barriers. As a result of Peter's Westernisation they rapidly came to inhabit what were to all intents and purposes, different worlds alien and incomprehensible to each other (Chubarov, 1999: 29). In contrast to the 'cultural revolution' experienced by the Russian elite, the vast majority of the Russian peasantry during Peter's rule remained loyal to traditional customs, dress, idiom, and primitive Orthodoxy. When this is considered alongside the fact that the literacy rate in Russian society was 6.9 percent at best, the majority of which would have been situated within the noble stratum, it is evident that Peter's cultural westernisation of the masses was little more than *limited* in scope (Hughes, 2006: 75).

Further undermining the extent to which Peter westernised Russian society is the continued and undisturbed presence of what was arguably the most primitive aspect of the Russian social structure, serfdom. Alexander Kizevetter (cited in Chubarov, 1999: 31) contends that, 'having considerably modified the external forces of state institutions, Peter left completely untouched the basic principles of the old system of social organisation'. Indeed, in contrast to the developed societies of Western Europe, the Russian serf population remained legally bound to the estate of their respective overlord and were also obliged to exchange their freedom for the right to lease and cultivate sufficient land to maintain their own subsistence. It should perhaps be taken into account that reform of serfdom risked depriving the Russian nobility of what was essentially their subsistence,

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their dependency, the ownership of people. Alexander Cubarov (1999: 31) points out that for contemporaries it was difficult to imagine implementing such change without bringing the Russian state to the ground, bringing into question the degree of realistic choice available to Peter in regards to including reform of serfdom as part of his overall programme of westernisation. A figure originating from some time after the death of Peter, the presence in 1744 of 3,443,293 serfs in comparison to 37,326 gentry, offers an illustration of the extent to which, even during the process of Russia's 'westernisation', serfdom as an institution in Russian society continued to thrive (Kahan, 1966: 42). Importantly, serfdom thus remained a *barrier* to further Westernisation. In stark contrast to the developing, money based economies of Western Europe, within Russia, serfs were both the fiscal and economic unit of account. It wasn't until the second half of the eighteenth century that rentals and sales of land without serfs occurred to any notable extent (Kahan, 1966: 42). With serfdom largely absent from contemporary Western Europe by the fifteenth century – emancipation in Western Europe came as a result of acute labour shortages, the decline of the manorial system, and the growth of commerce, towns, and the money based economy – until emancipation in 1861, the continued presence of this primitive institution in Russia, is, in my view, of great significance in distancing Peter's process of reform from that of a genuine westernisation of Russian society (Merriman, 2004: 12-13).

In comparison to the aspects of Peter's reform already considered, his efforts to reorganise the economy of Russia seem to have received little detailed attention in historiography. Nevertheless, there are some aspects of economic change during Peter's reign that in my view require attention. For example, the already considered *Ratusha* sought to develop, via centralised coordination, trade and industry in the towns of Russia (Anderson, 1969: 21). The introduction of the "Soul Tax", coordinated and enforced by an innovative web of fiscal inspectors, according to James Cracraft (2003: 63), signalled an 'unprecedented degree of central government control over the economic…life of [Peter's] country'. More importantly, these examples of economic reform again demonstrate the emergence within Russia of the key features of the contemporary, developed West – economic centralisation, bureaucratic control, and rationalisation. Thus, Peter's economic reforms illustrate further the arrival of the bureaucratic revolution of early modern Europe to Russia. However, it must not be overlooked that at the time of Peter's death, agricultural labour remained the principle source of the nation's wealth, whilst trade and industry remained only weakly developed (Platonov, 1963: 89). For Sergey Platonov (1963: 89), this evidence is sufficient to

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conclude that it is 'impossible to see any revolutionary significance in Peter's economic policy, its objectives or results'. Indeed, it is my contention that the Russian economy underwent westernisation to only a *limited* extent. In comparison to contemporary European standards, the Russian economy remained relatively primitive in substance and product, despite the emergence of increasingly westernised features of organisation and management during the reign of Peter the Great.

Finally, it is necessary to address the extent to which Peter's reforms represented little more than the continuation of westernisation already underway long before he gained power. Matthew Anderson (1995: 19) contends that 'long before [Peter's] birth, forces of change and possibilities of new growth had been evident…he did not create them'. Evident here is the opinion amongst some in historiography that little of what was implemented during the reign of Peter was original, and that therefore, Russian westernisation in the eighteenth century was an *inevitable* process, one that would have taken place with or without the input of Peter the Great. In some respects, these ideas are based upon initially convincing evidence. For example, the Russian military had for years before the reign of Peter been subject to the influence of western personnel, technology and methods, notably for example in the form of Western craftsmen employed from the seventeenth century in the Kremlin Armoury workshops (Hughes, 2006: 69). In terms of Russia's cultural westernisation, even James Cracraft (2003: 89), the advocate of the so-called 'cultural revolution' of Peter the Great, accepts that 'European influences in Muscovite imagery, paralleling those in Muscovite architecture, had been preparing the ground for decades'. In my view however, it is important to note that historians have been equally willing to defend Peter's credentials as westerniser of Russia on the basis that in hitherto unprecedented fashion, Peter *consciously* implemented a *programme* of reform based on western design, identifiable as being part of a clear cut plan, or as Chubarov states, Peter's 'lifelong ambition' to westernise Russia (Chubarov, 1999: 20). Nevertheless, consideration of this particular debate in historiography fosters doubt regarding the extent to which Peter the Great can be legitimately regarded as having westernised Russia during his rule.

Reflecting upon the foregoing analysis, it seems most accurate to conclude that Peter the Great westernised Russia to only a *limited* extent during his reign. The most convincing example of Petrine westernisation has been identified in Peter's reform of the Russian military. Here, it is clear how the adoption of western technology, bureaucracy, training and strategy, ensured that Russia

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became a notable and to an extent equal military power by contemporary western standards. As a result, Russia became established as a respected member of the early modern European state system (Cracraft, 2003: 164). Beyond the military sphere however, there exists more doubt regarding the extent to which Peter's innovations can be considered as genuine westernisation. In terms of his 'cultural revolution', whilst it can be concluded with some certainty that Russian elite culture was westernised on a rapid and unprecedented scale, the same cannot be said for the masses of the Russian population. Beyond the elite, little if any significant cultural westernisation took place. Socially, the distinctly 'non-western' and primitive system of Russian social organisation remained untouched. Similarly, despite the presence of the beginnings of limited westernisation in the Russian economy and the workings of government and politics, the arguments of Sergey Platonov and Georgi Plekhanov cast significant doubt over the extent to which Peter the Great genuinely westernised these aspects of the Russian state respectively. Whilst going beyond the scope of this single investigation, it is worth noting that it would also be advantageous to investigate the extent to which Peter's motives for reform undermine his credentials as the 'westerniser' of Russia. Indeed, according to Michael Fonvisin (cited in Chubarov, 1999: 30), 'the spirit of [European] civilisation, the spirit of legal freedom and civil rights – was alien and even repulsive to [Peter]'. Furthermore, historian Daniel Schafly (1988: 2-13) brings to our attention that the vast majority of Peter's attempts at westernisation were met with widespread protest and discontent within Russian society. This level of opposition raises interesting questions regarding the extent to which Russia, regardless of the ambitions of Peter the Great, was either willing or ready to adopt an extensive system of western practices. Nevertheless, Peter's state sponsored westernisation by autocratic means almost certainly established in Russia limited elements of western custom, practice, technology and bureaucratisation. However, in my view it would represent a considerable oversimplification of this complex historical issue to assume that Peter the Great westernised Russia to anything more than a limited extent during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century.

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