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Emily Frances Pagrabs
Wofford College

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Peter the Great and His Changing Identity

Senior History Honors Thesis

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Emiley Pagrabs

Introduction

Well aware of the perception that foreigners held of him, Peter the Great would never apologize for his nationality or his country. A product of his upbringing, Peter did have some qualities that many foreigners criticized as barbaric and harsh. Said Peter:

They say that I am cruel; that is what foreigners think of me, but who are they to judge? They do not know what the situation was at the beginning of my reign, and how many were opposed to my plans, and brought about the failure of projects which would have been of great benefit to my country obliging me to arm myself with great severity; but I have never been cruel...I have always asked for the cooperation of those of my subjects in whom I have perceived intelligence and patriotism, and who, agreeing with my views, were ready to support them.¹

Essentially, Peter I was simply a Russian. He was a product of his circumstances. A young boy who had grown up in a Russia in turmoil, Peter had been forced to fight for his right to rule his country. Once there, he would do what he thought was best in order to secure his country's future. Although foreigners may have viewed him as cruel at times, Peter was simply unapologetically Russian.

While Peter would always be associated with the identity of a Russian tsar, the idea and perception of him was in an continual state of change. A myriad of Peters would emerge, each with a different purpose or quality emphasized. During his youth, Peter would be the young prince – eventually tsar – who was held at the mercy of his sister and her supporters. Instead of having control of his own destiny, he would develop separately from Moscow, and as a result

¹ Frank T. Brechka, "Peter the Great: The Books He Owned," *Journal of Library History* (1974-1987) 17, no. 1 (1982): 2.

separate from the title of tsar. Once he had claimed his crown for himself, he was the young ruler wanting to improve himself for the betterment of his country. While part of his Great Embassy was youthful curiosity, his voyage to Europe was an opportunity to become a competent ruler. As a result, he earned another identification: Western reformer. The West was eager to believe that simply through a closer proximity to their culture, the Russia tsar would desire to be more like them. His changes after the Great Embassy and his proclivity for reform led others to assume that he was a Westerner at heart, regardless of his inherent Russianness.

Once he had grown into his title as tsar, he took on other identities. To his people, he largely became the peculiar tsar with strange foreign practices. Sometimes, the Western countries would view him as the militarily powerful king of Russia – the man who was able to reform his military and bend Sweden to his will. At other times, the West confined his identity to the traditionally held stereotype of the barbaric Russians. When the French finally came face-to-face with Peter I, their perception of him changed once again. He was still tainted by his nationality, but he became respected for his intelligence and his social skills. After his death in 1725, the idea of Peter would continue to shift. Even though his body was in the ground, he continued to be a focus of thought politically and intellectually. For the French politically, he would become the rallying point of anti-Russian aggression. In contrast, the philosophes would mold and reconstruct his memory, creating an enlightened monarch that could be an example for others. At the beginning of her reign, Catherine the Great used Peter's memory and patriotism to cast herself as his spiritual heir, the rightful tsarina of Russia.

Peter, therefore, was not simply a Russian tsar; he was a military aggressor, an enlightened monarch, and a barbaric ruler. Each of these identities would have a different effect not only on his country, but the rest of Europe as well. During this time period, France was the

undisputed most powerful country on the continent. With the consolidation of power under Louis XIV and its own military aggression, France had asserted its dominance and authority. Not only were the French in a place of political and military power, but a center of cultural and intellectual life as well. Even with this firm grasp on control, Peter shook the French sense of security. Not Peter the person; that Peter was the genial man, who on meeting the boy-king Louis XV picked him up and swung him around in a circle. Peter the idea, the founder of modern Russia, and the focus of Russian aggression caused trepidation and concern. Intellectually, Peter became a subject for the *philosophes*. His actions and ideas gave them plenty of material to fashion into the story of an enlightened monarch, regardless of the validity of the description. The Russian tsar was able to enter the minds of the French, the first Russian ruler to do so. His influence was felt 1,700 miles away in the center of European power. As a result, multiple versions of Peter emerged. These identities prove that he was more than a Russian tsar; he was the tsar that brought Russia to Europe.

The Russia of Peter's Youth

Peter and his impact on Russia is not our focus; this is a path that many historians have followed with great success. Instead, we are looking at how Peter impacted the French perception of Russia. However, it is important to understand the Russia Peter was born into in order to gain a clear understanding of his impact. When foreigners thought of Russia in the late seventeenth century, they thought of a backwards country, one not in touch with modern innovation and ideas. Many of their impressions were not wrong. Those who had the fortune – or misfortune – to visit or live in Russia knew they were intentionally being confined to the “German suburb”. They felt the stares and disapproval from local citizens who regarded them as a contamination and a threat to their way of life. When they saw the boyars, they regarded their attire as medieval and an ancient sign of prominence no longer needed in the modern world. Up until the end of the seventeenth century, Russians suffered from an intense case of xenophobia. They distanced themselves from foreigners, believing that foreign influence would contaminate Russian culture. Only those with the tsar's permission were allowed to leave the country. Said an outside observer, “they do not send their children to foreign lands for their knowledge and customs, fearing that once they are acquainted with the faith and customs and blessed freedom of these lands they will renounce their own faith and adopt another and once they return they will have no care and thought for their home and kinsmen.”²

In terms of foreign governments, the main form of communication and interaction with the Russian state was through diplomats appointed by the Tsar. Compared to other governments,

² Dan Altbauer, “The Diplomats of Peter the Great,” *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 28, no. 1. (1980): 2.

Russia established few missions in foreign countries, and those that were established were deemed to be temporary. Before Peter, prominent aristocrats of noble birth were selected to be diplomats. Often, these men had no diplomatic training and no language skills, combined with a lack of knowledge of European affairs, which is not surprising considering they were not permitted foreign newspapers or allowed much contact with foreigners. They relied heavily on translator and other secretaries for assistance in carrying out the tsar's specific instructions. Ambassadors were often swayed by their own interest, and they would often give false reports to the tsar upon their return. As Dan Altbauer concluded, "Muscovite diplomacy was to some extent ill-informed and sometimes ineffective."³ Their lack of knowledge on European affairs, unfamiliarity with other languages, and their confinement to instructions and Russian customs hindered their abilities, especially considering they only remained abroad for short periods of time.

An old French document gives historians some clarity as to the behavior of Russian ambassadors in France in 1687.⁴ The Russian emissaries sent a messenger, who demanded a special audience with the king to deliver his message, to the French government to inform them of their impending arrival. The French ministers tried to convince the messenger to give his letter to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, which is French protocol. When he refused, the French had to send the messenger back without reading the message. Despite this mishap, Louis XIV granted the emissaries the honor given to representatives of Heads of States. This included the transfer of their baggage to Paris, duty-free, if they would promise not to break the royal seal

³ Ibid., 3.

⁴ The French title of the document is "Mémoire touchant le conduit qu'ont tenu en France les ambassadeurs de Moscovie". Along with members of the French department at Wofford, I attempted a translation, but it was written in an old form of the language and as a result was difficult to correctly translate. Ibid., 15.

until their arrival. The diplomats broke the seal in order to sell their furs and clothes in Saint-Denis, ignoring their diplomatic status and behaving below their rank. When local merchants complained, Louis XIV ordered the diplomats be brought to Paris and restrained from selling their goods. The Russians insulted and threatened the officials who accompanied them. As a result, the king refused to grant them a second audience. Only when the Russians agreed to demonstrate a level of submission and obedience was the issue resolved.⁵ Still, the incident was fixed in the memory of the French government, portraying the impoliteness and barbarity of the Russian people.

Not only were Russians discouraged from leaving their homeland, but foreigners were removed from society and isolated in the *nemestkaia sloboda*, or “German suburb” so as not to corrupt ordinary citizens. Ordinary citizens saw foreigners as “potential spies and distributors of wrong information about Muscovy in European countries.”⁶ Geoffrey Hosking points out that “their segregation attested to the suspicion with which Muscovites regarded the outside world, and especially the ‘crafty ways’ of the West.”⁷ As a result of their seclusion, a Western subculture slowly developed in Russia. While they were not allowed to interact with Russians, the foreigners were allowed to keep to themselves and maintain their Western culture. Western culture was not forced underground, but merely confined to the suburb. A small but vibrantly intelligent Western presence already existed in Russia when Peter was born. It was simply hidden from view.

⁵ Ibid., 15.

⁶ Built in 1652, contemporaries thought the “German suburb” was a practical way to preserve Russian culture. Ibid., 2.

⁷ Geoffrey A. Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552-1917* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1997), 76.

With small numbers of people abroad and the few foreigners confined to the “German suburb”, Russia developed – in numerous ways – separately from the rest of Europe. Small things point to this intentional distancing. For example, Lindsey Hughes noticed that most sources name May 30, 1672 as Peter’s birthday. However, at least one source says he was born on May 29, which followed the Old Russian practice of starting days at dawn instead of midnight.⁸ In other Western countries that had adopted the Gregorian calendar, the date was ten days ahead of Russia’s, which followed the old Julian calendar. The year was also recorded as 7180, following the Byzantine idea of numbering years with the creation of the world in 5509 BC. Hughes said, “These peculiarities of time and record keeping provide a foretaste of the different customs observed in the Russia where Peter was born and the West into which he was later to force open a ‘window’.”⁹ While the Western Catholic countries adopted the new calendar in 1582, Russia would not adopt the Gregorian calendar until 1918.¹⁰ At the time, the difference in calendars would not have affected Russia much, but today it shows the determination of Russia to remain entrenched in its own practices.

Overall, the Russia of Peter’s childhood was determined to prevent foreign influence by means of controls on society and a stern adherence to tradition. The church was in control of printing and publishing documents, with fewer than ten secular titles being printed in the seventeenth century.¹¹ Although the majority of citizens could not read, those who could were

⁸ Lindsey Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998; New York Times Company, 1998), <https://www.nytimes.com/books/first/h/hughes-peter.html>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Britain was also late to adopt the Gregorian calendar, only doing so in 1752; however, this was not unusual as Protestant countries were unwilling to blindly follow a Catholic creation. Regardless, Russia was still over 150 years later. Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

confined mostly to spiritual texts. Newspapers from abroad were restricted to use in the Foreign Office, and only leading nobles and clerics would have the resources or thought to include foreign books in their libraries. Women were all but excluded in society. Peter had six surviving half-sisters, who were not regarded as direct contenders for power – although one would prove to be dangerous – because no woman had ever held the throne on her own and princesses were kept unmarried to minimize complications. In addition, well-born women were kept in “virtual seclusion” and were unknown to people outside their families.¹²

No group of people exemplified the adherence to tradition more than the Russian boyars, the elite nobility. These men held the highest rank and were members of the old families who held hereditary landed estates. With parallels to the court life that Louis XIV established in France at Versailles, the Russian tsar was the center of life in the palace, with the boyars surrounding him in attempts to gain his favor. When they were honored by seeing “the bright eyes of the Tsar,” they would bow to the ground, some as many as thirty times, in gratitude for favors granted.¹³ The system was developed based on a system of strict hierarchy, which the boyars fought to protect. Struggling against each other for influence and control over the throne, the boyars would throw their support behind whoever seemed most powerful, hoping to gain an advantage for their loyalty.

Regardless of the traditional system they fought for, the boyars were known more as the symbol of traditional Russian appearance and dress. Polish costumes had become more popular at court, and in 1691, Tsar Fedor insisted robes be shortened. However, most boyars clung to their traditional Russian dress: “embroidered shirt, wide breeches tucked into floppy boots

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Robert K. Massie, *Peter the Great, His Life and World*, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1980), 11.

brilliantly colored in red or green with turned-up toes and gold trim, and...a caftan reaching to the ground with a straight collar of velvet... and sleeves of exaggerated length and width.”¹⁴

When out in procession, the outfit became more ostentatious, with a long, flowing robe and tall fur lined hats. With their long, unshaved beards, the boyars made an impression. Western fashion had modernized long ago, and many could no longer comprehend why the boyars would choose to adhere to such impractical attire. Westerners who had the opportunity to see the boyars regarded them with curiosity and amusement, and soon the boyars became the symbol of the old, traditional, backwards Russia. For this reason, Peter created upheaval among the boyars when he took out long cutting shears and cut the sleeves of the boyars. Beginning in 1700, Peter issued a series of decrees that required Western dress for his officials and then his citizens.¹⁵

As a result of these factors, European powers did not take Russia seriously as a power, but at the same time Russia was not concerned by this. Russia’s interactions with the rest of Europe were limited, and Russia had little intention of expanding them. In many ways, Russia was content with its place in the East, isolated from the politics of their neighbors. Lindsey Hughes made the following observation of the status of Russia:

This, then, was the Russia into which Peter was born, a country...deeply rooted in tradition and in many ways very distinct from Western Europe, where Russia was still regarded as a ‘rude and barbarous’ kingdom...In the year 1672 the birth of a Russian prince went more or less unnoticed in the rest of Europe, of which Russia was at best a fringe member. There would have been scarcely any speculation about the new prince’s

¹⁴ Ibid., 238.

¹⁵ At first, only government officials, boyars, and men of property, were required to wear Hungarian or German-style caftans. The next year, men were commanded, “to wear a waistcoat, breeches, gaiters, boots, and a hat in the French or German style, and women to put on petticoats, skirts, bonnets and Western shoes.” Ibid., 238.

eligibility as a marriage partner, since the Muscovite royal family was known to be uninterested in such foreign involvements, although this had not always been the case.¹⁶

Considering the important power politics involved in royal marriages, this is an important consideration. European powers did not consider it worthwhile to marry their royalty to Russians, as it would gain them little political capital. By failing to engage not only politically but socially as well, Russia further fell from the notice of the Europeans.

This is the Russia that Peter was born into in 1672. Throughout his childhood and the very early years of his reign, he would in many ways be held prisoner by the expectations and customs of traditional Russia. The purpose of this thesis is not Peter's reign, but the change in France's perception of him and of Russia by the end of his life. As a result, it is not necessary to go into detail about Peter's youth; however, a few explanations are critical to understanding both Peter himself and France's early opinions.

¹⁶ Hughes, *Russia in the Age*.

Peter: the Boy-Prince and Young Tsar

At the time of Peter Alekseevich Romanov's birth in 1672, his parents, nineteen-year-old Natalia Kirillovna Naryshkina and Tsar Alexis Mikhailovich, had been married for less than eighteen months. The Tsar had been married previously to Maria Miloslavkaia, who had died three years previously giving birth to her thirteenth child. Sadly, most of the males had died early, and by 1672 only two of the five previous sons were still alive. Neither Fedor, who had delicate health, nor Ivan, who was mentally and physically handicapped, could be counted on to have a long reign; however, there was hope that one of them would produce an heir that would push Peter further down the line of succession.¹⁷ Tsar Alexis died in January 1676, and Fedor took the throne. His first wife and child died in 1681, and Fedor died a year later. On the day of his eldest brother's death on April 27, 1682, Peter encountered his first hardship.

Instead of giving the throne to his ill brother Ivan, Peter was declared the new Tsar of Russia by the patriarch one month before his tenth birthday.¹⁸ The matter would have been settled – there was no direct law against this, and Peter was more suited to the job – if it weren't for the streltsy and Ivan's sister Sophia. The Miloslavskys, led by Sophia, were able to use the

¹⁷ As a child of Alexis' second wife, members of Alexis' first family hoped to keep the monarchy firmly under their control and away from Peter.

¹⁸ Ivan was "weak-minded" and his inclinations prevented him from partaking in military and civil affairs.

streltsy, Moscow's unarmed guard, to their advantage. Tapping into the unrest after Fedor's reign, the Miloslavskys convinced the streltsy to support Ivan's bid for power. In May, the streltsy went on a bloody rampage in the palace, killing forty people considered to be threats to Ivan and Sophia. Peter was forced to watch some of his closest friends and advisors among the nobility killed, including his uncle and his mother's guardian. However, Peter and his mother were spared. In the end, Sophia became the regent over the dual tsars, with Ivan as the senior tsar and Peter as junior.

The turbulence at the beginning of Peter's reign had multiple effects. First, Peter developed a bloodlust at a young age. Not even ten years old, he was taught that blood and violence were legitimate means of expressing oneself. He acquired a brutal side that could not and would not be tempered. For the rest of his life, he would associate Sophia with "the dark forces of opposition."¹⁹ Second, Peter formed a distaste for court life in Moscow. For obvious reasons, he did not like his half-sister, and he hated the streltsy. As a young boy with limited powers, there was little that Peter could do to reform the court. However, when he gained full power, reforming the court system and erecting a replacement for Moscow – St. Petersburg – would become very important. Third, Peter was given space. Sophia took most of the power for herself, using her brother as a puppet. For the length of her seven-year regency, she would first allow Ivan to perform duties, and, if he were incapable, she would perform them herself.

While many would consider it terrible to have their power taken away, for Peter this period was a blessing in disguise. He was given "a sort of 'sabbatical' from the routine burdens of rulership, which allowed him to pursue his own interests (military games and sailing) and to

¹⁹ Hughes, *Russia in the Age*.

build up a circle of friends and assistants at a slight distance from traditional clan networks.”²⁰

He and his mother moved outside the palace, further allowing Peter to play his famous war games and develop an interest in the military. Additionally, he was able to create closer contacts within the “German suburb”. Peter’s education had never been that of his other siblings; Polish monks, for example, had taught Sophia, in many aspects of the classical education. Russians taken from the government, who failed to foster good habits in the young prince, would oversee Peter’s education. These deficiencies were nullified by the practical experience that Peter gained by visiting the foreign quarter. There, Peter met his best and most valuable teachers.

Three miles from the Kremlin, the foreigners in Moscow had built the “German suburb” as an isolated Western island in the heart of Moscow.²¹ The small area consisted of broad avenues lined with brick buildings with European-style windows. Carriages made in Paris and England drove along the streets, essentially attempting to create a mini-Europe in the center of Russia. While they were isolated from Russian culture, the German suburb thrived because those within it were able to easily maintain the habits from their own cultures, such as clothing and languages. The foreigners intrigued Peter, and his visits came to be so often that he almost lived in the foreign suburb. Quickly, Peter realized that foreigners loved to drink copiously and discuss the world, culture, politics, and science. These conversations fascinated Peter, and by engaging and listening to their counsel, he continued to learn and develop his curiosity and love of learning.²² Peter latched onto people whose ideas interested him; one such man was Francis

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The area was called the “German suburb” because most Russians could not distinguish between different foreign languages; therefore, all foreigners were Germans. R. Massie, *Peter the Great*, 110.

²² Peter became so loved in the German suburb that the foreigners would invite him to weddings, christenings, and other important events. He was the best man at multiple foreign marriages. Ibid., 113.

Lefort. Born in Geneva, he fled to Holland when he was young to join the Protestant fight against Louis XIV. As a young adventurer, he heard rumors of opportunity in Russia and left for the German suburb. When he met Peter, they became fast friends and Lefort became a major general in the Russian army. Lefort became a close friend, almost like a psychologist, giving advice to the young king.²³

While Sophia's rule may have given Peter the time to develop, it was doomed from the start since the only way it could continue was by deposing of Peter. Believing that Sophia was sending the streltsy to kill him, Peter ran to the Trinity-St. Sergius Monastery in 1689. That summer, a standoff ensued between Sophia and her forces – already beginning to realize they could not win – at the Kremlin and Peter's supporters at the Monastery. By late September, Peter had prevailed and Sophia was locked in the Novodevichy convent.²⁴ She would remain the symbol of dark forces for the rest of Peter's life, and he would always regard her and her supporters with heavy suspicion. However, he had regained control over his throne under the supervision of his mother. With her death in 1694, Peter finally became the sole ruler of Russia.

After regaining control over his throne, Peter knew that one aspect of his education remained: travelling abroad. No previous Russian monarch had travelled abroad in peacetime, and few others had travelled abroad as part of war campaigns. Where there was a diplomatic portion to Peter's travels, like renewing an anti-Turkish alliance, the main motive behind his travels was his desire to learn. The foreigners in Russia had taught him all they could; he had to

²³ When Peter was 18, Lefort was 34. Ibid., 115.

²⁴ This was a local and isolated conflict. In August, Peter thought that the streltsy were coming to kill him so he fled to the monastery. Some think these rumors may have been encouraged by Peter's supporters to force a confrontation between Peter and Sophia in which Peter had the upper hand. The incident was over by late September, and Peter emerged the victor. Hughes, *Russia in the Age*.

leave the confines of Moscow to continue his education. On a seal he engraved for himself before his departure, the inscription bore, "I am a pupil and need to be taught."²⁵ Due to his interest in naval expansion, he chose England, Holland, and Venice as destinations, eager to immerse himself in their expertise.

Not wishing to be tied down by his title and the formalities that went with it, Peter chose to travel secretly around Europe. To ensure the embassy was treated well in each country they visited, Peter formally recognized the venture while excluding himself officially from the party. Under the alias of "volunteer and seaman Peter Mikhailov", the young tsar was given the freedom to explore. Peter took part in a course in gunnery from a Prussian engineer and received his Master's certificate.²⁶ In Holland while dressed as a Dutch sailor, he went to work in the shipyards. When he visited the Parliament in London, he insisted on climbing to the highest galleries so that he could observe the proceeding unobserved. The tsar recorded everything, filling notebooks with his experiences and ideas.²⁷

The Great Embassy lasted eighteen months and cost Russia two and a half million rubles.²⁸ In terms of practical contributions, Peter and his ambassadors recruited over eight hundred foreigners to work in the Russian service. Many of these men would remain in Russia for years and help reform and make contributions to the modernization of the country. For Peter, the travels allowed him to pursue his interest in maritime activity, but also to engage in other

²⁵ R. Massie, *Peter the Great*, 156.

²⁶ Suzanne Massie, *Land of the Firebird: The Beauty of Old Russia* (New York: A Touchstone Book, 1980), 92.

²⁷ Among his other adventures, Peter worked in a paper factory, learned the art of engraving, learned how to cut up whale blubber, and studied art galleries. *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁸ For the time, two and a half million rubles was a substantial amount. R. Massie, *Peter the Great*, 231.

interests and expand his intellect. When he returned to Russia, he was no longer a boy-prince. He was the tsar of Russia, eager to lead in the improvement of his country.

Peter: The Military Aggressor

For most of Peter's life, he was synonymous with the Russian state himself. When Russia was involved, either domestically or abroad, Peter played a role in some fashion. His identity is tied to the his title of tsar. As many historians have realized, it is a simple task to fill volumes on the life and work of Peter the Great. His reforms and his work domestically captivated the world after his death, and made many praise him as an enlightened monarch, the westernizer of Russia. However, this classification, while easy to make, ignores his foreign policy. Peter did not wish to emulate and capitulate to the Western world. Peter was always Russian, and the Great Northern War was Peter's way of asserting his nation's power.

This seems like an insignificant point to make. Of course Peter was Russian. Looking through the historiography, it becomes clear, however, that Peter is often cast as a ruler blindly following Western ideas without thinking of the needs of his country. Occasionally, Peter has intentionally or accidentally been made to look as though he was a puppet of the Western states. In awe of their greatness and their advances, he wanted to reduce the backwardness of Russia by adopting Western ways because they were simply better. For example in his book on Russian

history, Sol Shulman asserts that Peter blindly admired the West to the detriment of Russia.²⁹ Peter the Great was curious and interested in Western ideas, but he was curious only in the way such ideas could benefit Russia. He cared about his country and his people, and wanted to make Russia a powerful country. Evgenii V. Anisimov summarizes Peter's view of his role as follows: "Peter was sincerely convinced that reigning was his service to Russia; that in reigning he was fulfilling his duty to the state."³⁰ He did not want to become a Western European, nor did he want to transform Russia into a European country. Instead, he wanted to use Western ideas to help Russia become the best version of itself. He once said, "We need Europe for a few decades, and then we must turn our back on it."³¹

The vision of Peter as a Russian using Western ideas opens Peter to further praise as a ruler. Riasanovsky noted, "Peter's Westernism is all the more noteworthy because he did not admire blindly but always tried to separate, in the West as at home, the wheat from the chaff and because he remained a dedicated Russian patriot."³² When analyzing foreign policy, Peter's Russian patriotism becomes more apparent. Many historians have emphasized Peter's love and desire for the sea. During the Great Embassy, Peter's main stops were in England and the Netherlands, both major seafaring nations. Yet, for all the effort he put into learning about the sea, Peter knew Russia lacked something important: a warm-water port. Sweden, his next-door neighbor and the major power in northern Europe, cut off his access to warm water by

²⁹ Solomon Shul'man, *Kings of the Kremlin: Russia and its Leaders from Ivan the Terrible to Boris Yeltsin* (London: Brassey's, 2002), 84.

³⁰ Evgenii V. Anisimov, *The Reforms of Peter the Great: Progress Through Coercion in Russia* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1993), 23.

³¹ Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime* (New York: Scribner, 1974), 113.

³² Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 7.

controlling Livonia, Ingria, and Finland. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Peter had had war with Sweden on his mind since 1698. The surprise came when the Russian army stood up to the Swedish advances and won. By the end of the conflict in 1721, Peter gained not only a port for his aspiring navy, but the identity of military aggressor.

With the Great Northern War, Peter engaged in a closer political conflict than ever before with Western Europe. Sweden, a great power at the time, was Russia's main adversary in the north. While mainly trying to gain the long-sought Russian port on the Baltic, Peter was also asserting his political power at the expense of Sweden. As a result, Europe took notice. Closely linked with the War of Spanish Succession and the coalition Europe was trying to build against Louis XIV, the conflict had an impact outside of the Northern Europe. France, hoping to gain Sweden as a potential ally, wanted to mediate a quick end to the conflict and free up Swedish troops. Peter and his counterpart in Sweden, Charles XII, were simply uninterested in a compromise. On one side, Charles XII was obstinate and refused to give in to Russia in any way, still clinging to his great power status. On the other side, Peter refused to give up any territory he had gained at the mouth of the river Nerva, which he had claimed in 1703. It was there that Peter began building St. Petersburg, his "window to the west."

The Great Northern War lasted over twenty years, with control of the conflict changing sides numerous times. However, it became increasingly clear that Russia was dominating Sweden. Peter demonstrated his resolve, and slowly but surely extending his control over the Baltics. In 1709, Peter won a great victory at Poltava, which affirmed Russia's dominance in Poland and the possibility of further control over the Baltic coast and northern Germany. Five years later, Russian troops carried out their first raid in Sweden proper. Charles XII was killed in battle in Norway in 1718, and although the war continued for another three years, this moment

marked the end of Sweden's dominance and the loss of hope of recovering the empire. The Treaty of Nystad was signed in 1721, and Russia became the new undisputed Baltic and northern power.

Relatively speaking, the Great Northern War was an isolated conflict between countries with occasional interference by other European states. Therefore, the question can easily be asked: what does the Great Northern War have to do with France's relationship to Russia? Think of the Great Northern War as Russia's coming-out party. Before, Russia was viewed as a child in many ways: the country and its rulers could raise a fuss, but on a whole they had little power or influence with regard to the rest of Europe. While much of Europe was engaged in fighting each other in the War of Spanish Succession, Russia was becoming more powerful with each Northern victory. When they turned their attention back to the Baltic after the Peace of Utrecht in 1713, "the fate of Sweden was already sealed. Their general policies henceforward were to try to prevent the delicate balance in the area being completely upset by Russia, a largely unknown quantity in Western Europe, which at one stage had stood menacingly on the river Elbe."³³ Regardless of any actions the other powers did or could have taken, Russia eclipsed Sweden. Russia had taken over Sweden's holdings Estonia, Ingria, and Livonia. The fortunate beneficiary of weak neighbors, Sweden had looked strong and powerful by comparison. After Russia had reformed its military and set its sights on the Baltic, it became clear that "Sweden's position as a great power was the result of favorable accident."³⁴ The war "made Russia appear clearly to the western powers for the first time as an international force which could play an effective role in

³³ Stewart P. Oakley, *War and Peace in the Baltic, 1560-1790*, (Florence, KY: Routledge, 1993), 104.

³⁴ Oakley, *War and Peace in the Baltic*, 119.

their own conflicts.”³⁵ In the course of twenty years, they had undergone a military reformation and subjected a great Western power to its will. Clearly, Russia was emerging as a country that had to be accounted for.

Understandably, Western Europe took this development with a mix of uneasiness and acceptance. The backwards country was becoming relevant. Russia was a potential source of danger to not only individual Western countries, but also to the European state system as a whole. Yet, Western Europe had to deal with the change to the best of its ability. From 1709 to 1710, Louis XIV sought the help of Russia in mediating the War of Spanish Succession. After 1714, more cultural and intellectual exchanges began taking place between Russia and France. Peter imported artists and architects from France to help with its projects. The Russian relationship with Europe was changing, and Peter was playing a role. Still, France was unsure what to make of the tsar. He was an undoubtedly impressive character – now with military accomplishments – but he remained Russian, a barbarian. Nevertheless, the savage Russians had won the Great Northern War, and had replaced the civilized Swedish as the northern power in Europe.

³⁵ M.S. Anderson, *Europe in the Eighteenth Century, 1713-1789*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2000), 214.

Peter: the Civilized Barbarian

The undisputed, most powerful country in the world: this is the unofficial title that France held at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Led by one of the most dominant monarchs in history, Louis XIV's France was esteemed across Europe. Militarily and politically, they were embroiled in a war for hegemony. Beginning with the Netherlands, Louis had launched a series of wars that left his at odds with virtually all of Europe. Culturally and intellectually, they were the home to the best artists and thinkers in the world. Other countries looked to France as the example in all matters. Intentionally or inadvertently, France played a part in every action taken in Europe at this time. However, they did not have many interactions with Russia. As a result, they were undecided on whether to think of Peter as a civilized ruler or a barbarian tsar.

When France emerged from the War of Spanish Succession without victory, the monarchy found that their barbarian neighbor to the North was gaining in power and preeminence. Multiple factors disinclined France to like Russia. First, Russia did not bow to France's dominance as the rest of Europe did. During his Great Embassy, Peter the Great never

visited France.³⁶ He decided that the Netherlands and England were better practical teachers than the ostentatious French court.³⁷ Peter did not often turn to France first as a model to emulate; instead, he looked to its adversaries. Second, France's alliance system – although they were less allies and more followers – was based on strong ties with Sweden and the Ottoman Empire. These were also Russia's greatest adversaries. As a result, France's foreign policy was naturally aligned against Russian interests. Third, France had built up a *barriere de l'est* against the Hapsburgs. In order to further protect themselves from encroachment by their neighbors, the Bourbons had set up Poland and Sweden to be an impediment to attack.³⁸ Not only was Russia attacking its alliance system, but also France's protection from a traditional rival in Europe.

The French also heard interesting tales about the brutality of Russia, which extended to the tsar as well. While Peter was traveling abroad the first time, the streltsy and Sophia again began to raise trouble, and started rumors of rebellion. Peter returned home to see to their demise and punishment. Two thousand streltsy were rounded up in Russian prisons, where their interrogations included whippings and having to walk over hot coals. During the streltsy's mass execution, Peter took to cutting off the heads of five of the traitors himself. Once the executions were complete, the bodies were placed on spikes outside the Kremlin for all of Moscow to see. Peter also saw to it that Sophia suffered for the rest of her life. He ordered her to be forcibly

³⁶ As a result, Peter the Great and Louis XIV would never stand together in the same room.

³⁷ Voltaire notes in his biography on Peter the Great that Peter thought that the court life of Louis XIV was too structured and pretentious. The French would not permit him to travel in the “private matter in which he proposed to travel.” Peter being himself, would not be convinced to give up his desires for the absurd needs of others. Voltaire, *The History of Peter the Great, Emperor of Russia*, trans. by Tobias George Smollett (New York: Leavitt & Allen, 1857; The Internet Archive), <https://ia600301.us.archive.org/7/items/historyofpetergr00volt/historyofpetergr00volt.pdf>, 90.

³⁸ Martin E. Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum* (Cambridge, MA: 1999), 24.

shaved and locked in a monastery, where several streltsy were hung outside her window close enough for her to touch so that she could remember the effect her actions had.³⁹ Voltaire circulated a rumor in which the Tsar entertained himself at a dinner by cutting off the heads of twenty members of the streltsy and drinking just as many shots of vodka.⁴⁰ He also, apparently, kissed an ex-mistress on the steps of the scaffold before her execution.⁴¹ In another rumor, he was said to have beat a servant to death because he did not take off his hat quickly enough in his presence.

While some of these stories may be exaggerated, they demonstrate the abundance of rumors surrounding the tsar. As a result, French contemporaries considered the tsar a barbarian. Not only was he a spectator to many acts of torture and punishment carried out by his government, but he was also a participant. Said the French ambassador when the tsar was twenty-six, “His facial features are rather handsome, one can even glimpse goodness in him sometimes. Looking at him it is hard to believe that he personally cuts off the heads of subjects who have incurred his displeasure.”⁴² The rumors, whether accurate or not, were being heard across the continent and were being incorporated into the French perception of Peter.

The tsar was known throughout Europe for his ability to drink. A contemporary said, “He didn’t miss a single day without getting drunk.”⁴³ This came as no surprise to contemporaries, as alcohol had long been “the joy of the Russes.”⁴⁴ Peter’s father, Alexei, and his boyars used to take pleasure in out-drinking the foreign diplomats. While this drunkenness

³⁹ Shul’man, *Kings of the Kremlin*, 77.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴¹ After the woman’s execution, it was said that Peter took her severed head and explained the anatomical parts of it. *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 77.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴⁴ R. Massie, *Peter the Great*, 118.

seems to be a national trait, Peter seems to have been one of the best. Said historian Robert Massie, “When he was young, though, these wild bacchanalia did not leave Peter exhausted and debauched, but actually seemed to refresh him for the next day’s work. He could drink all night with his comrades and then, while they snored in drunken slumber, rise at dawn and leave them to begin work as a carpenter or shipbuilder. Few could match his pace.”⁴⁵ Peter amassed a collection of friends and created, at the age of eighteen, the Drunken Synod. Mocking the hierarchy and order of the church, the friends were organized into a college of cardinals, bishops, priests, and deacons. Peter took care in devising a system of rituals and ceremonies; for example, the first commandment was, “Bacchus be worshipped with strong and honorable drinking and receive his just dues.”⁴⁶ Even as the tsar matured and became an emperor, he continued to participate in such games and behaviors, which were worse on holidays and at weddings. The foreigners who visited the tsar found the behavior “vulgar and scandalous,” unsuited to a man who proclaimed to be the emperor of Russia.⁴⁷

In all, Peter had given the French plenty of reasons to be inclined to disapprove of him. Yet instead of outright disapproval, their initial impression seems to have been one of confusion and intrigue. Yes, the tsar had some barbaric tendencies, but he also had enlightened inclinations as well. While he may not have specifically visited France during his first trip abroad, he still showed the desire to learn and experience other cultures. Combined with the activities of his diplomats and his military abroad, Peter was making a name for himself as a different kind of tsar.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 119.

⁴⁶ According to Massie, this basically means all cups were to be emptied and that members of the Synod were to get drunk everyday and never go to bed sober. Ibid., 120.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 120.

Unlike his ancestors, Peter articulated the idea of service to the state and ruling for the people. As was previously stated, he believed that his rule was meant to be what was best for Russia. He articulated a broad national vision and spoke of “the common good”, “the general welfare”, and “the benefit of the whole nation.”⁴⁸ No other Russian tsar had previously felt the need to serve the common people, or at least to speak of the desire. These ideas were similar to the Western idea of *bien public*, seeing the public and private welfare as interconnected. Whenever Peter made an imperial decree, he attached an explanation to it, wanting his subjects to understand why the action was important. As Pipes notes, “No monarch before Peter had though such explanations necessary; he was the first to take the people into his confidence.”⁴⁹ In 1703, he launched Russia’s first newspaper. Not only did this act improve the cultural life of the citizens, but it was also a departure from the old practice of keeping national and international news a state secret.⁵⁰ While still an autocratic tsar, Peter began to think of his people and his duty to his people as his ancestors had not. He saw a prosperous future ahead, and his rule was meant to solidify it.

Built in adverse circumstances, St. Petersburg was slow to develop into the city that Peter wanted to represent the bright destiny of his country. For example, men had to be forced to work on the new city, sometimes chained to prevent desertion and many dying from exposure and disease.⁵¹ While facts such as these taint the victory that is St. Petersburg, contemporaries did not view Peter’s new city as a tragedy; instead, it was the “window to the west.” By 1713, Peter was able to move the government and the court to St. Petersburg, insisting that nobles who

⁴⁸ Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime*, 128.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

wanted to present themselves at court build a residence.⁵² In sharp contrast to Moscow, foreigners were encouraged to live within the city. Merchants dealing in foreign trade were required to reroute their business to St. Petersburg.⁵³ All of these steps were meant to move the seat of Russia's power from Moscow to Peter's new port. Instead of being unorganized and rambling as many other Russian cities were, St. Petersburg was designed by foreign architects, constructed in stone, and laid out to allow for space to see the sky and the water. A century after its construction, a French observer, Marquis de Custine, would say that "the magnificence and immensity of St. Petersburg are tokens set up by the Russians to honour their future power, and the hope that inspired such efforts strikes me as sublime."⁵⁴ As a result of this hope, St. Petersburg would become the "forum for a new elite secular culture."⁵⁵ The city would bring Russia prominence as a cultural, intellectual, and political center and become a symbol of the new place Russia held in Europe.

Since he saw the military power as the path to European respect and dominance, many of Peter's reforms centered on the military. In 1700, Peter suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Swedish troops at Narva.⁵⁶ Although a blow for the Russian army, the loss taught Peter a valuable lesson: "his army, although large, was insufficiently trained and inadequately equipped to fight open battles against the finest European armies, of which the Swedish was

⁵² St. Petersburg was supposed to replace the chaotic and nepotistic nature of Moscow. Basically, Peter wanted to give Russia a better alternative than the city that had haunted him since childhood. Geoffrey A. Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire, 1552-1917* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press 1997), 86.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵⁵ Noble men and women alike were required to attend assemblies and discuss relevant topics of the day. Russian robes were replaced with the tighter fitting Western dress. *Ibid.*, 88.

⁵⁶ 8,500 Swedish troops defeated 45,000 Russians. Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime*, 120.

one.”⁵⁷ Peter now commenced in the restructuring of the armed forces that many European countries had already gone through in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The military was completely brought under the control of the state, including recruitment, training, and supplies. He instituted a mass levee, becoming the first European country to institute conscription as a permanent way of raising troops. Using the industrial structures the state already had, he employed the power of the state to create new industry and factories. Finding that his troops were illiterate and unable to perform the tasks required of them, he created schools for his troops and saw to it that the men attended.⁵⁸

Nine years later, Peter exalted his revenge on the Swedish army at Poltava, largely due to the restructuring of the military. In the course of his reign, Peter’s subjects enjoyed one year of peace in thirty-six years. The tsar was eager to assert his military strength, which he saw as essential to every country’s welfare.⁵⁹ While Peter was flexing his newfound muscles in the North, the rest of Europe was slowly taking notice of the tsar. Said the French envoy Jean-Jacques Compredon, “At the least demonstration of his fleet, at the first movement of his troops, neither the Swedish nor the Danish nor the Prussian nor the Polish crown dares to make a hostile move or to shift its own forces from one place. He alone of all the northern rulers is in a position to compel respect for his own flag.”⁶⁰ The French may not have appreciated Peter cutting into their *barriere de l’est*, but they had to respect his force and his conviction in doing so.

⁵⁷ Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire*, 78.

⁵⁸ The desire for a more intelligent and capable military was the motivation behind Peter’s education reform for young men. Decrees made it mandatory to send troops for inspection. After inspection, they were either sent to service or to school. Compulsory education lasted for five years. At fifteen, the young men would go into active military service, often in the same guard regiment they had attended school with. Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime*, 123.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁶⁰ Anisimov, *The Reforms of Peter the Great*, 252.

As was previously noted, Russian diplomacy was in an abysmal state prior to Peter the Great's reign. Diplomats were not considered to be important or essential, and as such unqualified nobles were used to fill these roles. With the wars that Peter chose to involve Russia in, diplomatic ties proved to be essential. The young tsar maintained the trend of selecting nobles for his diplomats, recognizing that individuals of higher ranks were more respected in negotiations. However, after 1700, he added another caveat to his ideal diplomat: an education.⁶¹ When the first permanent embassies were established abroad at the turn of the century, Peter began to use the nobles who had been sent abroad for their education, mostly for technical training such as seamanship. Although these technical skills were not particularly related to diplomacy, the time abroad taught the nobles how to conduct themselves in foreign courts.⁶² Foreign study was becoming a central feature of the Russian education, and the diplomats were among those who benefited the most noticeably.⁶³

As a result of the attention Peter paid to his foreign service, "the system of permanent Russian diplomatic representatives, although a new one, was not inferior to foreign services of other countries like France and England, which accredited their first permanent representatives in foreign courts long before the Russians did."⁶⁴ They were more than mindless bureaucrats carrying out the orders of their ruler who was on the other side of the continent; they were intellectuals capable of cultivating their own ideas and responding to different scenarios. Under Peter, being a diplomat for the Russian government became a coveted position in the

⁶¹ Altbauer, "Diplomats of Peter the Great", 7.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 8.

⁶³ Those appointed in the second group of diplomats after 1700 were not as confined in terms of language. While the early diplomats were restricted mainly to Italian and Latin, the later diplomats had mastered these as well as French, German, Polish, and sometimes Dutch. *Ibid.*, 12.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

administration. They were not strikingly different from their Western counterparts, and therefore were able to gain respect.

The new level of respect paid to Russian diplomats is particularly apparent in their treatment by the French. For the French, the most recent memory of Russian diplomats was their bad behavior and insults in 1687. In 1707, Peter's ambassador Andrei Mateev was engaged in negotiations with the French diplomat Le Moyne d'Iberville.⁶⁵ When writing a message to his superior in the French Ministry, Le Moyne said, "I found in this ambassador [with] much more intellect, more knowledge of European affairs and more courtesy than I expected from a person of that nation."⁶⁶ In another letter, Le Moyne wrote, "This ambassador certainly has wit and appears to be a righteous man. He is frank and without refinement. Judging from all his talks, he has devotion and religion."⁶⁷ Another Russian diplomat at the French court was described as a "minister of good sense, discreet and very able to report to his court, of the state of France and of our sentiments."⁶⁸ Prince Boris Kurakin became Peter's most esteemed diplomat. The French Foreign Minister described him as "the one of the Tsar's ministers who had the most courtesy and talents; his intentions always appear righteous."⁶⁹ Duc de Saint-Simon would add that he was "a great man with nice bearing, who strongly felt for the grandeur of his origin, with great

⁶⁵ The source does not elaborate on what these negotiations pertained to. Andrej Matveev (1666-1728) was a young diplomat who had a particular talent for engaging with foreigners. In addition to the compliments of Le Moyne, another French diplomat Foy de la Neuville on meeting Matveev in Moscow in 1689 said, "This young Lord has a great deal of Wit, speaks Latin well, loves reading, is mightily pleased to hear talk of what is doing in Europe, and has a particular inclination for Foreigners." He was the epitome of the new sort of diplomat Peter looked for. Matveev served mainly in the Hague as the ambassador to Holland, but he would take brief assignments in London and Paris. *Ibid.*, 10.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

intellect and education. He spoke French quite well and other languages.”⁷⁰ These comments were made in private correspondence between foreign officials, which shows that the Russian diplomats were worthy of comment and praise. The role of Russian diplomat became prestigious during the reign of Peter the Great, a stark change from the previous status of the Foreign Service.

The French perceptions of Russian then at the time of Peter’s visit to Paris can only be described as conflicting. On the one hand, the barbarian Russian king who was creating difficulties for their allies and their system of French dominance aggravated them. On the other hand, they had to respect the way he conducted himself and was reforming his country. He had raised the intellectual standards of his country, built the city of St. Petersburg, reformed his military into a force to be reckoned with, and oversaw a respectable collection of diplomats. The uncivilized Russians were becoming respectable, and this was disconcerting. Peter’s visit to Paris would add to the perceptions of the tsar and raise further questions as to his true identity.

⁷⁰ Duc de Saint-Simon was one of the central figures at the court of Louis XV and would meet Peter during his visit to Paris. *Ibid.*, 16.

Peter: The Russian Tsar in Paris

Under these circumstances, Peter set off for France in 1717, with diplomatic goals in mind. Peter hoped to secure the future marriage of his daughter Elizabeth to the young Louis XV.⁷¹ Through this marriage, he hoped to entangle the futures of Russia and France together. In addition, he hoped to cultivate an alliance with France. With the Great Northern War still being fought in Sweden, Peter wanted to detach France from their northern alliance in order to keep the

⁷¹ Will Durant and Ariel Durant, *The Age of Louis XIV: A History of European Civilization in the Period of Pascal, Molière, Cromwell, Milton, Peter the Great, Newton, and Spinoza: 1648-1715* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 405.

French military out of the war. At the least, Peter hoped to reduce interference in his struggle for territory.⁷²

While diplomacy and politics may have been part of the reason to travel across the continent, the curiosity of the tsar was not to be diminished by official duties. Peter arrived in Paris with a list of all the things, people, and places he wanted to see. Nothing was too great or too small for his notice. For example, one day he ordered a boatman one day to continue on so that he could float underneath all five bridges of Paris.⁷³ On May 12, the first day of his visit, the tsar arose at four in the morning to begin his sightseeing.⁷⁴ He only slowed down when he caught a fever one day and was forced to cancel a dinner with the Regent.⁷⁵ His exuberance and energy seemed unbounded.

A stranger to the court's French values, Peter ignored most royal protocol. He refused the elaborate apartments that had been prepared for him in the Louvre, choosing instead to stay in the Hotel Lesdisguières.⁷⁶ After his formal welcome ceremony, he asked that the formalities and protocol be ignored so that he could have more freedom to travel as he pleased. The Regent, Philippe II the Duke of Orleans, required that a member of the court and a bodyguard of eight soldiers escort him. The Marshal de Tessé, the member of the court most often assigned to Peter, had a hard time following the Regent's orders, as Peter felt no need to remain with his entourage. The tsar only slowed down when he was forced to. It was not out of the ordinary for the tsar to walk out of the hotel and jump into whichever carriage happened to be passing by, escaping his

⁷² Lindsey Hughes, *Peter the Great: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 116.

⁷³ R. Massie, *Peter the Great*, 652.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 647.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 649.

⁷⁶ Hughes, *Peter the Great: A Biography*, 116

French guard.⁷⁷ When he did so, “it was up to the Maréchal de Tessé and his suite to chase after him, but sometimes they could not find him.”⁷⁸ Also foreign to the French were Peter’s eating habits. Wrote the Duc de Saint-Simon: “It was inconceivable how much he ate and drank at meals, without mentioning the amount of beer, lemonade, and other beverages he and his suite put away between meals.”⁷⁹ With his peculiar habits alone, Peter was making a name for himself in France.

Peter’s list of all there was to see in Paris was diverse. With his interest in the military and the navy, many stops were related to these occupations. One day, the tsar went to the new military hospital at Invalides and visited the 4,000 soldiers housed there.⁸⁰ Drinking to their health and talking with them, he “clapped them on their backs and called them ‘comrades’”.⁸¹ He spent an entire day of his visit dining with the Marshal d’Estrées discussing the French Navy.⁸² In addition to the military sites, he went to see the various oddities that Paris boasted. One morning, he went to the Mint and was surprised and excited when the gold piece he watched being made was printed with his face and “Petrus Alexievitz Tsar, Mag. Russ. Imperat.”⁸³ Taking time to regard the medal, he turned it over multiple times in his hand and said, “It is myself.”⁸⁴ One of Peter’s most important stops was the Paris Academy of Science, of which he was made an honorary member six months after the visit. The Academy gave Peter the honor “in

⁷⁷ R. Massie, *Peter the Great*, 649.

⁷⁸ Duc de Saint-Simon, Louis de Rouvroy, and Ted Morgan, *The Age of Magnificence: The Memoirs of the Duc de Saint-Simon* (New York: Putnam, 1963), 52.

⁷⁹ R. Massie, *Peter the Great*, 649.

⁸⁰ Hughes, *Peter the Great: A Biography*, 117.

⁸¹ R. Massie, *Peter the Great, His Life and World*, 648.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 648.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 648.

⁸⁴ Jakob Staehlin von Storcksburg, *Original Anecdotes of Peter the Great* (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1970), 60.

recognition of Peter's military victories over Sweden and Russia's enhanced status in Europe...also in appreciation of his efforts to reform his country in keeping with the values of contemporary European civilization."⁸⁵ While this may not have been the official statement of the French government, the recognition of the Academy of Science was a direct result of the impression Peter had made during his Paris visit.

Seeing as Alexander Le Blond had built St. Petersburg's Versailles-by-the-Sea at the request of the Tsar, it is no surprise that Peter was excited to arrive at Louis XIV's masterpiece on May 24.⁸⁶ While visiting, he walked throughout the gardens, boated on the Great Canal, and toured the Trianon.⁸⁷ He surprised his escort, the Duc d'Antin, with his enthusiasm; Peter was already boating on the canal by the time the Duc found him one morning.⁸⁸ After a visit to Fontainebleau, Peter quickly decided that he preferred Versailles.⁸⁹ He returned to Versailles on May 30 for his birthday, when fireworks and illuminations were organized in his honor at Marly. In addition, torches and lamps were brought from Paris to light up the Agrippina fountain –

⁸⁵ James Cracraft, *The Revolution of Peter the Great* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 77.

⁸⁶ At the time, Versailles was the cultural and architectural center not only of France but also of Europe. His first impression would have been the large and imposing gilded gate, seeming to signal that commoners were not welcome within. Not a space on the walls was left undecorated, and his eyes would have wandered aimlessly over the many beautiful paintings and designs. The beauty did not end inside: the gardens with its many fountains and cultures made one question how a king could be so great as to construct and oversee all of the property. This was the grandiose impression that Louis XIV had intended, and he succeeded in leaps and bounds. Joseph A. Barry, *Passions and Politics: A Biography of Versailles*, 1st ed. (Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1972), 70.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁸⁸ R. Massie, *Peter the Great*, 651.

⁸⁹ Peter hated his experience at Fontainebleau. The Comte de Toulouse, Peter's host, convinced him to go on a stag hunt with the other men. Peter agreed to partake in the "noblest of sports". Peter was not used to the speed of the riders and the obstacles they encountered and almost fell off his horse. He returned angry and humiliated and left quickly after. *Ibid.*, 651.

Peter's favorite at Versailles. On his departure from Versailles, he was given twelve albums of engravings, which further solidified his own love for his palaces at Peterhof and Strel'na.⁹⁰

With all of his enthusiasm and oddities, the tsar was received well by the French during his six-week stay in Paris. His relations with Philippe, the Regent for Louis XV, were "excellent", although Massie notes that this is likely because Philippe was generally a friendly person. Nevertheless, the Regent and the tsar passed a good deal of time together. One night, the two went to the opera and sat in the royal box, where the regent – to the amusement of the spectators – personally served the tsar a beer.⁹¹ The Regent took Peter to meet his mother, "Madame", at the Palais Royal. Peter delighted the sixty-five year-old German woman, who later wrote, "Received a great visit today, that of my hero, the tsar...I find that he has very good manners...and is not the lesser affected. He has much judgment...He is polite towards everyone and is much liked."⁹² Overall, the impression of the first family was one of respect and delight at Peter's presence.

On May 10, the boy-king, Louis XV, went to meet the Russian tsar. The visit started off simply enough, with the tsar meeting the king at the door and welcoming him in. However, as the Duc St. Simon noted, "The astonishment was general when the Czar grabbed the king under both arms, lifted him in the air, and kissed him."⁹³ The king, who was seven, seemed to have no fear of the tsar after this surprising reaction. St. Simon was pleased to note how caring and gracious the tsar was toward the king. About two weeks later, the tsar repaid the visit and went to see the king. He arrived early and was taken to see the crown jewels by the Marshal de

⁹⁰ Hughes, *Peter the Great: A Biography*, 117.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁹² R. Massie, *Peter the Great*, 650.

⁹³ Saint-Simon and Morgan, *The Age of Magnificence: The Memoirs of the Duc de Saint-Simon*, 53.

Villeroy before seeing Louis XV. When the King came in, he handed a roll of paper to the tsar saying that it was a map of all his dominions. The young boy was especially polite to the tsar, who was charmed by the king's manners. Later, Villeroy would write to Madame de Maintenon, the former mistress of Louis XIV, "I cannot express to you the dignity, the grace, and the politeness with which the king received the visit of the Tsar. But I must tell you that this Prince, said to be barbarous, is not so at all. He displayed sentiments of grandeur and generosity which we never expected."⁹⁴

More historically documented than Peter's visit with the king is his visit with Madame de Maintenon, Louis XIV's widow. When the tsar was met with surprise at his desire to drive to St. Cyr and see her, he replied, "She has much merit...she has rendered great service to the King and nation."⁹⁵ She was very flattered to hear that the intriguing Russian would like to see her, but she wanted to be in her best appearance and conceal her age. According to Duc St. Simon, "she tried to escape his curiosity by taking to her bed and drawing all her curtains but one, which was only half closed." The tsar, however, was not to be deterred. Madame de Maintenon would later write to her cousin of the visit, "He asked me if I were ill. I said I was. He had asked the nature of my illness. I answered, 'A great age.'...He had the curtains drawn back at the foot of my bed to see me. You can well imagine the sight was not a pretty one."⁹⁶ Regardless of how Madame de Maintenon thought of herself in her old age, Peter seemed happy to have met her. When she asked him why he had come to see her, he responded, "I came to see everything of note that France contains."⁹⁷

⁹⁴ R. Massie, *Peter the Great*, 651.

⁹⁵ Staehlin, *Original Anecdotes of Peter the Great*, 57.

⁹⁶ Barry, *Passions and Politics: A Biography of Versailles*, 185.

⁹⁷ R. Massie, *Peter the Great*, 652.

Seeing “everything of note” was long a goal of Peter’s, and he took his visit to Paris seriously. Like the diplomats before him who replied, “Others are not our model” when asked why they would not follow custom, Peter would not follow the rituals that he deemed silly.⁹⁸ For example, disagreements over Peter’s etiquette kept him from meeting some of the ladies of Paris. Some of the Princes of Blood would not meet the tsar unless he promised to return the visit and meet their wives, which Peter found to be ridiculous. He did not take these slights to heart, though: “He preferred, in any case, to visit people of merit rather than people of blood.”⁹⁹ His visit to Paris was not to be dictated by the rules of certain members of the French royal family.

After making his farewell calls to Louis XIV and the Regent, Peter left Paris on June 20. However, he did not leave before being painted by the renowned court painter Jean-Marc Nattier. The portrait, which emphasizes the military side of Peter, portrays Peter in his shining armor wearing the Order of St. Andrew. The painter later traveled to The Hague to do a companion piece of Peter’s beloved Catherine who did not come to Paris.¹⁰⁰ While the tsar appreciated elegance and extravagance such as this, he also was acutely aware of the problems associated with it. As he drove through the countryside on his way out of Paris, he saw the poverty of the countryside and the hardships suffered by the people there. Said St.-Simon of the tsar’s perception of luxury, “The luxury he saw had greatly impressed him; he said it pained him to realize that such luxury would eventually doom France, and he spoke with sympathy of France and the King.”¹⁰¹ By the end of the century, the “barbaric” tsar’s prediction would of course come true.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 166.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 650.

¹⁰⁰ Hughes, *Peter the Great: A Biography*, 118

¹⁰¹ Saint-Simon and Morgan, *The Age of Magnificence: The Memoirs of the Duc de Saint-Simon*, 56.

Regardless of their differences of opinion, the French and the tsar seem to have fared well during the six-week visit. Yes, Peter drank excessively, had questionable encounters with women, and amazed the French with his indifference to protocol. Considering that the French expected a barbaric tsar lacking in intelligence and manners to arrive in Paris, these “flaws” seem to be almost negligible. The Duc de St.-Simon, who played a large part in witnessing Peter’s visit, wrote of the supposedly uncivilized tsar, “One could go on forever about a czar so particularly and so truly great. The singularity and rare variety of so many great talents will make him remembered to all succeeding generations as a monarch worthy of the highest admiration, despite the great defects of the barbarism of his origin, his country, and his education.”¹⁰² In another translation, the Duc would add, “Such was the reputation he gained everywhere in France, where he was considered a veritable prodigy.”¹⁰³ St.-Simon’s remarks accurately summarize the perception the French now held of Peter. Going into the visit, they had expected a backwards man not capable of functioning in civilized society. By the end, they came to regard him as much better than expected. Granted, the French had set their expectation low. Still, Peter had conquered them.

Despite all Peter’s personal success, he left Paris and France without accomplishing any of his diplomatic goals. Shafirov, Dolgoruky, and Tolstoy remained on in France in hopes that an agreement could be reached. Nothing came of these talks however. As much as the Regent was open to talks of an alliance, other members of the government were strongly against it. At this time, Peter was in open antagonism with King George I of England, and France could not consent to an agreement with both. The Abbé Dubois ended up choosing England. Later, the

¹⁰² Ibid., 57.

¹⁰³ R. Massie, *Peter the Great*, 654.

Marshal de Tessé admitted, “The government had no intention other than to amuse the Tsar as long as he stayed without concluding anything.”¹⁰⁴ These remarks may have been the result of Tessé having to chase after the tsar for six weeks; however, they show that the French government – despite their hospitality – remained disenchanted with the idea of a close Russian-French partnership.

Politically and diplomatically, very little changed as a result of Peter’s visit to Paris. France and Russia remained on opposite sides of alliances in Europe, and they would remain so for the near future. However after this voyage, Peter emerged in French eyes as intelligent and interesting. Upon his return, he took certain French ideas and models, such as the Academy of Science, and applied them to his own country. While the Great Northern War proved that Peter and Russia had to be respected as a European power, the visit to Paris demonstrated that Russia was not as backwards as had been assumed. Peter was rough around the edges, but Paris revealed his curiosity and intelligence. As much as the French disliked him politically, they had to respect his mind. Hoping for clarification on the Russian tsar, the French emerged from Paris more confused about Peter the Great.

Peter: the Quandary

When Peter left Paris, he left a French government that was unsure of where it stood. The main diplomatic goal of the Paris visit was to ensure the marriage of Peter’s daughter Elizabeth to Louis XV. This goal was not accomplished, and Peter returned home to deal with his rebellious son Alexis, who later died after being imprisoned and tortured.¹⁰⁵ French ministers

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 654.

¹⁰⁵ Durant and Durant, *The Age of Louis XIV*, 408.

were intrigued by the tsar, as were the French citizens who had seen this almost seven-foot person strolling the streets of Paris. He was appreciated as a person and as a thinker, but the actions of Russia were proving difficult for the French. After Peter left Paris, the French would largely retreat to their position of isolating the Russians. Nevertheless, Peter had made an impression in Paris. While no actions would be directly taken as a result of his visit, the French would not forget his impact.

While many people assume that Peter was greatly influenced by the French, he actually made few changes as a result of French influence.¹⁰⁶ He did not bring French customs or traditions to Russia on his return. For example, Peter was left 28,982 acres by his father when he inherited the throne. By the end of his reign, he had turned over much of this land to the royal treasury leaving his family only the ancient patrimony of the Romanov family. He reduced the number of people allowed at court to only a few friends with only the occasional festival to break up the routine of daily life.¹⁰⁷ As a result, there is no comparison between the court life in Russia and the life at the Palace of Versailles. St. Petersburg was partially modeled on French design; however, much of this construction and design was before his visit to Paris with some details being added later. Led by Peter's example, the court contented themselves with simple dress. In addition, Peter underpaid his servants, and, instead of hosting dinners, he invited his friends to picnics where everyone paid their own share.¹⁰⁸ On returning home from France, where the court life was the pinnacle of society and a spectacle unto itself, the Russian tsar made no attempt to alter his ways.

¹⁰⁶ Peter looked to the English and the Dutch for examples on how to improve his country, which is the main reason why they were included in the Great Embassy. These countries were known for their maritime industry, of which Peter took a particular interest.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 394.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 394.

The French respected the ability of the Russians to assert their dominance in the North. At the same time, this belligerence was the reason why France became more antagonistic toward the Russians. While other countries such as England and Austria were embracing Russia as a potential ally, France was quickly becoming one of Russia's fiercest enemies. Even after meeting Peter and seeing the quality of ruler the Russians were capable of, the French court "refused until the 1740s to recognize the Russian sovereign 'usurpation' of the title of emperor."¹⁰⁹ While they may have been annoyed and paid more attention, the French largely left Russia to itself as a "flank power". Because Russia confined its military advances to the Eastern edge of Europe, many of the great powers allowed Russia's advances and geographical gains. The other states, the French included, accommodated the Russians carving out more territory for themselves. England, Austria, and Prussia usually benefited when Russia made claims, and the French only occasionally lost – which the other countries wanted to create a better balance of power.¹¹⁰ Because of the geopolitical position of his country, Peter was able to make advances into Europe and begin Russia's rise as a great power with little outward response by the French.

In his work *Louis XIV and Twenty Million Frenchmen*, Pierre Goubert said of Louis XIV, "Dead, he became a kind of symbolic puppet for everyone to take over and dress up in his chosen finery."¹¹¹ While many great men in history have a degree of agency not found in other individuals, they are also impacted and influenced by their environment. They are the product of the works of others. What makes them great, in a sense, is that others wish to use their memory and their symbol for additional purpose. Their name gives power to a cause. Once Peter died in

¹⁰⁹ Malia, *Russia under Western Eyes*, 24.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹¹¹ Pierre Goubert, *Louis XIV and Twenty Million Frenchmen*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970), 291.

1725, his name and his memory became more powerful for the French. In the years that would follow, the French would react to his memory, often to a heightened degree than they actually reacted to Peter during his life.

Peter: The Enlightened

The French, with their power and prominence, had a formidable capacity to manipulate others. After Peter's death, they began to use this talent with regards to Peter. His memory, his accomplishments, and his failures could be used as the French wished for their own personal gain. As much as the French were aggravated and affronted by Peter's gains politically and

militarily, they were transfixed and enamored with his successes intellectually and culturally. During the Enlightenment, the philosophes took his rule, analyzed it, and reshaped it to fit the image that they had of an ideal ruler. Although grounded in fact, the result was a romanticization of Peter by the French, which impacted Peter's legacy.¹¹²

Although little happened following the 1717 Paris visit, the French made a large gesture to the tsar when six months later they inducted Peter into the French Academy of Sciences “in recognition of Peter's military victories over Sweden and Russia's enhanced status in Europe...also in appreciation of his efforts to reform his country in keeping with the values of contemporary European civilization.”¹¹³ Taking the French as an example, Peter sent his librarian J.D. Schumacher on a tour of Europe in 1721 in hopes of establishing a similar institution in Russia. Schumacher, a native of Colmar in Alsace and a graduate of the university of Strasburg, had enthusiastically supported the creation of an academy.¹¹⁴ Practically, Peter saw that the existing schools in Russia failed to produce enough civilian intellectuals.¹¹⁵ In addition, sciences and higher learning appealed to Peter, as did the esteem that he would enjoy as a result. Peter gave a speech in which he expressed the “national glory” to be gained and the “‘transmigration of sciences’ from ancient Greece, via England, France and Germany to Russia, which had the potential to ‘put other civilizations to blush, and to carry the glory of the Russian name to the highest pitch.’”¹¹⁶ Therefore, the recognition of the Academie and the creation of

¹¹² In this article, Lortholary discusses the myth of the change in Russia created by the philosophes. Instead of seeing what was really in front of them, the French saw what they wished to see and created a mirage. Albert Lortholary, “Le mirage russe en France au XVIIe siècle,” *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 7, no. 4 (1952): 549.

¹¹³ Cracraft, *The Revolution of Peter the Great*, 77.

¹¹⁴ Brechka, “Peter the Great: The Books He Owned”, 9.

¹¹⁵ Hughes, *Peter the Great: A Biography*, 188.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 188.

the Russian Academy led the exchange of ideas between Russia and France. Sadly, the Academy of Sciences in Russia, with an all-foreign faculty, did not open until August 1725, after Peter's death.

The members of the Academie were not the only intellectuals to be impressed by Peter in Paris. Voltaire first came in contact with Peter I accidentally, when he saw him walking casually around Paris in 1717. Only twenty-two years old, Voltaire would later say, "Neither he nor I had any idea that I should one day be his historian."¹¹⁷ He continued to take interest and keep track of the Russian tsar, but his main interest originally was in Charles XII, Peter's Swedish nemesis. The first version of Voltaire's *History of Charles XII* was published in 1731, and Peter was portrayed as the chief antagonist of Charles, the Swedish king. Though the research for the work focusing on the Great Northern War, Voltaire increasingly saw Charles XII as a destructive character in the history. After all, he had come to power with Sweden as a dominant power and left it in ruins and disarray.¹¹⁸ In contrast, Peter was involved in the same conflict as Sweden and emerged victorious and in a stronger position. Voltaire wrote, "The one left only ruins, the other was a creator in every respect."¹¹⁹

His writing on Charles XII was the first historical work of Voltaire's career, and, as a result, a major turning point. He was gaining the reputation of a historian, which attracted the notice of Peter's daughter Elizabeth, tsarina of Russia following the death of her father. Beginning in 1745, Voltaire inquired as to whether he could write Peter's biography. In 1746, Elizabeth named Voltaire an honorable member of the Russian Academy of Sciences. Eleven

¹¹⁷ A. Lentin, "Voltaire and Peter the Great," *History Today* 18, no. 10 (October 1968): 683, accessed online April 17, 2016, <http://www.historytoday.com/lentin/voltaire-and-peter-great#comment-0>.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

years later, she appointed him “Historiographer of the Russian Empire” and asked him to write the history of Peter the Great.¹²⁰ With her approval in 1757, Voltaire was given access to the Russian archives and the government.

A key figure in the creation of Voltaire’s biography was Count Ivan Shuvalov. A product of the closer relations between Russia and France, Shuvalov was described as the “Russian Pompadour” and was the Russian ambassador to France.¹²¹ After rising to Elizabeth’s favor, he encouraged Voltaire’s inquiries and gradually pointed the tsarina in the direction of Voltaire for the official biography of her father, believing it would be beneficial to have the best writer of the age for the project. Shuvalov would be Voltaire’s main contact in the Russian government, since he was also the curator of Moscow University. Due to health reasons, Voltaire never made the trip to St. Petersburg; instead, Shuvalov mailed the historian all the necessary source material from the archives including letters, confidential reports, and decrees. With the most valuable primary sources at his disposal, Voltaire became the first true historian of Peter the Great.

While Elizabeth may have wanted a biography of her father, Voltaire wanted to shape the work differently. He wanted to demonstrate the perceived genius of Peter the Great and honor Peter as a “soverains civilsateurs”, while still acknowledging that the hero was “a despot who enjoyed absolute power.”¹²² The book became a general history of a specific time period in Russia, with Peter as the central figure in the tale. Titled *L’Histoire de l’empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand*, Voltaire’s objective was to pay respect to Elizabeth’s father, but also stress

¹²⁰ Inna Gorbatov, “Voltaire and Russia in the Age of Enlightenment,” *Orbis Litterarum* 62, no. 5 (2007): 382.

¹²¹ Lentin, “Voltaire and Peter the Great.”

¹²² This is a classification that Voltaire liked to use when referring to monarchs meaning, “civilizing sovereign.” Gorbatov, *Voltaire and Russia in the Age of Enlightenment*, 382-383.

“Peter’s role as founder of the modern Russian nation.”¹²³ “My intention,” he wrote, “is not to say...how many glasses of vodka he (Peter) forced the maids-of-honour to drink at dinner, but what he did for the good of the human race in a country two thousand leagues in size.”¹²⁴

Through his biography, Voltaire was able to accomplish his goal. Overall, the work reads as a collection of the great feats accomplished by the tsar, almost putting him on the level of Alexander the Great. His accomplishments are well developed to the extent that the reader gets lost in the accomplishments of the new Russian ruler. By framing the work as a general history of Russia in which Peter is the main actor, Voltaire is able to give Peter an abundance of agency in the development of Russia. For example, Voltaire writes, “Russia is indebted solely to czar Peter for its great influence in the affairs of Europe...Before the time of Peter the Great, Russia was neither so powerful, so well cultivated, so populous, nor so rich as at present.”¹²⁵ Voltaire’s description of the initial stages of the Great Embassy is also interesting in this respect, as he portrays Peter as the best monarch for his people; “[a]t length he took a resolution to absent himself for a few years from his own dominions, in order to learn how to govern them better. He had an irresistible inclination to improve himself by his own observation and practice in the knowledge of naval affairs, and of the several arts which he was so desirous to establish in his own country.”¹²⁶ While this is an adequate description of Peter’s intent, the young tsar who was curious and desired adventure is depicted as an intelligent and wise ruler, partaking only in actions that benefited his country.

¹²³ Ibid., 383.

¹²⁴ Lentin, “Voltaire and Peter the Great.”

¹²⁵ Voltaire, *The History of Peter the Great*, 47

¹²⁶ Ibid., 90.

While Voltaire may not have wanted to dwell on the military details of the Great Northern War, the conflict with Sweden is a central focus of the work, as it demonstrates how Peter was able to impose his might on a once-great power. Voltaire is impressed with this aspect of Peter's reign in that he was able to develop Russia socially and culturally while also fighting the Swedish. He wrote, "Peter, while he was following the course of his conquests, completed the establishment of his navy, brought twelve thousand families to settle in Petersburg, kept all his allies firm to his person and fortunes, notwithstanding they had all different interests and opposite views; and with his fleet kept in awe all the sea-ports of Sweden, on the gulfs of Finland and Bothnia."¹²⁷ Not bearing in mind the force that had been required to bring these events to pass or the lives that had been lost in the building of St. Petersburg and the wars, Peter is a truly formidable and accomplished figure in Voltaire's estimation. His actions are all for the good of his kingdom. Interestingly, even the death of Peter's son Alexis is portrayed favorably. Voltaire summarizes the incident as necessary for the good of the country:

Throughout the whole of the foregoing dreadful catastrophe, it appeared clearly, that Peter had acted only as the father of his country, and that he considered his people as his family. The punishments he had been obliged to inflict on such of them, who had endeavored to obstruct or impede the happiness of the rest, was necessary, though melancholy sacrifices, made to the general good.¹²⁸

In this way, Peter's actions are portrayed as just and right, as they were done optimally in the service to his country.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 249.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 334.

Voltaire does adequately work through the sources that he had access to and constructs a reasonable and thorough biography of Peter, especially considering it is among the first works on the tsar. Yet, the ending to the *Histoire* reveals one of Voltaire's other goals. The last sentence reads, "Sovereigns of states that have long been policed can only say to themselves: if in the frozen climates of ancient Scythia a man aided by his genius alone has accomplished such great things, what could we not achieve in kingdoms where the accumulated labors of centuries have made all things easy?"¹²⁹ Certainly, Voltaire believes that Peter is to be admired in the work that he accomplished, but the nobility of this work should be the model to other kings of Europe – especially France. Throughout the work, there are subtle remarks against other rulers in Europe. When discussing the Great Embassy, Voltaire states, "France and Spain were the only countries that [he] did not take into his plan...France, because in that kingdom they reigned with too much ostentation, and that the parade and state of Louis XIV, which had disgusted so many crowned heads, ill agreed with the private manner in which he proposed to travel."¹³⁰ In the same paragraph, he goes on to blame the French for their rude behavior to the Russians in 1687.¹³¹ Voltaire denounces the most powerful nation in Europe at the time, and in effect raises Peter the Great to the effect that he should be a model to the French and others.

Voltaire took immense pride in his work, saying, "It is a fine sight to see St. Petersburg born amid a ruinous war to become one of the fairest and greatest cities in the world; to see fleets, where there was not even a fishing boat, to see seas linked together, industries arise, manners become polished and the human spirit advance."¹³² Still, Voltaire himself doubted that

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 391.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹³¹ This was the embassy of Russian diplomats who had completely disregarded French customs and disrespected not only the French, but also the Russian king as well with their behavior.

¹³² Lentin, "Voltaire and Peter the Great."

the history would have success among the French.¹³³ Yet, contemporary heads of state and the public enjoyed the biography. Upon reading the work, Louis XV and Madame de Pompadour asserted their fervent approval. Nervously, Voltaire wrote to Shuvalov inquiring whether the tsarina accepted the *Histoire*. Shuvalov replied full of praise, “Out of plain bricks you have raised a magnificent edifice.”¹³⁴ In addition, the general public declared the work a success, making it a best seller and running nine editions in the eighteenth century.

Yet despite the joy that Voltaire took in writing the work, the two-volume history – published in 1759 and 1763 – would not stand up to intellectual criticism. Diderot enjoyed the literature of the work, but doubted whether it would have lasting historical value. Gerhardt Friedrick Mueller, the official Historian of St. Petersburg, denounced Voltaire’s handling of his courses and his lack of knowledge on Russian history and the period.¹³⁵ Russian historians since have remarked on the many errors in the work. In addition, Voltaire took an idealistic and naïve view of Peter. For example, many negative aspects of Peter’s reign such as his “sadistic cruelty” were played down.¹³⁶ For these reasons, *l’Histoire* has had many critiques and is today considered one of Voltaire’s least-respected works.¹³⁷

One of the more outspoken critiques of Voltaire’s work was Frederick the Great of Prussia. At the time the work was published, The Seven Years War had the major powers of Europe locked in conflict. Frederick was suffering at the hands of the Russian army, and then

¹³³ Gorbatov, “Voltaire and Russia in the Age of Enlightenment,” 383.

¹³⁴ Lentin, “Voltaire and Peter the Great.”

¹³⁵ Personally, I wonder if some of this criticism comes from jealousy at not being asked to write the biography. Ibid.

¹³⁶ Gorbatov, “Voltaire and Russia in the Age of Enlightenment,” 383.

¹³⁷ This is demonstrated by the fact that the work is very difficult to find in print. I was able to find it online on an archive, but even then it was an edition from the 1970s. When compared to Voltaire’s more popular works such as *Candide*, it is almost non-existent.

the history of the enemy's greatest leader was published by one of Frederick's closest friends.

For Voltaire, who loved his subject and his work, this was an uncomfortable situation.

Interestingly, Frederick admired Peter the Great in his early years as a ruler, saying in 1737:

In recent times the only truly educated prince was the Tsar Peter I. He was not only the legislator of his country, but he understood perfectly all naval science. He was an architect, a surgeon (sometimes a dangerous one), and expert soldier, a consummate economist [-] in short, to make him the model of all princes, he only needed an education less barbarous and ferocious than that he received in a country where absolute authority was only known through its cruelty.¹³⁸

This was extremely high praise from the young prince who would come to power three years later. He was looking to his neighbor to the east as an example. A year later, Frederick would write a letter that promised to send information and anecdotes on the Tsarina and the Tsarevitch. Frederick had an ulterior motive to offering aid, hoping that the anecdotes would reveal to Voltaire the faults in Peter. The future Prussian ruler wrote, "Russia is a country into which the arts and sciences had not penetrated. The Tsar had no touch of humanity, of magnanimity or of virtue; he had been brought up in the most crass ignorance; he acted only in accordance with the impulses of his undisciplined passion."¹³⁹

By the time the first volume was published, Frederick had shifted from attempting to direct Voltaire's work to outright indignation. Now king and the focus of Russian aggression, Frederick wrote, "Tell me, what do you mean by writing a history of the wolves and bears of Siberia? What can you relate of the Tsar, which cannot be found in the life of Charles XII? I

¹³⁸ Voltaire, Frederick II, King of Prussia, and Richard Aldington, *Letters of Voltaire and Frederick the Great* (New York: Brentano's, 1927), 55.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 112.

shall not read the history of those barbarians; I wish I could ignore their existence in our hemisphere.”¹⁴⁰ The outrage of Frederick is worthy of note for two reasons. First, it shows the growing animosity towards Russia and the increasing impact of Russian aggression. The Siberian “wolves” were directly impacting western European powers. Second, Fredrick’s displeasure is a direct result of Voltaire and other Enlightenment figures’ admiration for Russia and Peter. The positive reputation of Peter the Great was apparently growing, even years after his death.

Joining Voltaire in his praise of Peter I, Montesquieu included him and his actions when writing *The Spirit of Laws*. While not a work about the tsar, Montesquieu’s use of the tsar in the section “What are the natural means of changing the Manners and Customs of a Nation” is interesting. The famous Baron intellectual clearly views Peter as a tyrant; he forced the nobles to cut their beards and robes under threat of punishment by law when he should have introduced these measures by custom. Peter may have looked down on his people as uncivilized, but his people demonstrated that they were not “brutes” by their ability to quickly assimilate to new customs. He allowed the women to return to society and to court, and to dress and enjoy themselves. Montesquieu wrote, “Peter I, in giving the manners and customs of Europe to a European nation, found a facility which he did not himself expect.”¹⁴¹ While Montesquieu does chauvinistically give Peter the credit for bringing Western customs to Russia, the statement also gives agency to the Russian people for being receptive to the possibility of change. Montesquieu was a supporter of Peter; however, he did not believe that he alone should be extolled for Russia’s rise.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 270.

¹⁴¹ Charles de Secondat Montesquieu, baron de, et al., *The Spirit of Laws*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, Ill: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc, 1990), 138.

Numerous historians have written on the place that Peter the Great holds in the Enlightenment. In his work *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought*, Nicholas Riasanovsky asserted that Peter I belonged to the Age of Reason “by belief, word, and deed.”¹⁴² Not only did he belong, but also he was recognized by figures of the Enlightenment. During his life, Peter became a member of the French Academy of Science after the tsar impressed the French intellectuals.¹⁴³ For Riasanovsky, a concrete recognition of Peter’s elevation in position was Voltaire’s biography. There were, of course, intellectuals, such as Rousseau, who would critique the work of Peter.¹⁴⁴ However, other philosophes like Diderot and D’Alembert agreed with Voltaire in praising the tsar. French scholar Labriolle wrote:

With Voltaire, Europe saw that this immense land, peopled by ignorant and brutish muizhiks, “had given birth to Peter the Great, tsar legislator, and reformer,” that next it places at its head... Catherine, whose writings and codes were admired by all... Within a few decades Russia steps out of its historical and intellectual “nonbeing,” provides for itself “rational, harmonious” laws and becomes for Western intellectuals a kind of model state, which attracts the eyes of all the theoreticians in politics and philosophy. The

¹⁴² Riasanovsky, *The Image of Peter the Great*, 18.

¹⁴³ Riasanovsky says that this honor was bestowed after Peter corrected the French on the exact position of the Caspian shoreline. While this may be an interesting anecdote and would fit with the curiosity and audaciousness of the tsar, I think it more likely that the honor was bestowed due to Peter’s excellence in the Great Northern War as Cracraft asserts. *Ibid.*, 18-19.

¹⁴⁴ In the *Social Contract*, Rousseau critiques Peter and his reforms in Russia: “The Russians will never be perfectly civilized, because their civilization was attempted too hastily. Peter had a genius for imitation, but he did not possess those great talents which can create and establish everything from nothing... He saw that his people were barbarous, but he did not see that they were unripe for civilization... Peter was desirous of making them Germans or English, when he should have first made them Russian.” Even this critique lends itself to the idea that Peter was a Western reformer, trying to inflict reforms on his people that they did not need or want. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Charles Frankel (New York: Hafner Press, 1947), 40-41.

“Muscovy” of 1700 has transformed itself into an “enlightened” empire, into a country of “Light,” into an example.¹⁴⁵

The Enlightenment had hope in the work that Russia had accomplished in the previous years, led by Peter the Great and then Catherine. The reforms and evolution of Peter the Great worked well with the ideas of the Enlightenment, and the philosophes continued to analyze his life.¹⁴⁶

Martin Malia makes a more negative argument about the work of the philosophes in *Russia Under Western Eyes: From the Bronze Horseman to the Lenin Mausoleum*. He begins by stating, “The roseate image of Russia held by Voltaire and his successors may be understood only if one bears in mind that the philosophes’ attack on the existing order was not a frontal assault but rather an undermining action.”¹⁴⁷ Therefore, the philosophes – especially Voltaire – were using the image of Peter the Great for their own gain and to make other political statements. Malia works through Voltaire’s *History of the Russian Empire under Peter the Great* and ends with Voltaire’s last paragraph on Peter’s place as an exemplary model for other rulers. For Voltaire, Peter’s Russia was “a slogan and a symbol” for the reforms that he wished Louis XV would make in France, “a battering ram against the ‘irrational’ institutions and ‘prejudices’ of the supposedly civilized states of old Europe.”¹⁴⁸ This opinion of Russia as an enlightened monarchy dominated Western thought for the rest of the century. A result was that Russian

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 20.

¹⁴⁶ Riasanovsky also asserts that Peter was the catalyst to the Russian Enlightenment and the work of Russian intellectuals: “Glorifying Peter the Great thus became a main theme – even the main theme as the glorifiers extended it, in what was for them a natural manner, into attacks on the old Russian ignorance and prejudices, a championing of education, or an exaltation of Catherine the Great – of the intellectuals of the Russian Enlightenment.” Even though it is not necessary for the purpose of this thesis, it is interesting to note that he was also a central figure in the work of Russian intellectuals in the same manner as French intellectuals. Ibid., 21.

¹⁴⁷ Malia, *Russia Under Western Eyes*, 42.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 45.

monarchs felt the need to live up to the reputation; Peter's daughter Elizabeth, for example, was the first European sovereign to abolish capital punishment.¹⁴⁹ Catherine the Great would later be the most altered by the view of Russia and its monarchs as enlightened.

While the philosophes expressed the best intention, they used Peter for their own purposes. He was a reformer who used the West for the betterment of his country, but he was also a brutal despot, the tsar who hung bodies outside his half-sister's window. Yet, the Age of Reason was entranced by the idea of a barbaric king who was able to drag his country out of the darkness. As Voltaire insinuated, if the Russians could do it, what was holding the more privileged countries back? They remade him and molded him into the symbolic ruler that they needed to influence their contemporaries and the next generation of rulers. As Malia demonstrates, the philosophes created a "cult of Catherine", the moral heir of Peter.¹⁵⁰ She would be the ruler that the philosophes wanted, taking the memory and symbol of Peter and building on its legacy.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 47.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 47.

Peter: The Founder of Russia

In his work *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersbourg*, Frenchman Joseph de Maistre described Peter and his legacy: “The sovereign changes both name and face, but he is always...I, THE KING...the king does not die.”¹⁵¹. Peter’s identity was powerful and emotional; he was the father of modern Russia. His descendants were forced to take up his memory and attempt to live up to his example. While many would not be able to fulfill such a lofty expectation, one tsarina – not even related by blood to Peter – relished in this opportunity to live on as Peter’s heir.

Catherine the Great was long lauded as the truly great westernizer of Russia. While there was some ambiguity as to whether or not Peter was a reformer, Catherine seemed to play perfectly into the hands of the philosophes. However, questions remain as to how genuinely Catherine cared about the Russian people. A German princess brought to Russia to marry the future tsar, Catherine was trapped in an unhappy marriage. Hating her husband, she took many other partners, and ambiguity arose as to the legitimacy of her children. Always ambitious and intelligent, she plotted a revolution that resulted in her rise to power and the assassination of her husband, Peter III. Catherine was now the queen of a foreign country, alone and lacking in legitimate power. As a result, she would turn to Peter’s memory and the intelligence of the philosophes for partners.

After violently and suspiciously seizing power in 1762, Catherine had to find a way to affirm her power and legitimacy. A long-time admirer of the French and their intellectual culture, she looked to their society as an example. The French, however, shunned her in the

¹⁵¹ Brian Grosskurth, “Shifting Monuments: Falconet’s Peter the Great between Diderot and Eisenstein,” *Oxford Art Journal* 23, no. 2 (2000): 38.

early years, unsure if she would keep her power. She continued on, making reforms and restructuring Russian society. Detesting Russian customs she had been forced to learn when she moved to Moscow, she changed the official language of the court to French and set about changing the structure of the court. She also called for a special commission to discuss a project on legal reform, largely based on Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*. Lauded as a patron of the arts, she offered to print the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot at a time when it was in danger of being censored by French authorities.

Her enlightened behavior was meant to hide Catherine's absolutism and desire to maintain control of Russia. In her first years, she ensured that her supporters and the Russian people would have confidence in her, awarding 1 million rubles of the 16-million ruble revenue of the Russian state to her supporters.¹⁵² Although she called for legal reforms and, in fact contributed to the final product, the Great Instruction, the reforms were largely meant as "to impress western European statesmen and westernized Russians" and serve as "the basis for Catherine's growing European reputation as an enlightened ruler."¹⁵³ She would not risk putting them into practice and jeopardizing her rule. Catherine reputedly enjoyed her rule as an absolute monarch, and instead of encouraging a decentralization of power, she instituted laws that would limit the nobles and the church and strengthen the position of the monarchy.

Regardless of reality, Catherine the Great slowly won over the hearts of the French. Europeans were well aware of the ambiguity of the circumstances that surrounded Catherine's rise to power, and they were concerned about her ability to rule effectively. Even ten years into her rule, Voltaire described the former German princess as "the most despotic power on earth" in

¹⁵² Lisa Rosner and John Theibault, *A Short History of Europe, 1600-1815: Search for a Reasonable World* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000), 297.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 298.

a letter to d'Alembert.¹⁵⁴ However, as time went on, Catherine eventually won the hearts of Voltaire and the French. Catherine had been reading the work of Voltaire and the other philosophes before she ascended the throne. Once she took the throne, she sought out his correspondence.¹⁵⁵ As time went on, it became clear that she would keep control of the throne, and Voltaire increasingly considered her to be an enlightened monarch. Seemingly desperate to find another “enlightened monarch” in Europe, Voltaire was apparently genuinely convinced that Catherine would be the one to revolutionize Russia. He was unable to accept that Catherine’s liberalism was used to gain her a favorable reputation in Europe or that it had little foundation in reality.

Voltaire was not the only one to see Catherine in a favorable light. In 1782, the French journal *Mercure de France* articulated Catherine’s problem in the most favorable light:

The crime which he [Peter III] committed against his son and against his wife [Catherine] whom he wished to deprive of their rights, of their rank, of their freedom, and likely of their life, his contempt for Russians, his taste for German morals, his extreme debauchery, his indiscretions while drunk, the cowardice to which he gave in at the first rumour of an insurrection, were the cause which threw him from the throne into chains, and from chains into the tomb... When one has the misfortune to ascend to sovereign power through a great revolution which focuses more attentively all eyes upon oneself, which displeased a large faction, which opens a vast field to conjectures, one has need of more talents and more virtues than a Prince who inherits a throne... Catherine II realized all that her position demanded of her and she executed all that she commanded... She

¹⁵⁴ Gorbatov, “Voltaire and Russia in the Age of Enlightenment,” 387.

¹⁵⁵ Their correspondence would begin in 1763 and continue almost uninterrupted until Voltaire died in 1778. Ibid., 387.

created establishments of all kinds, she populated deserted provinces...embellished her capital with new monuments, erected an equestrian statue to the founder of Russian civilization...¹⁵⁶

Catherine was portraying herself not only as a legitimate ruler of Russia, but also as the superior and rightful one. Her rise, through the hardships of her husband and her situation, showed that she was the best possible monarch for Russia. [Or at least, that is the image that she wanted to portray.]

Peter the Great was the “civilizing sovereign” of Russia, the man who opened the door to the West and allowed Russia to become a modern nation.¹⁵⁷ He was renowned throughout Europe as the father figure of the modern Russia. Seeing the favorable opinion that Peter held in the history not only of Russia but the rest of Europe, Catherine sought to link herself to Peter. Unfortunately, she was not directly related to him and had little basis on which to claim proximity to the great ruler. Through the obsession of Voltaire and the other philosophes with Peter, she found her opening. She presented herself as the “spiritual daughter” of the founder of modern Russia.¹⁵⁸ Elizabeth, the mother of Catherine’s husband Peter III, was Peter the Great’s legitimate daughter, but through her actions, Catherine proved to be the more suitable heir to the transformer of Russia.

By using the image of Peter I, Catherine was able to capitalize on the “symbolic prestige” his memory inspired.¹⁵⁹ In the early years of her reign, Catherine commissioned French sculptor Étienne-Maurice Falconet to create a monument to honor Peter the Great, thereby solidifying her

¹⁵⁶ Grosskurth, “Shifting Monuments,” 35.

¹⁵⁷ Gorbатов, “Voltaire and Russia in the Age of Enlightenment,” 382.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 384.

¹⁵⁹ Grosskurth, “Shifting Monuments,” 35.

connection to the success of Russia's history. The statue was placed in St. Isaac's Square in the middle of St. Petersburg, serving as a consistent reminder of the past. Sitting confidently and calmly on a rearing horse, "Peter the Great, the very embodiment of power and hierarchy, dramatizes the traditional topos of the restraint and quelling of the brute forces of nature and discord."¹⁶⁰ Diderot said of the impact of the statue, "That hand masterfully commands and protects; that face compels respect and belief...one stops and gazes in long contemplation."¹⁶¹

In his *Reflections on Sculpture*, Falconet wrote "The most worthy goal of sculpture, from a moral perspective, is...to perpetuate the memory of illustrious men, and to provide a model of virtue which is all the more effect as the subjects can no longer be objects of envy."¹⁶² If this were the goal of the statue, Catherine the Great could not have chosen a better subject. By placing his towering and authoritative form in the center of St. Petersburg, he reminded the Russian subjects of the grandeur possible in their rulers. In a brilliant and almost detectable touch, Catherine added an inscription to the monument in both Russian and Latin: "To Peter I, Catherine II".¹⁶³ The German princess had solidified her place as a Russian tsarina, the rightful heir and follower of the Great Peter I. With the inscription featured prominently on the statue celebrating the commanding and authoritative presence of the greatest ruler of Russia, the power and legacy of Peter was bestowed onto Catherine.

In Catherine, the French found the ruler that they had always wished for in Russia: the ruler who needed them. Ascending the throne in an unconventional manner, she used French ideas, art, and culture to solidify her place. Although she needed the image of Peter, she used his

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 36.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 34.

¹⁶² Ibid., 31.

¹⁶³ Ibid., 35.

influence in a French manner, with monuments and glory, ostentatiously reminding the people of the glory of the past. In Peter, none of this elaborate display existed. He was unapologetically Russian, and acted as the ruler he thought the people needed. Catherine had the refinement and the honor the French wanted, while Peter had the desire to help the Russian people. For this reason, less controversy surrounds Catherine. She was more intellectually gifted than Peter in many aspects; after all, she was a follower of the philosophes from her youth. However, she did not possess the same courage and curiosity of Peter. Once she gained rule, she was determined to keep it, while Peter was determined to use it.

As time passed, Catherine increasingly became onto which figure that history projected the Enlightenment. While Peter's recognition as the civilizing force of Russia faded, he remained the father of modern Russia. The Falconet statue remained in St. Isaac's square, and as time went on, the link between Catherine and the statue became less important. The figure of the tsar dominated, towering over the city he helped build. Published in 1821, Joseph de Maistre wrote *Les Soirées de Saint-Petersburg*, which contained a haunting description of the statue:

The equestrian statue of Peter the Great rises up on the banks of the Neva, at one of the extremities of the immense St. Isaac's Square. His severe visage gazes at the river and still seems to animate the navigation created by the genius of the founder of the city. All that the ear hears, all that the eye contemplates in this superb theatre exists solely through the thought of the powerful head which drew from the swamp so many imposing monuments. On these desolate shores, from which nature seemed to have exiled life itself, Peter founded his capital and created his subjects. His terrible arm still extends

over their posterity which presses around the august effigy; one looks, and one does not know whether the bronze hand protects or menaces.¹⁶⁴

Peter remained, while Catherine faded, as the symbol of the greatness of Russia. The man that brought Europe to Russia, but perhaps more importantly, the man who brought Russia to Europe.

Peter: The Focus of French Aggression

A piece of French propaganda, the Testament of Peter the Great is the fictitious work that supposedly asserts the ideas and legacy Peter hoped to pass onto his descendants. The piece was developed gradually, with actors from different nationalities and backgrounds contributing to its fabrication. Many different groups saw a benefit in engendering hatred for the Russians. When it was finally published in the early nineteenth century, the text was used to enflame anti-Russian aggression by the French. By putting Peter's name on the document, the French were able to create another identity for Peter: aggressive founder of Russia. As a result, the Testament is not a historical document, but propaganda that reveals what others thought of Peter and his memory.

Although document is occasionally given historical validity, no actually copy of the Testament currently exists in its original form. However, in 1948, Dmitry V. Lehovich described the document as it at survived to that point, highlighting the main points that the French felt necessary in their forgery.¹⁶⁵ The document was Peter's imagined goals for his country,

¹⁶⁴ Grosskurth, "Shifting Monuments," 37.

¹⁶⁵ Lehovich says of the Testament: "For more than 135 years the 'Will' of Peter the Great has flitted across the stage of history at moments of tension between Russia and her Western neighbors." At the time he was writing, the work "turned up" at a business lunch in New York in a speech discussing the displacement of people across Central Europe. The Testament, as it is not a concrete document but a piece of propaganda, is open to manipulation and hearsay. People pick and choose what is of the most use to them. For this reason, it is difficult to point to a concrete version of the Testament. Dimitry V. Lehovich, "The Testament of Peter the Great", *American Slavic and East European Review* 7, no. 2. (April 1948): 111.

including advice on how to reach these goals. First, Russians were to invite and encourage the sharing of information between themselves and the rest of Western Europe. Using the Westerners' skills and expertise would allow Russia to bridge the gap and catch up intellectually and militarily with the rest of the world. Second, if Russia was ever to be a great power, she needed to engage with the affairs of Europe. The old Russia that sat by and did not engage in formal alliances and marriage deals would not be able to survive. Third, territory needed to be extended north to the Baltic and south to the Black Sea. Fourth, Moscow was to share with Versailles and Vienna power over the world. If the two other powers did not want to share, Peter's successors were to put them against each other so that they would weaken each other. In this case, Russia would be left alone as the dominant power in Europe.¹⁶⁶

Who concretely wrote the testament or plan of Peter is a subject clouded in ambiguity. Over the century in which it was developed, too many people had their hands on the information to pinpoint the exact culprit. For this reason, historians place different dates and creators on the Testament.¹⁶⁷ While this is frustrating, the plethora of possible authors demonstrates the amount of people and actors who benefited from propaganda encouraging anti-Russian sentiment; a piece of propaganda masquerading itself as the work of the founder of Russia was a logical way encourage hatred. The story starts with the Hungarian rebels who were fighting against the Hapsburgs in the early eighteenth century. Led by Ferenc Rákóczi, they were given the support of the French, the longtime enemies of the Hapsburgs. They went to Constantinople, seeking advice and support from the French foreign minister there. While some of their arguments were against the Hapsburgs, a part of them were also against the Russians, hoping that an Ottoman-

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 113.

¹⁶⁷ Lehovich places the date at 1857, while Resis places it at 1836. Subtelny rejects the idea that it has a true date, as it was more of an evolution of ideas.

Russian conflict would involve the Hapsburgs and aid the Hungarian cause. They presented memorials to the French and the Ottomans that the French would include in their final work.¹⁶⁸

Wanting to encourage closer relations with the infamous Russian tsar, Rácóczi sent his diplomat Máté Talaba to Moscow. Having close ties also with the French diplomat des Alleurs, the Russians soon found Talaba suspicious and forced him to leave Moscow in 1710 when he was accused of spying for the French. The Russians were not wrong; Talaba sold a document to Charles XII of Sweden that he obtained from the tsar's archive in "some secret manner" for 10,000 talers. In des Alleurs, the "French connection" becomes clear. Des Alleurs had met the Hungarian representatives in Constantinople, Talaba in Moscow, and Charles XII in Sweden. A French diplomat known for spreading anti-Russian propaganda, he brought the three actors together and united their ideas in the document of Talaba. ¹⁶⁹ The document contained the idea that Peter had a genuine plan for expansion, which there may be truth in: it was no secret that Peter did seek expansion – often to the detriment of the Ottomans. However, the apocryphal and self-incriminating rhetoric of the document was created to stress the "devious and unbridled ambition of the tsar."¹⁷⁰ Already, the creators were impeding a sense of fear in their forgery.

The Hungarians were only the first to be used by the French to create their anti-Russian propaganda. Hryhor Orlyck, a young Pole, was recruited into the French Foreign Service in 1730 because of his background in Russian intelligence and his father's connections as a Russophobe.¹⁷¹ Hryhor was supposed to be useful in encouraging the Cossacks and the Crimean

¹⁶⁸ Orest Subtelny, "'Peter I's Testament": A Reassessment", *Slavic Review* 33, no. 4 (December 1974): 665.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 667

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 669.

¹⁷¹ His father, Pylip Orleck, was a Ukrainian émigré who worked with Charles XII in the Swedish Wars, actually sending copies of Talaba's work to the Cossack officers in an attempt to encourage them to rebel against Peter. He was unable to help the Swedish king undue the effects

Tatars to rise against the Russians. For the next twenty-five years of his life, he was employed in the French Foreign Service and played a major role in schemes designed to thwart Russian expansion. During the time, he continued to present the French with documents that supported the idea that the Russians were acting on a preconceived idea of expansion. In 1742, he wrote after the Russians had just finished a war with the Ottomans: “The Tsarina [Anna Ivanova] did not wish to distort her father’s work and return to Sweden those provinces which her father had acquired, because possession of them allows Russia to maintain a foothold in Europe, to have supremacy un the North, and to be the terror of the neighboring states.”¹⁷² When Hyhor Orlyk died, the French placed a large number of his and his father’s surviving papers in their archive for future study.

The *Secret du Roi*, the personal organization of Louis XV for the conduct of foreign affairs, had access to these papers, and is credited with the ultimate assembling of the testament. Chevalier d’Éon, one of the younger members of the group, is often connected to the final work that is referred to as the Testament. Circumstantial evidence links him to the formation of anti-Russian tracts.¹⁷³ The supposed “plan” was interesting to the general membership of the *Secret du Roi* as well, including the leader Comte de Broglie, who wrote multiple times about the desire of Peter to conquer his neighbors.¹⁷⁴ Certainly, Orleck had an impact on the *Secret du Roi*, and his memorial about Peter was read and “underlined several times by an eighteenth-century reader, and a note was made about the “ambitions of Russia.”¹⁷⁵ However, it is a Pole, General

of Poltava. He settled with sending out warnings of Russian aggression to European statesmen for the next thirty years. After being harassed by Peter’s officials everywhere he went, he left form the Ottoman empire in 1721, where he was detained for twelve years.

¹⁷² Ibid., 672

¹⁷³ Ibid., 674

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 674

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 675.

Michal Sokolnicki, whose name appears on the earliest undeniable text of Peter's plan. Having gone to France to ask for support against the Russians, Sokolnicki warned of "an entire codex of ambitious projects, a whole book of arrogant instructions, born in the fiery imagination of Peter I."¹⁷⁶ As a result, scholars have described the final version of the supposed testament as a "joint effort by Polish émigrés and the French political cognoscenti."¹⁷⁷ The French and the Poles, both threatened by the expansionist ideas of Russia, had good reason to collaborate in the creation of the fabrication. The text surfaces at the time when Poland was suffering due to Russian aggression, and the French were about to directly confront Russia under the rule of Napoleon. Historically, it would be nice to have a clear culprit to point to as the forger of Peter's master plan. Yet, the implications that can be drawn from a collective conspiracy between the French, the Hungarians, the Poles, and the Ukrainians are far more interesting.

While the concrete writer of the plan can only be speculated about, the publisher and the person who gave power to the plan is undeniable. In 1805, Russia joined the Third Coalition against Napoleon. The French emperor, who was his own head of propaganda, instructed the press to say that the Russians "are a nation of barbarians and their strength lies in their cunning."¹⁷⁸ Before his invasion of Russia, Napoleon ordered another wave of anti-Russian propaganda, believing he needed further justification for his aggression. This included a five hundred-page book detailing the expansive nature of Russia that infringed on the rights of other Europeans. As a result, the efforts of France to create an "Eastern shield" to save the rest of Europe was well founded and validated. The most important part of the anonymous author's

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 675.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 677.

¹⁷⁸ Albert Resis, "Russophobia and the "Testament" of Peter the Great, 1812-1980", *Slavic Review* 44 no. 4 (Winter, 1985): 682.

book was the supposed plan of Peter. According to the author, “the death of this “indefatigable conqueror” ... may have spared the continent a great catastrophe, but only temporarily, for he had bequeathed his plans to his successors.”¹⁷⁹ The author was later found to be Lesur, one of the members of the *Secret du Roi*, and it initially had little effect on the public. After all, it was only a resumé of the plan. However, the French commanders and government took the plan seriously. Copies of it were found in Vilna as the French forces retreated in 1812.¹⁸⁰ Frederick Gaillardet, the secretary of d’Éon, officially published the Testament in 1836 and the official lie about the Testament’s creation was told: that the Empress Elizabeth had given d’Éon access to the archives, where d’Éon found and copied the Testament, which he placed in the hands of Louis XV in 1757.

Since its inception, the Testament has risen and fallen in terms of historical importance. Interestingly, Russians have occasionally used the document. Stalin, at the height of his power, used Peter’s supposed words to justify expanding Russian territory. Perhaps more interestingly, the American government used it in a way similar to that of the French – to support anti-Russian sentiment. At the beginning of the Cold War, President Truman accepted the authenticity of Peter’s “will”. When challenged in 1948, he said that Russian leaders “have fixed ideas and these ideas were set out by Peter the Great in his will – I suggest you read it.”¹⁸¹ Even after suggestions were made that the will was a forgery, he still cited the report created by his senior

¹⁷⁹Ibid., 683

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 684.

¹⁸¹ Arnold A. Offner, *Another Such Victory: President Truman and the Cold War, 1945-1953*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 181.

advisor Clark Clifford. The report was filled with apocalyptic rhetoric supporting the Soviet aim to conquer the world with military force, citing Peter as the foundation of this rhetoric.¹⁸²

Why is this forgery important in terms of Russian-French relations? France was taking Russia seriously as a threat. In the early nineteenth century, the manifestation of their insecurity was in a forgery they created. Their insecurities had grown after the Great Northern War. When their Swedish ally was replaced by an uncontrollable and unfriendly Russia as the dominant northern power, France had to restructure their foreign policy. They could not afford to ignore Moscow any longer. However, they had few diplomatic foundations in which to gather information, so they turned to those who did. In the Poles, Hungarians, and Ukrainians, the French found less powerful partners desperate for the dilution of Russian power and the aid of France, developing an invaluable network. With their help, the French were able to construct a convincing and useful piece of propaganda that supported their anti-Russian policies.

While most rulers cease to be a threat after death, Peter the Great continued to be a “menace” to the rest of Europe long after his death. For the rest of Europe, he was a symbol of Russian power, the tsar under whom Russia ceased to be barbaric. He was respected by Europe, and that is why they were frightened by “his” plan. His descendants, although tsars and tsarinas in their own right, were considered as extensions of his greatness. The Testament was influential because the most Western and intellectual tsar to date supposedly crafted it. His identity as the founder of modern Russia was powerful in memory, making it useful to the French. The Testament of Peter the Great is noteworthy because it demonstrates another facet of

¹⁸² Partially, Truman was responding to Stalin’s use of the document. However, even after it was proven that the document was not real, Truman still continued to cite the document because it supported his claims. In this way, Truman joins the ranks of others who used the French propaganda to support their goals because it was convenient.

the tsar. After his death, he was not simply the model ruler the philosophes made him out to be. His military power was remembered, and grew into a powerful symbol of Russian strength.

Conclusion

Arriving at Moscow in 1812, Napoleon said, “Peter the Great, this man of granite like the foundations of the Kremlin, founded the civilization of Russia.”¹⁸³ Peter became the foundation of modern Russia. A strong character in his own right, it was tempting and easy for others to construct new identities for him. For his people, he was the Russian reformer trying to alter their way of life. For the rest of Europe, he would fluctuate between the barbaric, aggressive Russian tsar and the intellectual, interesting new monarch of Russia. After his death, his memory would prove a useful base for a numerous purposes. For the philosophes, he could be cast as the enlightened monarch who brought civilization to Russia. For Catherine, Peter was the founder of modern Russia who bestowed on her his greatness and legacy. For the French government, he was an aggressive symbol that could be used to enflame anti-Russian aggression.

The Great Man Theory of History is useful when looking at a figure like Peter the Great. In the nineteenth century, historians such as Thomas Carlyle argued that history is simply a

¹⁸³ Henry Vallotton, *Pierre Le Grand* (Ottawa: Le Cercle du livre de France, 1959), 9.

collection of the biographies of great men. These men are born into the world with inherent natural gifts and abilities, and their actions are the basis of history. They rise because of these abilities to positions of leadership, often at time when their leadership is most needed. This description of Great Men has some truth when its applied to Peter the Great. A young boy who never was supposed to ascend the throne, he gained power and used it for the betterment of his country. However, the Great Man history has the tendency of assigning too much agency to a single individual. As Montesquieu points out, his people, although reluctant to change, were not as barbaric as they seemed and embraced certain aspects of his rule. He was a devoted pupil, and much of Peter can be dedicated to the educated provided by his many teachers. While he did achieve a great victory in the Great Northern War, Sweden was a weaker state than it had appeared.

Yet, the many identities people assigned to him prove that he had a profound impact on history. Contemporaries and modern historians had the ability to remake him and mold him into different characters. There is no definitive opinion on who Peter the Great was. Today, historians continue to debate whether Peter was an adorer of the West or a reform-minded Russian monarch, just as people debated whether he was a barbarian or civilized during his life. His actions and ideas gave history an abundance of material to contemplate and evaluate, and as a result, agreement on his place is almost impossible.

Throughout my thesis, I looked at Peter through the eyes of the French and the perceptions they had of Peter. As the most powerful country in Europe, France played an important role in European affairs at the time. Even with its preeminence, France played a smaller role in the civilization of Russia. Instead of being an active participants, the French were observers in the emergence of Russia as a European power, having to readjust to the change.

Peter played a major role in this readjustment, with the French having to contend first with his actions and then with his legacy.

Often, Peter is said to be the monarch who brought Europe to Russia. However, some of Peter's European reforms did not remain in place after his death. Many of the citizens of the Russian state would have barely have recognized the change occurring in the monarchy unless they lived in Moscow or St. Petersburg. Instead, Peter is the monarch who brought Russia to Europe. Before Peter's reign, Russia was a neighbor to Europe, barely having a place in the European state system. After Peter's reign, Russia was a force to be contended with. They had emerged as a country capable of intelligence, culture, and political strength. They claimed a more active role in Europe, and less than a century later, Russia would take part in the coalition against Napoleon, the emperor of France. The different identities of Peter demonstrate how Europeans saw the Russian tsar during and after his reign. He, along with Russia, was transformed into threats as a result. Although there are many different sides to Peter, one identity encompasses them all: the tsar who founded the new Russian state.

Afterword

This project began in 2014 during my sophomore year of college when I was offered the opportunity to write an honors thesis. As a French, History, and Government major, I wanted to choose a subject that would encompass all of my interests. With my Eastern European and Russian heritage, a subject looking at the relationship between France and Russia looked like a good place to begin. Gradually over time, I narrowed my subject down to Peter. I figured that as the westernizer of Russia, the French would have a large impact on his reforms.

During the summer before my senior year, I studied abroad in Rennes, France for my French major. Already knowing that Peter had visited Paris and stayed at Versailles, I knew that I would have to go. When I arrived at the imposing gold gate, I understood why the court of Louis XIV was the center of Europe's political power at the time. I emerged from my visit with three conclusions: I understood how Louis was able to distract the nobles, I realized why other monarchs tried to emulate Versailles, and I knew why the French people revolted against the monarchy. After visiting such a property, I figured that Peter would have returned home to

Russia and make many changes. As I started diving into my research, I was struck by how the French seemed to play no role in the development of Russia under Peter. While Peter may not have been reacting to the French, they seemed to be subtly reacting to Peter and the changes he was making. My premise shifted: what if it was Peter who had an impact on the French? After this shift in focus, the project opened up to me.

Writing my thesis was one of the most frustrating and intellectually demanding tasks I have ever undertaken. While I am pleased with the route I took and my argument, I was limited when writing my thesis. First, I am a French major; however, my understanding of the language is not at the level where I can read French documents and feel confident using them. I relied on English translations when I could find them. Second, I do not know Russian. By limiting myself to English, I often reached a dead end finding sources. While I was able to access some primary sources, such as the work of the French philosophes, many of them were either in Russian or French. As a result, many of my sources are secondary sources that quote the originals. Lastly, little research has been previously conducted looking at the interactions between France and Russia. Because their diplomatic ties were limited and Peter only visited France once, the French are only briefly mentioned in works on Peter the Great. It was a daunting task to take up the subject and make my own judgments.

I would not have made it through this project without the help of others, and I cannot conclude without thanking them profusely. Thank you to the library staff who let me check out every book on Peter the Great in the collection, and then allowed me to create a stack on the hold shelf when I received too many library fines. My friends and family put up with my incessant talking on Peter for the past year, and the many moments of uncertainty when I questioned whether or not my thesis would be written. As for the History Department, thank you for

answering my many questions and easing my concerns. Dr. Vanderhill and Dr. Whisnant, thank you for agreeing to be a part of my committee and helping guide my research. Lastly, thank you Dr. Schmitz for encouraging me to begin this project two years ago, for talking through my thoughts with me, and for pushing me to think more and not settle. Taking on a subject such as Peter the Great is a large undertaking, and I hope that I was able to do him justice.

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