



Peter the Great - His Life and World

By Robert K. Masses – *Sorry I returned this book to the Library before I realized I'd scanned it backwards. See also Katherine the Great - Portrait of a Woman, available on CD. Note that the double headed eagle, a symbol Russia, denotes Russian territories owned in both Europe and Asia. **Some Notes:***

Peter's Childhood – In March 1669, when Tsar Alexis was forty, his first wife died in childbirth. She was greatly mourned by her husband and numerous relatives whose power at court had rested on her marriage. During twenty-one years of marriage she had produced thirteen children but none of her sons were strong. Which left only Fedor, then ten, and Ivan 3 who was half blind and had a speech impediment. Within a year the Tzar found a new wife. Natalya Naryshkina, was a tall, shapely young woman with black eyes and long eyelashes. For a Russian girl, she was well educated and by watching and assisting her foster mother she had learned the ways of Western culture. Her foster parents entertained the widowed Tsar and he fell in love with her. The tradition of the day was to assemble all eligible young noble women and parade them before him (think Queen Ester) so he could choose a new wife. The Tsar chose Natalya.

From the day of their marriage it was clear to everyone that the forty-one-year-old Tsar was deeply in love with his handsome nineteen-year-old wife. He wanted her constantly by his side. He took her with him where ever he went. At court the new Tsaritsa quickly became an agent for change. With her semi-Western upbringing she introduced dance, games and theater at their court—dramatic changes from the former Asiatic custom of separating men and women. In the fall of 1671, the Tzar learned that she was pregnant. Both father and mother prayed for a son, and on May 30, 1672 at one o'clock in the morning she delivered a large, apparently healthy boy. The child was named Peter after the apostle. Along with good health, his mother's black, vaguely Tartar eyes, and a tuft of auburn hair, the royal infant entered the world at a normal size. . . . Moscow rejoiced when the ringing of the great bells and messengers galloping off to carry the news to other Russian towns.

Since Michael Romanov's accession in 1613, each tsar had been succeeded by his eldest surviving son. When Tsar Alexis died at age 47 he left only sixteen-year-old Ivan - nearly blind, lame and spoke with difficulty and 10-year-old Peter - active, glowing and big for his age. The Boyars all supported Peter. But Peter's nineteen-year-old half-sister wanted the power. Sophia cried, "Peter is young and impetuous. Ivan has reached his majority. He must be the tsar." When everyone objected she led the palace guard in revolt and seizing the power. The revolt marked Peter for life. The calm and security of his boyhood were shattered, his soul was wrenched and seared. And its impact on Peter had, in time a profound

impact on Russia. He hated what he had seen; the maddened, undisciplined soldiery of the old medieval Russia running wild through the Kremlin; statesmen massacred; Moscow, the Kremlin, the royal family at the mercy of ignorant, rioting soldiers. The revolt helped create in Peter a revulsion against the Kremlin with its dark room and mazes of tiny apartments.

While Sophia ruled as regent, Peter left Moscow and grew up in the countryside outside the city. Later, when Peter was master of Russia, his aversions had significant consequence. Years were to pass when the Tsar never set foot in Moscow, and ultimately, Peter stripped Moscow of its rank. The ancient capital was replaced by a new city created by Peter on the Baltic. In a way, the Streltsy revolt helped to inspire the building of St. Petersburg.

Peter's Marriages - Peter's mother insisted that he marry and produce an heir. So Peter allowed her to choose a wife for him. The woman she chose was a typical Russian noble woman, four years his senior. Peter married her when he was 17 and she produced one son. She was very shy and had no interest in Western culture. Their marriage was a disaster. While Peter was off fighting wars with the King of Sweden he fell in love with a peasant girl. After several years he wed her in a ceremony privately performed in St. Petersburg without fanfare. For a while, even though Catherine had borne him three, then four, then five children, he continued to keep the marriage a secret from his people and his minister and some members of his family members while she continued to bear his children.

Since traditional Russians would find it an act of madness for their Tsar to marry an illiterate foreign girl, before leaving on a campaign against the Turks, he summoned his sister Natalya, his sister-in-law Praskovaya, and two of her daughters to tell them that Catherine was his wife now and should be considered the Russian Tsaritsa. He expected to marry her in public as soon as he could but wanted them to know that if he were to die first, they were to accept Catherine as his legal widow.

By then he had persuaded his first wife, the Tsaritsa to go into a convent which was legal in Russia so he was free to remarry. In February 1712, Peter married Catherine again—this time with drums and trumpets playing, with the diplomatic corps in attendance, with a magnificent banquet and a show of fireworks. Before the ceremony Catherine had been publically received and was baptized into the Russian church. The Tsarevich Alexis her step-son, acted as her godfather. Thereafter she was publicly proclaimed Tsaritsa.

Catherine had qualities which Peter had never found in another woman. She was warm, merry, compassionate, kind-hearted, generous, adaptable, comfortable, robustly healthy and possessed of great vitality. Among all of Peter's followers, she came closest to keeping up with the Tsar's phenomenal energy and compulsive drive. Catherine had an earthy common sense which immediately saw through flattery and deceit. The language she spoke, like Peter's own was simple, direct and honest. In private, she alone could indulge her playful humor and treat Peter like an overgrown boy; in public, she had the tact to remain the background. She had enough intelligence and sympathy to understand Peter's burdens as well as his character.

His death Peter suffered from a chronic infection of the bowels which may have been the result of excessive drinking. On November 5th 1724 he felt twinges of pain and other symptoms but decided to travel by boat to visit another ironworks and an armament factory at Systerbeck on the Gulf of Finland. The weather was typical for early winter in the North; gray skies, high winds and rough, icy seas. Beyond the south of the Neva, Peter's yacht was approaching the fishing village of Lakhta when in the distance

he saw a boat carrying twenty soldiers swept out of control by the wind and the waves. As he watched, the boat was driven aground on a shoal. There its keel struck in the mud with waves pounding its side. The little vessel began rolling back and forth, threatening to capsize. Those inside obviously unable to swim, seemed incapable of doing anything to save themselves. Peter sent a skiff from his own yacht to assist, but his sailors were unable to refloat the grounded boat; the men inside, meanwhile did little to help, being almost paralyzed by fear of drowning. Watching impatiently, the Emperor ordered his own skiff to take him along-side the grounded boat. Unable to come close because of the waves, the Emperor suddenly jumped into the sea, plunging into the shallow icy water up to his waist and wading to the stranded boat. His arrival and presence galvanized the desperate men. Responding to his shouts, they caught lines thrown from the other boat, and with the help of other sailor now in the water beside the Emperor, the stranded boat was pulled and dragged off the shoal. Blessing themselves for their salvation, the survivors were taken ashore to recover in the houses of local fishermen.

Peter returned to his yacht to strip off his wet clothes and dress in something warm before anchoring at Lakhta. At first, although he had been immersed in the icy water for a considerable time, it did not appear that this exposure had affected him. Enormously pleased at his exploit in saving lives and refloating the boat, he went to sleep at Lakhta. During the night, however, he came down with chills and fever and within a few hours the pain in his intestine reappeared. He canceled his trip and sailed back to St. Petersburg, where he went to bed. From that moment on, the disease never relinquished its fatal grip. . . On January 22, he suffered a relapse and called for a priest. Then ordered the release of all state prisoners except murderers and granted amnesty to young noblemen punished for not joining the service.

By evening on the 25th the Emperor seemed a little improved and doctors began to talk of letting him get up. Encouraged he sat up and ate a little oatmeal gruel. Immediately he was stricken with such violent convulsions that those in attendance thought the end had come. . . In agony, crying out loudly from the intensity of the pain, he repeatedly expressed contrition for his sins. Twice more, he received the Last Rites and begged for absolution. He said, "I hope God will forgive me my many sins because of the good I have tried to do for my people."

Through his ordeal, Catherine never left her husband's bedside, day or night. At one point, telling him that it would help him make his peace with God, she begged Peter to forgive Menshikov, still in disgrace. Peter consented, and the Prince entered the room to be pardoned for the last time by his dying master. At two o'clock on the afternoon of the 27th perhaps thinking of the succession, the Emperor asked for a writing table. Once was given him and he wrote, "Give all to . . ." then the pen dropped from his hand. Unable to continue and meaning to dictate, he sent for his daughter Anne, but before the Princess arrived, he had become delirious.

Peter never recovered consciousness, but sank into a coma, moving only to groan. Catherine knelt beside him hour after hour, praying incessantly that he might be released from his torment by death. At last, at six o'clock in the morning of January 28, 1725, just as she was pleading "O Lord, I pray Thee, open Thy paradise to receive unto thyself this great soul, "Peter the Great, in the fifty-third year of his life and the forty-third year of his reign, entered eternity.