

THE PERSONALITY OF PETER

More than in any other period of Russian history or the history of any other country, the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth centuries was a era of great events and changes for which a single man was mostly responsible. To posterity Peter seems like a superhuman colossus bestriding half a continent. To contemporaries he seemed much the same. He is indeed a unique personality in history.

Intellectually Peter the Great was one of those simpleminded people who can be read at a glance and are easily understood. Physically Peter was a giant of just under seven feet, and at any gathering he towered a full head above everybody else. Not only was Peter a natural athlete, but habitual use of ax and hammer had developed his strength and "manual dexterity to such an extent that he was able to twist a silver platter into a scroll. Indeed so dexterous was he that if a piece of cloth was thrown into the air he could cut it in half with his knife before it landed.

Peter at eleven was a lively, handsome boy. But traces of a serious nervous disorder due either to the memories of the bloody scenes of 1682, or to his all too frequent debaucheries, or to a combination of both, ruined his health. So that in later years Peter made a different impression. By the time he was twenty he began to suffer from a nervous twitch of the head. When he was lost in thought, or during moments of emotional stress, his round, handsome face became distorted with convulsions. This, together with a birthmark on his right cheek, and a habit of gesticulating with his arms as he walked, made everybody notice him.

In 1697, some Dutchmen who were waiting in a barber shop in Haarlam, and who had been obligingly informed of these characteristics by some of their compatriots who had been in Moscow, easily recognized the carpenter who had just come in to be shaved as the Tsar of Muscovy. At times Peter's face and eyes took on such a savage aspect that nervous people were likely to become demoralized in his presence.

Parisian observers described Peter as an imperious-looking sovereign who, in spite of his fierce and savage looks, could be most amiable to those who were likely to be of use to him. Peter had such a sense of his own importance [hat he paid no attention whatsoever to the elementary rules of behavior, and behaved on the seine as he behaved on the Neva. Leaving his Paris hotel one day, he took possession of a carriage that did not belong to him and calmly drove away.

Peter was never more than a guest in his own home. His adolescence and youth had been spent either in traveling or working out of doors' Had Peter at the age of fifty paused to look over his past, he would have seen that he had been constantly moving about from one place to another. During his reign he had traveled the length and breadth of Russia, from Astrakhan to Derbent, from Archangel to Azov, and from the Neva to the Pruth. As a result of this perpetual mobility, Peter became so restless that he was constitutionally incapable of staying in one place for any length of time, and was always looking for a change of scenery and for new impressions. The haste with which he did everything was now normal. He had such a long stride and used to walk so quickly that his companions had to run to keep up with him. He could not sit still for long, and at banquets he would jump out of his chair and run into the next room in order to stretch his legs.

When he was young his restlessness added to his enjoyment of dancing. Peter was an ever-welcome

guest at the parties of noblemen, merchants, or artisans; here he danced a great deal and, though the only dancing lessons he had were "practices" during evenings spent at the Lefort establishment, he danced well. If Peter was not sleeping, traveling, feasting, or inspecting, he was busy making something. Whenever he could he used his hands, which were never free from calluses. When he was young and still inexperienced he could never be shown over a factory or workshop without trying his hand at whatever work was in progress. He found it impossible to remain a mere spectator, particularly if he saw something new going on. His hands instinctively sought for tools; he wanted to work at everything himself.

He eventually became so skilled and dexterous that he was able to master new and unfamiliar techniques in a very short time. This attention to techniques, which had developed from an intelligent curiosity, became a habit, and Peter felt that he had to master every new technique before he had even considered whether or not it was of any use to him, so that over the years his technical knowledge became most impressive. Even during his first foreign tour, the German princesses who had talked with him came to the conclusion that he was a master-craftsman in fourteen different trades. He felt quite at home in any factory.

After his death, it was found that nearly every place in which he had lived for any length of time was full of the model boats, chairs, crockery, and snuff-boxes he had made himself. It is surprising that Peter ever found enough leisure to make so many knick-knacks. He was so proud of his own skill and dexterity as a craftsman that he believed himself to be a good surgeon and dentist as well. Those of his companions who fell ill and needed a doctor were filled with terror lest the Tsar hear of their illness and appear with his instruments to offer his services. It is said that after his death a sackful of teeth was found--a memorial to his dental practice!

But his favorite occupation was shipbuilding, and no affairs of state could detain him if there was an opportunity to work on the wharves. When he lived in St. Petersburg in later years, he would spend at least one or two hours every day at the Admiralty. He was such a competent marine architect that his contemporaries said that he was the best shipwright in Russia, since he not only could design a ship, but knew every detail of its construction. Peter took a particular pride in this ability and he stinted neither money nor effort in extending and improving Russia's shipbuilding industry.

The Moscow-born landlubber had developed into a real sailor to whom the smell of the sea was as necessary as water is to a fish. Peter always said that sea-air and constant hard physical labor helped to keep him in good health in spite of his over-indulgent way of living. It was probably because of this that he had an insatiable sailor appetite. According to his contemporaries, he was always hungry and whenever he went visiting he was ready to sit down to a meal, whether he had already dined or not. He used to get up at five in the morning and lunch between eleven and twelve, after which he retired for a short sleep. Even when he was guest at a banquet he would observe this rule, and return after his sleep ready to start the meal all over again.

Because political quarrels during this childhood and youth had kept him from the strait-laced functions of the Court, Peter surrounded himself with a motley group of unconventional youngsters, the consequence of which was that when he grew up he could not tolerate ceremonial functions. During solemn ceremonies of state this otherwise masterful and self-willed monarch would become awkward and confused; when Peter had to dress up in all his ceremonial finery and stand by the throne in the presence of the Court to listen to a newly-accredited ambassador's wordy peroration, he would breathe heavily, grow red in the face and perspire freely. In his private life Peter lived simply and frugally, and the monarch who was considered by the rest of Europe to be most powerful and the richest in the world used to walk about in worn-out shoes and in stockings that had often darned by his wife or daughters.

When he was at home he would hold a reception as soon as he had got out of bed, dressed in a very

old dressing gown made from nankeen and would then put on a plain, thick, serge caftan which he seldom changed. He rarely wore a hat in summer, and used to go out either in a gig drawn by two miserable horses, or in such a shabby cabriolet that a foreign observer declared that a Muscovite tradesman would have thought twice about using it. To the end of his life, Peter retained the habits of previous generations, disliked large, lofty rooms, and during his travels abroad avoided living in sumptuous palaces. Bred on the vast plains of Russia, Peter found in Germany that the narrow river valleys surrounded by mountains oppressed him. At St. Petersburg he built himself some small summer and winter residences with tiny rooms.

Peter was free and easy in his relationship to people; but his social manners were a mixture of the habits of a powerful aristocrat of a previous generation and those of an artisan. Whenever he went visiting he would sit down in the first vacant seat, if he was hot he would take off his caftan in front of everybody. When he was invited to act as Marshal of Ceremonies at a Wedding he would fulfill his obligations punctiliously and then, having put his Marshal's rod of office away in a corner, would move towards the buffet, take a hot roast of meat in his hands, and start eating. It was this habit of dispensing with knives and forks at table that had so shocked the princesses of Germany. He had no manners whatsoever and did not consider them necessary.

Peter thought that official functions were oppressive and boorish but there were others which were worse and were openly indecent. It is difficult to know what caused such behavior. Was it a search for vulgar relaxation after a hard day's work or was it merely lam of thought Peter tried to give his debaucheries an official form in order to turn them into permanent institutions. In this way Most Drunken Synod of Fools and Jesters" was created. Meetings were held under the presidency of a chief buffoon called the prince-Pope, or the "Noisiest, all jesting Patriarch of Moscow,". There was a college of twelve cardinals, all tipplers and gluttons, who were attended by a large suite of bishops, archimandrites, and other dignitaries, whose coarse and obscene nicknames were deliberate provocations to the church. Peter himself was a deacon of this Order, for which he drew up, with the same legislative skill that he expended on his laws, a Charter that minutely defined the method of electing and installing the "Prince-Pope" and the ritual required for the consecration of the rest of this hierarchy of drunkards.

The first commandment was that members were to get drunk every day, and might never go sober to bed. The Synod's most important tasks were to offer excessive libations to the glory of Bacchus, and to lay down a suitable procedure to ensure that "Bacchus be worshipped with strong and honorable drinking and receive his just dues." The Charter also prescribed the vestments to be worn, drew up a Psalter and Liturgy, and even created an "All-jesting Mother Superior with Lady Abbots". It even went so far as to imitate the catechism, and decreed that, just as a baptismal candidate was asked DO you believe?, so a candidate for this institution was to be asked "Do you drink?.. Those who lapsed into sobriety after initiation were to be debarred from all the inns of the Empire, and a heretic was to be banned from the society in perpetuity. In short, this was a most indecent parody of religious rites and ceremonies. The pious believed that its members souls were damned eternally, and that those who resisted this apostasy would become martyrs.

Generally most foreigners took the view that such behavior served a political or even educational purpose, and that it was directed against the Church and its hierarchy, as well as against drunkenness. The Tsar wanted at one and the same time to ridicule an institution which he wished to discredit, and to divert his subjects while trying to make them contemptuous of bigotry and disgusted with debauchery. It is difficult to know how much truth there is in this view, particularly since it is more an attempt to justify than a genuine explanation. Peter not only ridiculed the Church hierarchy and ceremonial, but also made a mockery of his own personal power. Surely his behavior is the result of a peculiar sense of humor rather than of a particular personal bias.

Peter and his friends were more intent on playing the fool than in causing trouble. They made fun of

everything, ignoring tradition, popular feeling, and their own self-respect, in the same way that children imitate the words, actions and facial expressions of adults, without meaning either to criticize or to insult them. They did not mock at the Church as an institution, but merely showed their resentment of a class which contained so many worthless people. It has always been a characteristically Russian habit to make fun of the Church and to give an anti-religious twist to any buffoonery. Equally familiar is the part played by Church ritual and the clergy in popular legend. The clergy had only themselves to blame for their debasement, because, while they expected the laity to adhere strictly to the precepts of the Church, they notably failed to do so themselves.

Peter had other sides to his character. He spent time and money generously in obtaining paintings and statues from Italy and Germany which formed the foundations for the Hermitage Collection at St. Petersburg. The many pleasure palaces which he had built round his new capital indicate his taste in architecture. At enormous cost he hired the best European architects. He showed marked aptitude for the plastic arts, and delighted in complicated building plans; but here his artistic appreciation stopped. He himself confessed that he did not like music, and found even dance music unpleasant.

Occasionally serious discussions were held at the Drunken Synod's uproarious meetings. Peter's discussions of policy with his collaborators were held with greater frequency as the war spread and his own reforms multiplied. Through the smoke and above the clinking of tankards, political ideas were thrashed out. Peter worked hard, both mentally and physically, all his life; he was always ready to adopt new ideas, was extremely observant, and became a highly skilled craftsman. But he had no time for complicated reasoning, and found it easier to grasp the details of a plan than to view it as a whole, so that he was better at devising ways and means of implementing it than at seeing its consequences. He was more a man of action than a thinker, which not unnaturally heavily influenced his way of life and his political program.

It was Peter's misfortune that he had no coherent political understanding, but only a vague, confused, notion that he had unlimited power and that somehow this was minced. For a long time nothing was done to make good this deficiency. His early passion for manual labor and craftsmanship left him no time for meditation, and distracted his attention from those subjects which form the basis of a political education.

In spite of the facts, that Peter's early moral guidance had been bad, that he had ruined his health, that his manners and way of life were uncouth, and that he had been unbalanced by the terrible experiences of his childhood, he remained sensitive, receptive, and extremely energetic. These qualities went a long way to mitigate the faults which were due to his environment and way of life. The introduction of all Peter's reforms was accompanied by force; he thought that only force could bind together a nation lacking in cohesion, and he believed that with force he could completely transform the traditional way of life of his people. His devotion to his people led him to overstrain their resources and waste their lives recklessly. He himself was honest and sincere, and did not spare himself; he was also just and kind to others.

But, owing to his interest, he was better with inanimate objects than with people, whom he treated as if they were merely tools. He quickly found out who was useful, but could neither learn not to overtax people nor put himself in their place. In this respect he differed greatly from his father. Peter knew how to manage people, but either could not or would not try to understand them. These characteristics affected his relations with his own family. He may have had a vast knowledge of his own country, but he hardly knew his own family and home, where he was never more than a guest. He never really lived with his first wife, and he grumbled about his second; he never came to terms with his son, Alexis, the Tsaravitch. Moreover Peter did nothing to preserve Alexis from the evil influences which were finally responsible for his destruction and endangered the very existence of the Romanov dynasty.

It is obvious then, that Peter differed greatly from his predecessors, In spite of a certain family similarity. He was a great statesman who knew where the sources of Russia's wealth lay and understood her economic interests. His predecessors of both dynasties were also statesmen, but they were sedentary men who preferred to benefit from the work of others, while Peter was an acute, self-taught master craftsman, an artisan Tsar.

Source: V. O. Kluhevsky, *The Course of Russian History*.

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