

THE RISE OF THE EUROPEAN RUSSIAN STATE: HOW THE DIPLOMACY AND FOREIGN POLICY OF THE EARLY RUSSIAN TSARS AND PETER THE GREAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE EUROPEANIZATION OF RUSSIA

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Abstract

The use of foreign policy and diplomacy to advance the interests of the State has remained at the core of statecraft since the earliest days of its practice. Its successes and failures are evident throughout history and its tenets continue to be practiced by people from all reaches of the globe. Particularly in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century, the use of diplomacy and foreign policy helped to define, and oftentimes, redefine the borders of European empires. This impact on power and prestige was not lost on the emerging nation to the East— the Muscovite State.

This paper seeks to examine the foreign policy strategies of Muscovy and the succeeding Russian Empire (which formed the foundation of the modern state). As the Muscovite/Russian state grew in size and power, leaders from both time periods understood the importance of the European empires. The author finds that by means of warfare, conquest, political actions, and personal and cultural diplomacy, Russian Tsars attempted to not only establish themselves as powerful continental actors but forge closer ties with Europe in the process. Their motivation was an effort to redefine the Muscovy/Russian nation and combat the ideas of backwardness which were so often associated to its people and society. By heavily adopting European values and creating an empire modeled after those of Europe, it was the hope of Russian leaders that their European counterparts would take the Eastern nation seriously and treat it as an equal.

The piece is divided into two sections, the first section of this piece will be devoted to foreign policy goals and success of the early rules of Muscovy: Grand Duke of Moscow Vasili II (1425-1462), Ivan III (1462-1505), Vasili II (1505-1533), and Ivan the VI (1533-1584). The second section will place a particular emphasis on the reign of Peter the Great (1682-1725) and his efforts to reform the Russian state into a nation more on par with the societies of the Central European Empires.

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Introduction

The annals of history are filled with the ambitious actions of kings, princes, and ruling dynasties as they sought to expand their rule, their wealth, and above all, their power. Nowhere is this more exemplified than in Europe and over the course of the last millennium; principalities, kingdoms, and empires have risen to enormous heights only to be dissolved from the map by more powerful actors or the failure of statecraft within their borders.

At the beginning of the 16th Century, a new power was emerging from the East, seeking to upset the status quo of European nations. The Muscovite State, which would later become the Russian Empire, was beginning to exert control in the region and establish ties to Europe. Throughout its history, Russia has always had a connection to Europe and powerful rulers have never hesitated to use the full extent of diplomacy to capitalize on this connection. From the ancestors of Ivan IV to Peter the Great, each leader conducted their own diplomacy and foreign policy in very different (and perhaps even contradictory) ways, yet each was committed to the betterment of the state, the exertion of greater central Muscovite power, and the establishment of a European Russian state.

In an effort to redefine their nation and combat ideas of backwardness, Russian Tsars used foreign policy and diplomacy to advance a modern Russian Empire based heavily on the characteristics of the nations of Europe. Over the course of several hundred years, Muscovite leaders and Russian Tsars transformed their small and comparatively weak nation state into which could compete with the powerful, continental European allies.

The Early Russian Empire Under the Muscovites and Expansion into Europe

The growth of the Muscovite state first began under Grand Duke of Moscow Vasili II following victory in a civil war during the mid-15th Century, however expansion into Europe was not yet a priority of the young state. During his reign, Vasili II expanded the control of Moscow, capturing ethnic Russian lands, such as Novgorod, via warfare and treaty (Vernadskij, 1936). Through the use of absolutism, he abolished all perceived political threats within the Moscow dominion by “[eradicating] all vestiges of sovereignty or even autonomous government in its comment parts” to prevent the destruction of his power (Florinsky, 1969, p. 63). Under such a system of governance, the decisions of the state were not subject to approval by anyone other than Vasili III himself and, due to the somewhat universality for the time, absolute rule served as one of the first common denominators between the Russian state and the European empires. The two entities would continue to share similar progression of governance styles with pure authoritarianism giving way to governments influenced by elite driven legislative system.

Following the death of Vasili II in 1462, his son, Ivan III, continued his father’s legacy. Likewise relying on absolutism, the new leader expanded Muscovite influence and power over the weaker regional principalities, until finally incorporating them as part of his young nation. Over the course of his reign, Ivan III skillfully acquired Vereia, Yaroslavl, Rostov, Tver, and Viatka with a foreign policy strategy of treaties, military conflict, and absolutism (Florinsky, 1969). Perhaps his greatest contribution to the establishment of the Russian empire was his part in the defeat of the Mongol Golden Horde via a complex network of alliances and war tactics. In doing so, Ivan III opened further opportunities for the Muscovites to expand their state eastern ward. In addition to exerting control over local lands within *Great Russia*, Ivan III began to expand Moscow’s power in Europe. By marrying the niece of the final Byzantine Emperor, Ivan III solidified the early relationship between Moscow and Europe. This politically advantageous marriage allowed him to claim the legacy of the Emperor, and moreover it began – perhaps a few centuries early – the Europeanisation of Russia. Zoe, the European princess who took

the Russian name Sophia, brought with her European artists and architects who helped to Europeanize Moscow and the etiquette of the Russian court became more similar to the elaborate European courts upon her arrival (Vernadskij, 1936).

Ivan III's diplomatic efforts were not only contained within Muscovy. Seeking to change the perspective of Muscovy as an unorganized and unruly backwater state and redefine Russia's relations with Europe (at that time the most powerful collection of power), Ivan III began to cultivate modern diplomatic relations with nations West of Moscow. As a result, these two worlds, with very little in common, were soon working to become better neighbors. By the close of the 15th Century, Ivan III had cordial relations with a number of European entities. Foreign exchanges with the Holy See, the Holy Roman Empire, and Hungary amounted to little more than cordial embassy exchanges. Conversely, more meaningful relations with the Danes (for the purposes of checking the power of Sweden) and those with Italy (to facilitate the one sided transfer of artistic talent from the former nation to early Russia) emphasized the increased symbiotic relationships between East and West (Florinsky, 1969). Additionally, like other European powers, Muscovy under Ivan III expanded its foreign relations globally to the Ottoman Empire and India.

Vasili III, Ivan III's successor, continued to build these relations when he took the throne in 1505. During his rule, the monarch further extended diplomatic invitation to France, Pope Leo X of the Papal States, and returned peace between Muscovy and Sweden (Florinsky, 1969). Moreover, during Vasili III's rule the emerging European state began to establish early relations to the south with the Safavid Empire. In the early 1520s, the Russians received an envoy from Shah Ismail I, likely regarding trade relations and control over important routes, as well as a military alliance against the Ottoman Empire (Mattheem, 1994, p. 741). Beyond this, Vasili III's time in power was relatively uneventful in unique foreign policy, due to his emphasis on cementing the work done by his father.

By time Ivan IV assumed power of the Muscovite State in 1547, the land-area of the empire had nearly quadrupled in size since Vasili II began the modern state. Ivan IV's success in foreign policy was certainly due to his domestic policy and his unification of the Russian State into an empire. During his reign, he expanded the Russian state beyond the Ural Mountains by use of force, annexing Siberia to "bring Central Asia and the Middle East within the Russian sphere of interest" and maintain economic interests in both regions (Florinsky, 1969, p. 102). This interest in forceful diplomacy defined Ivan's tenure as the Russian Empire's first tsar. Additionally, Ivan IV did find some success in the continuation of diplomatic relations with Europe, and through correspondences and trade exchange, Ivan was able to cultivate a relationship with Queen Elizabeth I of Great Britain, gaining her support so much as to secure assurance of asylum in Great Britain should he need to flee Russia (Anon, 2016).

These contributions of the early tsars helped establish footholds in Europe, and various treaties, marriages, and even conflicts bound this rising eastern power with established powers in the west. The groundwork these men established provided enormous benefits to the future leaders of the Russian Tsardom.

Cultural Ambassador: Peter the Great and the Establishment of a European Russian Empire

When Peter the Great became the leader of the Russian Empire in 1682, he continued the aggressive European style diplomacy which had defined the reigns of his predecessors. However, more so than engaging with Europe in political diplomacy, Peter began also to style his own nation after his western neighbors in what can only be defined as cultural diplomacy. In the era of Peter the Great, the upper echelons of the Russian state, that is the rulers and aristocratic class, began to look more like the high

society of *Europe-proper*⁵, while remote peasant communities still reflected the uniqueness of traditional Russian society.

One of the biggest accomplishments of Peter the Great was the founding of a city, St. Petersburg, to control his increasingly European empire, aptly named after the great leader's patron saint. This city, located in the Europe half of Russia, became the capital of the Russian Empire, yet the city itself was far from Russian. In his comprehensive book on Russia, Orlando Figes (2002) writes of St. Petersburg: "Every aspect of its Petrine culture was intended as a negation of 'medieval' (seventeenth century) Muscovy. As Peter [the Great] conceived it, to become a citizen of Petersburg was to leave behind the 'dark' and 'backward' customs of the Russian past in Moscow and enter, as a European Russian, the modern Western world of progress and enlightenment." (p. 10). In his poem, *The Bronze Horseman*, Alexander Pushkin (1833) further writes of the city and describes it as "a window on to Europe"; Figes (2002) adds further that the city was modeled after places such as Amsterdam, Venice, and Versailles in terms of city planning and architecture (pp. 8-10). In these canaled cities, pedestrians and those in horse-drawn carriages could expect to travel across the waterways over bridges or a well maintained system of regattas. Inspired, Peter attempted to replicate this European system (mainly from the Dutch and English) in his new capital, yet Russian enthusiasm for this mode of transportation was not equal to that of their European counterparts (Huges, 2002, pp. 178-179).

Peter the Great's use of this European city in the East contributed heavily to the foreign policy of his reign. From the marshy city Peter 'exported' Russian intellectuals to learn in the great centers of knowledge in Europe. The expectation was that these 'cultural ambassadors' would bring back all they learned in Europe, while at the same time promoting Russian interests abroad. Yet, many Europeans regarded Russia as still backwards and looked down on the nation despite its efforts at establishing cultural relations (Huges, 2002).



While this Europeanization of Russia served as an important, and newer method of conducting foreign policy, Peter the Great was also very reliant on more *traditional* means of executing foreign policy. In March 1697, Peter and a 250-strong team set out for a tour of Europe "for the confirmation of ancient friendship and love" (Huges, 2002, p. 40) and the reaffirmation of a European alliance against the Ottoman Empire. This Grand Embassy, as it was called, traveled to cities across

Europe and at each stop, Peter was able to study the culture and politics of his host nation, as well as conduct important diplomatic business. Upon his arrival home to Russia nearly two years later, Peter was able to use much of what he learned in northern Europe to establish a modern continental army—very similar to other European powers—to enforce his own foreign policy. Russian historian Figes (2002) notes of Peter the Great's European travels that "in Königsberg, he studied artillery. From his travels he picked up what he would need to turn Russian into a modern European state: a navy modeled on the Dutch and the English ones; military schools that were copies of the Swedish and the Prussian; and a Table of Ranks adapted from the Danes" (p. 12). For his own court governance, Peter looked to the court of Louis XIV creating "the post of *reketmeister*, an office modeled on the *maître de requêtes* at the

⁵Term coined by author to geographically describe the landmass to the West of the Russian state. Politically, the term can also refer to the powerful and established empires of the continent, including (but not limited to) France, the Holy Roman Empire, the Habsburg Monarchy, and Spain.

French court, to whom appeals could be addressed by individuals complaining about delays, red tape and abuses in hearings of cases in colleges and other bodies” (Huges, 2002, p. 169).

These observations, lessons, and replicated ideas helped Peter to establish a very Western army and navy, able to withstand the fury of other European nations (such as the Napoleonic Empire or the Swedes). Prior to the reign of Peter the Great, the Russian military was not a powerful force in comparison to many European neighbors; the army was neither well trained nor permanent, and there was no established Russian navy. In his childhood years, Peter began to organize a modern military amongst children his age (and of all classes) and during his reign he founded a strong standing Russian army – organized by European standards and strict discipline as outlined in his Military Statute, the *Ustav voinskiĭ* (Raeff, 1971, 39). As aforementioned, on the high seas, Peter founded a powerful navy, combining the knowledge he learned in the Netherlands with expert Dutch shipbuilders in Russia (from his father’s reign) (Crescente, 2014). Much like the land units, this navy was well disciplined and organized like the navies of England and the Netherlands whose copied precepts formed the basis of his Naval Statute (*Ustav morskoi*) (Raeff, 1971, p. 39).

The strongest link connecting the Russian state to the established empires of Europe-proper is undoubtedly the previously mentioned Table of Ranks, an elaborate system defining the hierarchy of the Army, Navy, and civil servant bureaucracies. Peter the Great biographer Huges (2002) emphasizes the Table of Ranks’ unique creation as a Russian system of organization influenced by a number of European nations. In designing the Table of Ranks, “English, French and Spanish ranking systems were ... examined, [and] were regarded as less appropriate for Russian condition” (Huges, 2002, p. 22) whereas the systems of the Swedes, Danes, and Prussians was seen as more appropriate for the Russian empire and adopted earnestly by Peter. The Table of Ranks was also used to strengthen the noble classes’ commitment to serving the newly improved Russian state. Those who held rank on the Table, the “eminent people” of Russian society, “were expected to have clothing (Western, naturally), carriages and livery appropriate to their office and calling” (Huges, 2002, p. 167) as would any *eminent person* in Europe.

During his reign, Peter the Great transformed the Russian political and social landscape into a nation modeled after Europe. In large part due to his diplomatic efforts –both political and cultural – Peter was able to project Russian power and new culture into Europe. Moreover, his diplomatic missions into Europe afforded him the opportunity to learn more about the societies he was emulating. Therefore, he was able to copy established institutions to help make his own state successful in culture, politics, and military.

Undoubtedly, Russia would likely never have developed into the nation it is today if not the skillful foreign policy efforts of the Muscovite kings and Russian Tsars. The leaders of Europe’s biggest nation (in landmass, at the very least) understood the importance of following a European model of development. From humble beginnings, Moscow evolved from a small dot on the Europe map to an impressive actor on the international stage. In achieving this, the aforementioned skilled foreign policy of Russia, wittingly or unwittingly, followed a similar course to that of European states: firstly, steadily expand the borders by means of conflict to thus gain power and prestige; once achieved, the second step (so to speak) was to use the varied tools of diplomacy to legitimize these new borders amongst neighbors and build up a support network of like-minded monarchs; the final aspect of this process was to use these networks to help better the state from within, be it culturally, politically, or militarily.

Epilogue

Following the reign of Peter the Great, Russia never lost the drive for greatness that was so evident throughout her history. However, the Europeanisation of the Russian Empire that began under the early Muscovite rulers and reached its zenith with Peter the Great did not last forever. Following the War of 1812 in Europe and the Napoleonic invasion of Russia, many members of the new generation of aristocrats began to question their national identity. The harsh conditions of the front had begun to wear down the boundaries that separated the aristocratic officers from their peasant enlisted men and helped foster a shared Russian identity. Once back home, these young officers rejected the court language of French in favor of Russian and replaced their fine European looks with the rugged look of the Russian common folk. This led to the creation of a new Russian— a nationalist committed to the ideal of keeping foreign influence out of Russia. Yet at the same time, the Russian state continued to be involved in European diplomacy and foreign affairs, ensuring that the external power of Russia had not changed.

Yet at the same time, the Russian state continued to be involved in European diplomacy and foreign affairs, ensuring that the external power of Russia had not changed. Following the ill-fated and arguably misguided Congress of Vienna, Russia was as much an European power as England or the restored Bourbon dynasty of France. At the Congress's conclusion in 1815, Russia had expanded her holdings in Poland, and greatly influenced the weaker powers of central, southern, and northern Europe. Despite the nationalism brewing amongst the Tsar's Napoleonic War veterans during this time, "Russia had become more of a European state than at any other time in its history" (King, 2008, p. 317). It was this congress which build on the actions of earlier leaders of the Russian state; Tsar Alexander understood (like his forebears) the importance of diplomacy in expanding the empire's borders and ideology.

Undoubtedly, this control of central and eastern Europe has not been abandoned by the current Russian political structure. While the Russian Federation cannot maintain control over the Europeanized Russian sphere of influence in the same way Tsar Alexander's imperial forces could, or in the brutal way of the Red Army and Soviet Leadership, they have nevertheless adapted to meet the challenge.

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