

## Peter the Great

Peter I of Russia came to the throne in 1682. Known as Peter the Great, he was a brilliant but highly controversial ruler. He made Russia into a great power although he brutally oppressed many of its people.

While many countries in Western Europe had made economic, scientific, and cultural changes by the 17th century, Russia—the largest country at the time—was still a mostly illiterate, agricultural society, based on a feudal system of serfdom. It had no army, few schools, and almost no factories. Foreigners were kept out. Peter was determined to bring Russia up to date. In 1697 Peter traveled to Europe in disguise (although at over 6 feet tall, he was rather recognizable). He worked as a carpenter in a Dutch shipyard, learned how to cobble shoes, engrave metal, and even to pull teeth.

When Peter returned to Russia he mandated extensive reforms in religion, art, science, and government.

He created a Russian navy and established schools, libraries, and museums. He encouraged the sons of nobles to study abroad and master reading, writing, arithmetic, and geography. Women were no longer to be kept secluded, but were to appear in public at social functions.



Peter wanted to create a city that would showcase Russia's power and progress. In 1703, work began on St. Petersburg (later called Petrograd and then Leningrad). Peter transformed what others viewed as a dismal marshland into a beautiful capital city. In 1721, after defeating the Swedish and winning Latvia and other territories, Peter proclaimed Russia an empire and took the title of Emperor of All Russia, Father of the Fatherland.

Despite his reforms, Peter was also a ruthless dictator. It is estimated that 30,000 to 100,000 people died building St. Petersburg. When Russians hesitated to move to the new city, Peter ordered them to do so at their own expense. Peasants, most of whom were serfs working the land for the nobility, could not travel without permission, and could be drafted into the army at any moment. Hundreds of thousands of people left the country during Peter's reign.



Although Peter and his second wife, Catherine I, had 12 children, only two lived past the age of seven. In 1718, fearing his son Alexi was plotting against him; Peter disinherited and tortured his heir, who died in prison awaiting trial. After Peter died in 1725, it would be 37 years before Russia enjoyed another "golden age" under the reign of Catherine II, also known as Catherine the Great.