Peter the Great: The Evolution of His Image in Russian History and Thought

A Thesis Presented for the

Bachelor of Arts

Degree

University of Florida

Sydney Disdier

May 2019
Acknowledgements

There are so many people to thank for helping me during this last semester. So many have made this process a lot easier that I thought it was going to be. It is therefore my honor to express my deepest thanks to those who have made this thesis possible.

First, I would like to thank Dr. Galina Rylkova for her guidance, encouragement, and patience over the last semester. Thank you so much for encouraging me to continue with my research. Your support was essential to my success here.

I am deeply indebted to my respected teachers and other members of the Russian department for their invaluable help in preparing this thesis.

My sincerest thanks go to my friends for their continuous support during this project. My joy knows no bounds in expressing my cordial gratitude to my best friend Sarah Larson. Her encouragement and moral support were a great help throughout the course of this research. I could not have done it without you.

Lastly, I owe my deepest gratitude to my mother Sandra Disdier. You worked so hard to help me achieve my dreams, and for that I thank you so much. Without you, none of this work would have even been possible.
Abstract

Every nation has its historical figures who rose to the status of mythological heroes. In our remembrance of them, these people have been given praise and the chance to live forever in the image of their work. It is in this light that we see Peter the Great (1672-1725). As the emperor of Russia, Peter the Great transformed his country, immortalizing himself as an Enlightened despot who brought Russia into the European scene. This Enlightenment image of Peter the Great dominated Russian intellectual discourse for nearly 125 years. In this thesis, I focus on the Russian Westernizers and Slavophiles and what use they found in their discussions of Peter the Great in the nineteenth-century. Had Peter the Great not received the notoriety and attention that many believed he deserved, these two groups certainly would have invented another pro-Western Russian monarch to initiate and legitimize their discussions of Russia’s past and future. Peter the Great was the heart and soul of these debates, and the reconceptualization of his image allowed Westernizers and Slavophiles to flourish in the nineteenth-century Russia.
Contents

Introduction..................................................................................................................5
Legends About Peter the Great.....................................................................................8
His Son’s Murder.........................................................................................................10
Feofan Prokopovich...................................................................................................14
Catherine the Great....................................................................................................15
The Decemberists........................................................................................................18
The Image of Peter the Great in Official Nationality..................................................20
Pushkin (Peter I Becomes a Literary Character).........................................................21
Peter Chaadaev..........................................................................................................34
Peter the Great Through the Eyes of Westernizers....................................................37
Vissarion Belinskii......................................................................................................38
Alexander Herzen........................................................................................................40
Peter Through the Eyes of Slavophiles.....................................................................43
Conclusion..................................................................................................................46
Bibliography...............................................................................................................50
Introduction

Every nation has its gods and myths, and it is with these myths that our heroes are born. Over the millennia, the word hero has come to mean many things: a ruler, a warrior, a superhuman being. Finding its origins in Old French, this noun has evolved with the time, allowing our heroes to be given praise, immortality, and the chance to live forever in the image of their work. In our remembrance of them, these heroes have shaped our understanding of history and literature, and it is in this light that we see Peter the Great (1682-1725).

Born in Moscow on Thursday, 30 May 1682, Peter the Great proved to be a remarkable individual. Almost seven feet tall and powerfully built, stories spread of his astonishing physical strength, detailing the tsar’s ability “to bend silver talers with his fingers” or “roll up a silver plate.”¹ Indeed, the tsar was an overwhelming presence for his contemporaries, but his insatiable need to learn added to Peter I’s extraordinary attributes. Lacking a regular education, Peter I proceeded with an almost superhuman effort to become involved in every practical segment of his reign. During his lifetime, Peter I found himself involved in “diplomacy, administration, justice, finance, commerce, industry, education,” and practically everything else that fell within his power.² He possessed an amazing sense of self-confidence and his directness as a tsar never allowed for any doubt in his role as the sovereign of the Russian people. Peter the Great was confident and consistent in his role as a tsar, and his image of himself was thus the first step leading toward his eventual canonization. This canonization would begin with his own image of

---

¹ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.
² Ibid., 4.
himself, but the image of the great Russian tsar, as with any astounding historical personality, would continue to change over time concerning these attributes.

Long before Peter’s reign, Russia’s relationship with the West was essentially nonexistent. The Mongol Yoke left them isolated, and the country faced a period of stagnation for nearly 500 years. After his journeys abroad, Peter the Great sought to revolutionize the entire state of Russia. As the first tsar to travel abroad, there is little doubt that his two trips to the West were critical in his transformation of Russia. The main purpose of these journeys was to modernize his backward, undeveloped state and transform it into a European power.³ As Feofan Prokopovitch proudly stated in the tsar’s image, Peter the Great not only moved Russia from darkness into light but from “backwardness to a new prominence and parity with the West.”⁴ In his 43 years as tsar, he took his knowledge of the West and transformed a country that was hardly considered a threat by the West into a vast empire that spanned two continents and eleven time zones.⁵ Peter’s “Great Embassy” in 1697-1698 and his second trip in 1717-1718 were successful in transforming Russian and Western European perceptions of his country, and this success fueled the glorification of his Enlightenment image.

This Enlightenment image of Peter the Great dominated Russia intellectual discourse for nearly 125 years. This essay will focus on the Westernizers and Slavophiles and what use they found in their discussion of Peter the Great in the nineteenth-century. The formation of these two

³ Sergei Alschen, In the Footsteps of Peter the Great, (New Jersey, University of Dartmouth, 2013), 3.
⁴ Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), 12.
⁵ Sergei Alschen, In the Footsteps of Peter the Great, (New Jersey, University of Dartmouth, 2013), 3.
parties, not unlike the American Republicans and Democrats, with their ongoing debates allowed Russia to place itself within the contemporary world, and more specifically, within the ever-encroaching East-West dichotomy. Following in the footsteps of the Russian Enlightenment image, the Westernizers praised Peter the Great for his transformation of Russia, but as their rival group emerged in the early nineteenth-century, the Slavophiles would be the first group to make the decisive break in this long intellectual tradition.

In his Enlightened image, Peter the Great, the magnificent tsar, was thought to be a catalyst of the new world. He is remembered in gratitude and honor, where his image has been cherished most continuously. Indeed, anyone who looks into the memory of Peter the Great must first confront the culmination of image and texts that have accumulated around his glorious reign, and even more, after his death. Since the start of the eighteenth-century, every citizen of Russia has heard the story of how the magnificent tsar traveled to the West, bringing with him education and modernization to his once backward country. In bringing his country into the European scene, Peter the Great not only became one of the few people to change history, but he also became the subject of some dark legends as well. He changed the entire course of his country’s history, and this is how he has been remembered ever since.

If a historical image of Peter the Great had not existed, the Westernizers and Slavophiles certainly would have invented him. The recreation of his image marked a decisive break in Russian intellectual discourse, and this evolution of his image says a great deal about his popular memory. The memory of Peter the Great is not a neutral memory: it is fragmented and controversial. Reflecting the conflicts of ideas that have divided the Russian people since the reign of the tsar, the Westernizers and Slavophiles were influenced by the striking and explosive changes in Russia’s intellectual identity, but it also brought into question the definition of Russia
itself. As the history of Peter’s commemoration spans nearly 200 years in this context, there are certain events, ideas, and thinkers that will be omitted from this essay due to time and space constraints. Russians, from tsars to commissioners to intellectuals to common people have felt ambivalent about the memory of Peter the Great, and through the recreation of his image, these Russians were able to discuss the role of great individuals in Russian history and Russia’s role in Western civilization.

Legends About Peter the Great

The image of Peter the Great as an Enlightened despot has dominated Russian intellectual discourse for well over three centuries. His image among the common people, however, was not always as consistent as with the enlightened elite.

By the year 1700, a legend had already emerged, with the government working aggressively to extirpate it, that the Peter I on the Throne was not the true Peter I but rather a substitute that was both un-Russian and evil. Many attempted to explain this through his frequent absences and avoidance of state affairs, the prominence of foreigners surrounding the ruler, and ravaging of ancient Muscovite traditions. These actions irritated Muscovites, and many began referring to the tsar as the Antichrist. Many rumors circulated that he was not the real tsar or that he was switched at birth, and these legends of him being the Antichrist dominated the view of the Old Believers who refused to give up their Russian traditions.

---

6 Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), 76.

During his reign, his subjects held at least three fundamental versions of the legend with numerous stories told within each. First, the Russian people believed that a substitution had taken place during Peter I’s infancy. Word circulated that the Tsaritsa, Natalya Naryshkina, had presented Tsar Alexis with a daughter and that he had her secretly exchanged for a son. The second version of this legend explained that this substitution indeed took place, but rather than happening at birth, it more likely happened while he was abroad. The Russian people believed that the real Peter I had been imprisoned in the West and that an imposter returned in his place.

No true Russian could possibly denounce the tradition of his people. In the third, but most likely not final, version of the legend, the Russian people believed that the Antichrist himself had substituted Peter I. This version of the story sparked a fire among the Russian people, but like the first two legends, its arguments varied for when the Antichrist truly appeared. Some stories claim that this substitution was apparent form the very beginning while other claim that this substitution did not take place until the tsar began his persecution of the Old Believers. Regardless of whatever version may, or may not, be true, the people believed that Russia was being ruled by a “heretical foreigner or by the Antichrist himself.”

This impression of Peter the Great as the Antichrist was based on Peter’s physique. The tsar’s gigantic stride and striking stature already suggested the evil power, but even more, his reforms of foreign dress, smoking, and novel drinking was seen as having something satanic in them. The Old Believers had no problem explaining the victories of the tsar’s military victories,

---

8 Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), 76.
9 Ibid., 76.
10 Ibid., 76.
11 Ibid., 76.
because as the Antichrist, he was supported by the magic of Hell that was bound to help him prevail.¹²

To conclude at this point, the popular Russian tradition and literature of Peter the Great contained both positive and negative images. As shown in the legends regarding his ancestry, the negative image of Peter the Great is largely dominated by the view of him as the Antichrist as the Old Believers tried to make sense of this new sinful world that began to emerge around them. This view of Peter the Great was widely accepted, but the negative approach to his reign was not limited to this image. In addition to this, many Russian people also felt a general sense of uncertainty and even existential anxiety, which led them to protest Peter’s new reforms that they struggled to understand. Peter the Great was primarily seen through the lens of his Enlightenment image, but the ideas surrounding his reign were not limited to that. Peter the Great served as an Enlightenment hero in the eyes of educated Russians, but his image of the evil despot dominated the imagination of the common people since they were the first to experience the negative impact of Peter I’s revolutionary reforms.

**His Son’s Murder**

One of the most painful episodes of Peter the Great’s reign is largely dominated by the imprisonment and death of his son, Tsarevich Alexis. The relationship between Peter I and Alexis was strained at best, and there was nothing done within his son’s lifetime that could repair this rift. Peter’s relations with his son did not improve after Alexis’s wedding, nor did they

¹² Ibid., 76.
improve after the birth of his first grandchild. Catherine I, Peter’s second wife, did her best to reconcile the relationship between Peter I and her stepson, but as far as Peter I was concerned, Alexis’s actions were simply part of a series of duties he was required to carry out. Nevertheless, Alexis continued to mistreat his wife (procured by his father) and blatantly disregarded all Peter’s reforms and innovations.

In short, Alexis preferred the life of tradition that existed in Moscow. He hated Peter I’s quest for modernization, and he especially despised Peter I’s push for a more refined military. These acts of treachery were not accepted by Peter I. In January 1715, Peter I wrote to Alexis:

“Have you assisted [me] since you came to Maturity of Years in [my] Labours and Pains? No, certainly, the World knows you have not. On the other Hand you blame and abhor whatever Good I have been able to do, at the Expense of my Health, for the Love I have bore to my People, and for their Advantage; and I have all imaginable Reason to believe, that you will destroy it all, in case you should Survive me.”

Peter I believed that Alexis’s apathy towards his reforms was a sign of his plotting a coup, an accusation that would eventually lead to Alexis’s trial.

In June 1718, Alexis was tried under a special tribunal known as the Chancellery for Secret Inquisitorial Affairs. Facing the charge of high treason, Alexis was accused of leaving

---

13 Lindsey Hughes, *Peter the Great A Biography*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008), 111.
14 Ibid., 112.
15 Ibid., 127.
Russia to seek aid through the Austrian government to overthrow and assassinate Peter I.\textsuperscript{16} This accusation was entirely based on Alexis’s forced confession and hearsay with no concrete evidence to truly tie Alexis to the crime.\textsuperscript{17} Much of the attention during the investigation focused primarily on Alexis’s physical and moral failings rather than on the treason at hand. Alexis was accused of being a drunk, lazy, and for attempting to escape the succession.\textsuperscript{18} His plan to kill his father was not to steal the throne but to destroy everything father brought into Russia. This trial took place over a series of days, and his death would follow shortly after.

Official reports of Alexis’s death attribute it to seizure, yet unofficial versions rumors such as death by poison or that Peter had strangled him with his bare hands.\textsuperscript{19} While these rumors circulated, the most likely cause of death is quite obvious: Alexis, who had already been weakened by his imprisonment and tuberculosis, was subjected to a series of brutal beatings leading up to the day of his death.\textsuperscript{20} It is speculated that Peter I was tearful in his last moments with his son, but given his prior relationship with Alexis, Peter I’s reaction to his son’s death can only be guessed at. First and foremost, Peter I was a monarch, and more importantly, a monarch with a mission. His role as a father came only second, and his son failed to support him in the worst possible way: by refusing the throne.\textsuperscript{21}

Alexis’s death was a very complex issue indeed, because it directly affected the succession to the throne. This complexity made it even more important to have an official version that was clearly presented. In the canonical account of Alexis’s death, it is emphasized

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 127.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 127.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 127.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 127.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 129.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 130.
that Peter the Great felt a profound love for his son and that he attempted to raise him to be a worthy successor of the throne. Alexis, however, refused to cooperate with his father in this effort, and he neglected the approaches and opportunities his father presented to him. Alexis’s own decision to reject his father was crucial in this saga. Apologists latched on to this interpretation, claiming that it was the “ultimate example of civic virtue:” a father who sacrificed his son for the interest of the Russian state and people. This sacrifice, as sad as it is, has even been suggested to be directly responsible for bringing the highly popular Catherine the Great to the throne. Alexis’s death was a crucial event defining Peter the Great’s reign, and whatever move he made towards the downfall of his father, his actions became embedded into the official image of Peter the Great.

Although many images of Peter the Great have emerged over time, the first and most basic images of the ruler can logically be considered his own. His idea of himself was largely idealized and oversimplified, but as his reign continued, many took up the opportunity to praise the image he presented to Russian society. In fact, the Petrine canon was not even fully formed until the time of the emperor’s death. As a ruler, he considered himself to be a strong warrior dedicated to the struggle of pulling his country out of the darkness and into the light. After his passing, many of his collaborators enthusiastically took up the torch, championing the tsar and propagating his reforms. Without changing the image Peter the Great created for himself, these collaborators simply added praise and veneration to the name of the tsar, something his simple

---

23 Ibid., 51.
24 Ibid., 10.
25 Ibid., 10.
26 Ibid., 10.
and pragmatic view of himself left out. Following his death, glorifying the reformer became the main theme in carrying on his image. This image was developed and later canonized by his contemporaries, most notably Feofan Prokopovich (1681-1736).

**Feofan Prokopovich**

Feofan Prokopovich proudly restated the tsar’s image of his reign as not only a move from darkness into light but from a backward state to one comparable with the West. Before Peter the Great, Russians were considered barbarians in the political scene, but as his reign progressed, Europeans “began to both speak and write about [them] differently”. He made Europe look at Russia differently. This glorifying image of Peter the Great continued to gain strength as the Enlightenment progressed throughout his empire. Many preachers followed in Prokopovich’s idea of “two Russias,” celebrating Peter’s unparalleled accomplishments in transforming his native country from a backward country into a modern European empire. This idea of promoting Russian society from nonbeing into being solidified the image of Peter the Great as a sculptor who shaped Russia into a statue of his own making, and this image would become the quasi-official formal rhetoric when concerning the reformer for the next 125 years.

Many preachers were quick to stress the “religious nature and the Christian virtues and behavior of their hero”. They emphasized his willingness to sacrifice his life for his own people.

---

27 Ibid., 10.
28 Ibid., 12.
29 Ibid., 12.
30 Ibid., 25.
31 Ibid., 16.
while also focusing their attention on his profound faith, his reliance on God, and his humility.\textsuperscript{32} To compliment this focus, the preachers of this era also turned their attention to the diplomacy of his reign, highlighting the admiration Charles XII felt for Peter the Great late in his life.\textsuperscript{33} They claimed that such inexplicable conversion of Peter’s greatest enemy should be seen as an undeniable testimony to the tsar’s true character and Christian merit.\textsuperscript{34}

While many admired Peter’s newly built empire, he was also criticized for his behavior as a monarch. He had a penchant “for doing everything himself” and for constantly being engaged in hard work.\textsuperscript{35} This was an intrinsic part of his image from the very beginning. The emperor’s drive to transform his country was praised in the shadow of his reign, but after his death, it was also criticized. According to some educated Russians, this behavior was that of an improper sovereign; it was “deplorably wasteful, taking time away from much more important affairs”.\textsuperscript{36} Prokopovich was eager to point out that this behavior served as an example for the people of Russia, rather than a criticism, to get them moving in what he believed was the right direction.\textsuperscript{37}

**Catherine the Great**

Following the murder of her husband, Peter III, Catherine the Great took control of the throne in the summer of 1762. Although she is the most famous Russian Empress to take the throne, she,
unlike all other modern Russian rulers, had no connection to the Romanov dynasty or to the country of Russia at all. As a German-born princess, Catherine also had no connection to Muscovy, and therefore, no hatred for the old traditions of Russia. This history may have left her with no connection to ancient Russia, but it did not weaken her interest. In fact, as “the first crowned intellectual in modern Russia,” Catherine the Great spent a lifetime trying to understand Peter the Great “in terms of the Enlightenment to which she entirely belonged.”

As Empress of Russia, Catherine II admired Peter the Great, but it is sometimes difficult to know for sure what she truly believed or if she believed anything at all. She likely found her first critical review of Peter the Great in the writing of the French political philosopher Montesquieu (1689-1755), who considered him a tyrant, but there is no doubt that the observations she made about the reformer were entirely her own. There are many factors to keep in mind when reconstructing Catherine II’s image of Peter the Great and her reaction to her predecessor throughout her reign.

As a ruler, the empress was extraordinarily vain, and this made the image of Peter the Great a persistent challenge in determining her own worth and accomplishment. In all of Russia’s history, Peter the Great was her most formidable rival and her greatest competitor for being the greatest ruler of Russia. To project her image as a ruler, she was determined to indicate her superiority over her predecessor. As the first of Peter I’s heirs to make a name for herself, Catherine II aimed to capitalized on Peter the Great’s immense prestige by underlining the importance of his rule. The reformer came to Russia first, and indeed there would have been no

38 Ibid., 35.
39 Ibid., 35.
40 Ibid., 36.
41 Ibid., 37.
place for Catherinian Russia without him. This praise of Peter the Great persisted throughout her reign, but it was only there to assign her a higher place in Russian history. For example, it can be seen in Ivan Betskii’s address to the throne that “Peter the Great created men in Russia,” but it was Catherine the Great who “has given them souls”.\footnote{Polnoe sobranie zakonov, XVIII, no. 12.597 (August 11, 1767) 292, column 1.} This strategy within her reign continued on the idea that modern Russian history would now be presented in two stages: the Petrine and the Catherinian. The second phase differed from the first, in official ideology, on the basis that it was more human and more civilized.\footnote{Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 49.} The first phase set the foundation, allowing the second phase to build on it and rise above. It would be an exaggeration to say that the empress intentionally tamed the image of Peter the Great to fit her own purposes, but this propaganda did successfully uplift her image during the years of her reign.\footnote{Ibid., 38.} It would not be until the later years of her life that she would come to admire and accept the accomplishments of the reformer, once again changing her view of his image.

As an enlightened legislator, Catherine the Great had developed her criticisms of Peter the Great, finding herself superior to him and his reforms. It would not be until the end of her reign that she recognized that this superiority “was largely imaginary”.\footnote{Ibid., 38.} It is possible that in this time near the end of her reign that Catherine the Great felt the deepest appreciation for Peter the Great in addition to the series of obstacles in his path.\footnote{Ibid., 38.} In a truly Enlightenment tradition, the empress would not allow criticism of the reformer in her presence, praising the tsar as a
“benefactor of his subjects” and a monarch who worked for their well-being. Peter’s reforms were revolutionary within the country’s political climate, and it would be these changes that would pave the way for Catherine to continue in this Enlightenment image. During her reign, the empress may have been jealous of standing in his shadow, but she was very impressed by him and held a great deal of respect for him. Concerning his military success, she was very impressed with his achievements both on land and water, even calling special attention to him during the years of the First Turkish War, 1768-1774.

To sum it up at this point, the image of Peter the Great not only remained central to the age of Catherinian Russia. It became linked “to the newly proclaimed glory of Catherine the Great.”

The Decemberists

The Russian educated public continued to show interest in the reformer. This is especially true of the Decemberist movement in 1825. Brought up in the traditions of the Western Enlightenment, future Decemberists were heavily exposed to the Enlightenment image of Peter the Great. While the revolutionaries were influenced by the reformer, their rebellion went “beyond any reliance on an enlightened despot.” This did not necessarily turn the Decemberists against the tsar who attempted to transform their country. Many of the Decemberists were influenced by their own individual circumstances, therefore, having their own impressions that developed from the rise of

47 Ibid., 35.
48 Ibid., 36.
49 Ibid., 37.
50 Ibid., 37.
51 Ibid., 65.
a national and patriotic spirit that began making its way through the country at the end of the eighteenth-century.\textsuperscript{52} This group possessed a complex, and often, contradictory outlook on the history and reign of Peter the Great “with no specific evaluation shared by all members of the Decemberist movement.”\textsuperscript{53}

The Decemberist treatment of Peter the Great ranges from the acceptance of his reforms to modernize the country to the criticism of his oppressive rule. Some Decemberists admired his reforms and what they did for the country, but some also took a negative view of Peter the Great as well. Drawing from the criticisms of his earlier critics, this negative view of Peter the Great focused primarily on the issue of tyranny. Based on the legends that circulated in the time of his rule, it is interesting to note this criticism that developed early in the nineteenth-century. Derived from the Greek \textit{tyrannos}, the Greeks understood a tyrant as someone who assumed royal authority “illegitimately,” something that many Russians believed was the case with Peter the Great.\textsuperscript{54} As a tyrant, Peter the Great came to be seen as an enemy of the freedom the Decemberists were fighting for. From their point of view, Peter the Great did establish a tyranny that sought to destroy the freedoms that had previously existed in Muscovy, and in doing so, he hoped “to bring everything and everyone under his complete control.”\textsuperscript{55} Many Decemberists saw Peter the Great as a barbarian, describing his actions as cruel and overall inhumane. They

\begin{footnotes}
\item[52] Ibid., 65.
\item[53] Ibid., 66.
\end{footnotes}
believed he was an imitator rather than a creator, borrowing from the West numerous “useless and noxious things.”

While this negative view of Peter the Great prevailed, several Decemberists made an effort to make his image more attractive within their group. Often fluent in French, these Decemberists were familiar with the Western ideas of great men playing a defining role in their nations’ history. They would rather see Peter as “light brought into darkness, progress replacing stagnation, reason conquering superstition.” This ambivalence surrounded Peter the Great throughout the long eighteenth century (roughly until 1825).

The Image of Peter the Great in Official Nationality

German idealistic philosophy and Romanticism did play a major role in the changing intellectual climate, but they were not the only agents of change within the Russian state. As Nicholas I came to power, he adopted a new ideology known as Official Nationality, and this was an ideology perfectly suited for the Petrine Cult. Proclaimed on April 2, 1833, Official Nationality was introduced to Nicholas I by his new minister of education, Serge Uvarov (1786-1855). He proposed that education should again become centered on theology, emphasizing “Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality;” the past, the present, and the future of Russia. As this ideology swept across Russia, Peter the Great began to be interpreted as the “Russian autocracy

56 Ibid., 67.
57 Ibid., 66.
58 Ibid., 107.
59 Ibid., 107.
incarnate,” and as a ruler, the “ideal model for Nicholas I.” Indeed, it can be said that a remarkable Petrine revival had sparked in Russia.

As with earlier rulers, immense measures were taken to draw a link between Nicholas I and his predecessor. Comparisons were drawn between the two emperors, and they were glorified by numerous writers of the era, Alexander Pushkin included. These writers defended the tsar and his predecessor on a national scale, prompting publicists to do the same on an international level. Publicists exhausted their efforts to defend Nicholas I from foreign criticism, finding it their duty to defend Peter the Great as well.

The doctrine of Official Nationality symbolized the views of Nicholas I and his government, but broadly speaking, it also represented the ideas of the Russian educated public at the time. The supporters were “not an entirely homogenous body.” Those who cherished Peter’s reforms also admired the ideals of a pre-Petrine Russia. Others recognized Peter’s numerous accomplishments, insisting that the country’s development had become static since the time of his rule. Nicholas I’s Official Nationality sparked a Petrine revival in Russia and this is something that prompted many writers, especially Pushkin, to glorify the reformer in their literature.

**Pushkin (Peter I Becomes a Literary Character)**

Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin (1799-1837) is largely considered the founding father and gold standard of Russian literature. Still a man of the Enlightenment, Pushkin is considered to be the

---

60 Ibid., 107.

61 Ibid., 121.
greatest writer in Russian history, contributing to the image of Peter the Great by recording his praise and objections to the emperor and his writing. Descended from African slave, Abram Petrovich Gannibal (1696-1781), the writer had an interesting personal link to Peter the Great through his African heritage.\textsuperscript{62} Gannibal, Pushkin’s great-grandfather, was brought to Russia in 1705 as the slave of a diplomat, but his intellectual abilities made him very appealing to Peter the Great. Shortly after his arrival to Russia, Peter I made Gannibal his godson (hence, the patronymic “Petrovich,” son of Peter), and from here, Peter I sent him to France for an education.\textsuperscript{63} Thanks to Peter I’s blessing and reforms, Gannibal became an accomplished engineer and general in the Russian army.\textsuperscript{64} His military rank granted him the right to claim noble status, and this success in Russian society eventually gave birth to Alexander Pushkin. As a poet, Pushkin was obsessively proud of his genealogy, and this personal link to Peter the Great was crucial to his identity.\textsuperscript{65} Pushkin’s contribution to the Russian Enlightenment image of Peter the Great was enormous, and it is from this familial connection that he found his inspiration.

In his first poems drawing inspiration from the reformer, Pushkin’s “Stances” (1826) commends Peter the Great for his accomplishments for establishing Russia as a rising Western power. Pushkin’s glorification of the reformer in this poem became one of Peter the Great’s most celebrated images:

Now an academician, now a hero


\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 105.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 105.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 105.
Now a seafarer, not a carpenter

He, with an all-encompassing soul

Was on the throne an eternal worker\textsuperscript{66}

Written After Nicholas I’s ascension and the Decemberist revolution, Pushkin wrote “Stances” to remind the young monarch that Peter the Great also began his reign with uprisings and executions but that he managed to turn it toward “glory, civilization, and enlightenment.”\textsuperscript{67}

Be, then, proud of the family resemblance

Be in everything like your ancestor

Like him tireless and firm

And like him, remembering no evil\textsuperscript{68}

Nicholas I’s reign sparked a remarkable Petrine revival in the nineteenth-century, and “Stances” was Pushkin’s attempt to create a well written example documenting this direct connection between the young tsar and Peter the Great.

Two years later, in 1828, Pushkin celebrated Peter the Great as a war hero. His long poem entitled “Poltava” presents a stunning depiction of the battle itself and an impressive depiction of Peter I within that battle.

Then Peter’s sonorous, inspired


\textsuperscript{67} Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), 69.

\textsuperscript{68} A. S. Pushkin, “Stansy,” (Leningrad, 1961), 189.
Voice somehow rose above the din:

“To battle! God is with us!” Peter

Emerged, surrounded by a crowd

Of favorites, from his tent. His eyes

Ablaze, his face inspiring awe,

He quickly moves, magnificent,

Like bolts of lightning cast by God.

He’s going. Someone brings his horse.

His steed is ardent and resolved,

Atremble as his nostrils sense

The battle flames. Through martial dust

He flies, his eyes attentive, sly,

And proudly bears his mighty burden.

...

The troops had caught a glimpse of Peter.

He tore ahead of all the ranks,

Enraptured, mighty as the battle.

His eyes devoured the martial field.
The fledglings of the Petrine nest

Surged after him, a loyal throng—

Through all the shifts of worldly fate,

In trials of policy and war,

These men, these comrades, were like sons:

The noble Sheremetev,

And Brius, and Bour, and Repnin,

And, fortune’s humble favorite, ⁶⁹

And after the battle:

But Peter revels, and his gaze

Is proud, and clear, and full of glory.

His regal feast is marvelous.

Within his tent, amid the shouts

Of all his men, he entertains

His leaders and his enemies’ leaders,

Consoles his worthy prisoners,

Raises the cup of victory

To drink his warlike teacher’s health.\textsuperscript{70}

It was from this poem that Russian school children would learn about the momentous battle, encouraging new generations to absorb the Enlightenment image of Peter the Great. This contribution would significantly influence the positive, war hero image of Peter the Great.

While Pushkin’s early work contributed to the image of Peter the Great, these writings were only the first stage in his quest to glorify the tsar. Pushkin’s interest in the reformer would extend far beyond his own visions of Peter the Great. In 1831, Nicholas I appointed Pushkin as historiographer and custodian of the Emperor’s legacy. In 1832, Pushkin began his work in the archives, but due to the tragic end of his duel (in 1837), he never got around to writing his history of Peter the Great. The only evidence left of his work on this project are his extensively detailed notes, whose publication in 1938 acquired great prominence. Pushkin’s admiration for Peter the Great in these notes is undeniable, but it is also believed among scholars that while he studied Peter the Great, he became increasingly aware of the ruthlessness and cruelty of the reformer. Pushkin’s life seemed to revolve around a recurrent problem: at every turn, the writer constantly found himself face to face with the restrictions that Peter the Great kept imposing on his subjects. Pushkin could not help drawing parallels with his own relationship with Peter I’s powerful successor, Nicholas I.

In his writing, Pushkin repeatedly referred to the year 1698 as “frightening,” calling attention to the execution of the empress’s corrupt lover, William Mons, as well as the massacre of the streltsy.\textsuperscript{71} There is no doubt that Pushkin once held close ties to many of the Decemberists,

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 138.
\textsuperscript{71} Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, \textit{Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought}, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), 91.
but like them, the writer held very ambivalent views about Peter the Great. These elements, and no doubt, many others were significant factors that went into the making of Pushkin’s masterpiece *The Bronze Horseman* (1838). *The Bronze Horseman* begins not with this ruthlessness and cruelty, but, rather, with a long and impressive introduction which is often considered “the most brilliant single item in the entire glittering Petrine cult.”

On the banks of a wilderness of water

One man stood, brimming with thoughts

As his eyes advanced to the horizon.

The breadth of the river surged forward,

As a single, ramshackle canoe sped by.

Along the moss-rulled, swampy shores

He saw the dark and scattered huts

Of the godforsaken Finns;

And the forest, foreign to the sun;

Sounded around him

And he thought

Here’s where we’ll threaten the Swedes from,

Where we’ll set a city’s first stones

______________

72 Ibid., 92.
In spite our power-drunk neighbours.

We’ll make a slave of nature,

Hack a window through to Europe

And by this sea put down firm feet.

All flags will find their way

Across these waves; and we’ll hold a feast

Out here in these wastes

One hundred years have passed,

And the youthful city’s become the marvel

Of the midnight regions, has risen

From the dark forests, from the sweat

Of the marsh, luxuriant and confident.

Where nature’s neglected stepson,

The Finnish angler, would sit by himself

On low riverbanks to cast a fraying net

Into the unplumbed depths, now

The stern hulks of palaces and towers

Crowd shores busy with life,
And ships from all ends of the earth
Jostle towards rich jetties;
The Neva is draped in granite,
Bridges raised across its waters,
Islands wearing the warmth
Of green gardens; in the glow
Of the younger capital
Old Moscow seems ever fainter,
A purple-clad widow
Standing before the new tsarina.

Oh act of Peter, I’m in love
With your strict and structured form,
The Neva’s commanding flow,
Its granite banks, the design
in the iron railings, the translucent
dusk and moonless sheen
of dream-soaked nights.
As I write in my room I need
No lamp. Bright giants are asleep

On the empty streets,

And the needle of the Admiralty shines,

And bannering the gloom from gold skies,

Dusk hurries on towards dawn,

And night makes do with a half-hour.

I’m in love with the frost and immobile air

Of your brutal winter, the sprint

Of skates along the broad river,

Girls’ faces brighter than roses,

With ballrooms, their lights and noises;

And—when it’s time for the single

To get down to serious drinking—

The hiss of foaming glasses,

The run-punch’s flame of blue.

I’m in love with the glittering force

Of the drills on the Field of Mars,

The singular beauty of foot-soldier and horse,
The shreds of victorious banners

In the strict, rippling ranks,

With bronze as it flashes on caps

Shot through battle.

War capital, I’m in love

With the smoke and thunder

At the fort when the Tsarina of the North

Bestows her son to the empire,

Or Russia triumphs over enemies

Once more, or when the Neva

Cracks open its pale blue ice,

Bundles it off to the Baltic,

And, sensing spring days, exults.

Stand in beauty, Peter’s city,

Remain as unshakable as Russia.

May the defeated elements

Make their peace with you. Let

The Finnish waves forget
Their ancient enemy and prisoner,
Their futile malice fail to unsettle
The everlasting dream of Peter.

There was a time of terror,
Its memory fresh… This, friends,
Is the theme of the events
I’ll relate in my bleak story.\(^{73}\)

Due to this magnificent introduction of Peter the Great, the common interpretation of *The Bronze Horseman* as a powerful and accomplished image of Peter the Great and his work remains very convincing. While highlighting sympathy for the unfortunate Eugene, Pushkin depicted *The Bronze Horseman* as an infinitely majestic and almost divine figure whose work the writer affirmed unforgottably in the introduction.\(^{74}\) It is these lines highlighting the emperor, not Eugene, that remained a treasure within the Russian verse. Pushkin’s tale is a tragedy for Eugene, but its complex story is not so evenly balanced: following the view he acquired later in life, Pushkin focuses on the autocratic ruler’s realizing his destiny, “undeterred by the obstacles of nature, such as swamps and floods,” while also being impervious to the opposition of the individual, as demonstrated by “Eugene’s miserable plight and his pathetic rebellion.”\(^{75}\)

\(^{73}\) A. S. Pushkin, “The Bronze Horseman,” (Prologue)
\(^{74}\) Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), 97.
\(^{75}\) Ibid., 97.
The Bronze Horseman (the statue and the symbol of autocracy) is seen primarily through Eugene’s eyes and, therefore, is not believed to be the view of Pushkin’s narrator, whose opinion shines through in the story’s luminous introduction. Many scholars believe that this contradictory image of the emperor can be related to Pushkin’s closeness with the Decemberists and their ultimate persecution by the regime. Pushkin’s friends’ view of Peter the Great, much like Pushkin’s following his research, was incredibly ambiguous. Several interpretations of the story acknowledge that the Decemberist rebellion “was represented in the poem not only by Eugene’s futile protest, but also by the at least temporarily vicious waves.” If Eugene represents some collective Decemberists, then Pushkin’s Bronze Horseman might represent his shift towards conservatism, demonstrating his belief in the monarch’s supreme power.

After The Bronze Horseman, Pushkin continued his research on the life of Peter the Great up until the night of his fatal duel on January 27, 1837. Although he made no comprehensive statements about the emperor, the importance of his reign is highlighted in the extensive notes he collected as well as in his letters to various friends, such as the philosopher Peter Chaadaev (1794-1856). Stunning the Russian educated public, Chaadaev claimed that “Russian had no history at all and in truth amounted to nothing.” Pushkin answered him by declaring that Russia did indeed have a history: a history that started with Peter the Great. “The awakening of Russia,” Pushkin argued, “the development of its power, its movement toward unity (Russian unity of course)” was caused by Peter the Great “who alone is an entire world history.”

---

76 Ibid., 97.
77 Ibid., 97-98.
78 Ibid., 98.
79 Ibid., 98.
contribution to the image of Peter the Great solidified his role as an enlightened monarch. His contribution is arguably the most significant in Russia’s literary history.

Peter Chaadaev

Both Pushkin and Peter Chaadaev (1794-1856) “made the greatest and most lasting contribution of their generation to the Petrine tradition.”

In 1829, Chaadaev had written his first, and notably most important, “Philosophical Letter” on Peter the Great, but this work would not be published until 1836. Pushkin, who had lived just long enough to respond to this work, addressed the issues of Chaadaev’s claims, but by then, Chaadaev had already undergone his intellectual transformation. In the early 1830s, Chaadaev abandoned his earlier affiliation with the Enlightenment and began to focus more on French Catholic thought, especially to that of the growing ideas surrounding German Idealistic philosophy.

In his first “Philosophical Letter,” Chaadaev argued that “Russia had no past, no present, and no future.” He claimed that Russia belongs neither to the West nor to the East, that the country possessed the traditions of neither. Peter the Great “wanted to civilize them,” throwing them the “cloak of civilization” as he reigned, but when Russia took up this cloak, “they did not so much as touch civilization.”

This total dismissal of the Petrine legacy and the new Russia that emerged from its Enlightenment was unprecedently shocking to the world of Russia.

---

80 Ibid., 98.
81 Ibid., 99.
82 Ibid., 99.
84 Ibid., 23-51.
literature. Many works had emerged degrading Muscovy in the name of Peter the Great but never the reformed Russia he worked so hard to create. Chaadaev’s “Philosophical Letter” resembled the work of some scholars in the West, particularly Rousseau, “who believed that Peter I’s policies did not suit the Russia people and, therefore, could not succeed.” Chaadaev also stressed the idea of his country’s isolation as well as its lack of civilization.

The backlash Chaadaev received when his letter was published prompted him to make a statement regarding his views on Russia’s stagnation. In his “Apology of a Madman,” released one year later, Chaadaev changed his views on the history of Russia and attempted to steer away from this nihilistic approach to Russia’s history. Peter the Great yet again proved indispensable:

“For the past three hundred years Russia has been aspiring to identify herself with the West, she has been admitting her inferiority to the West, drawing all her ideas, all her teachings, all her joys form the West…The greatest of our kings, our glory, our demigod, he who began a new era for us, he to whom we own our greatness and all the goods which we possess, renounced old Russia a hundred years ago in front of the entire world…So, he liberated us from all these precedents which encumber historical societies and impede their development; he opened our intelligence to all great and beautiful ideas existing among men; he handed us over totally to the West, such as the centuries had made it, and he gave us all its history for a history, all its future for a future.”

Chaadaev changed his view from dismissing the advancements of the Petrine reign to praising them. In his most celebrated sentence, Chaadaev acknowledges that “in his hand Peter the Great found only a blank sheet of paper, and he wrote on it: Europe and the West; since then we belonged to Europe and the West.”\textsuperscript{87} It is here, he believed, that Russia entered history. He also argued that, “once it became part of the West, Russia found itself in a remarkably advantageous position.”\textsuperscript{88} As the newcomer in the West, Russia possessed enthusiasm for its ability to grow, and Chaadaev argued that this was because the country was truly free from the traditions and prejudices of its past. As a romantic intellectual, Chaadaev was profoundly aware of the crucial importance of understanding of the self and of history, and this was something he believed that Russia was moving towards. He believed Russia was moving towards the accomplishment of its destiny.

Due to his intellectual transformation, Chaadaev came to “love [his] country in the way that Peter the Great taught [him] to love it.”\textsuperscript{89} In its past, Russia was backwards and empty, but he believed that this new era could change that. Chaadaev learned from Peter the Great that it was a privilege to follow in the path of others because, “if we have to come after others, it is in order to do better than the others.”\textsuperscript{90} Chaadaev’s new Russians would not fall into “their superstitions, into their blindness, into their infatuations.”\textsuperscript{91}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 205.
\textsuperscript{88} Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, \textit{Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought}, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), 102.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 213.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 213.
\end{flushright}
Ironically, Chaadaev’s “Apology” would be the source of inspiration for the Westernizers, while the religious argument central to Chaadaev’s thought would lead directly to Slavophilism.

**Peter the Great Through the Eyes of Westernizers**

In the winter of 1831-1832, a gathering of friends around Nicholas Stankevich (1813-1840) was generally considered the first Westernizer circle of the nineteenth-century. In the beginning, this circle was “a loosely organized intellectual fraternity with literary and philosophical interests” whose members met irregularly to read literature and discuss the ideas of leading philosophers at the time. It was not until the emergence of Slavophilism in 1839 that Westernizers would take their circle and focus their interests on specific historiographical themes. By this time, many members of the circle had already gone their own way, and in doing so, these Westernizers continued to develop their ideas in other areas of Russian literature and thought.

The Westernizers’ image of Peter the Great, much like that of Official Nationality, was influenced by “the fundamental Petrine perception of the Russian Age of Reason.” This image reflected the belief that Peter the Great was an enlightened monarch in every meaning of the word. This positive interpretation of Peter the Great’s activity would become the standard among Russian Westernizers and the major point of contention in their debates with the Slavophiles.

---

92 Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), 123.
93 Ibid., 124.
94 Ibid., 122.
Vissarion Belinskii

Vissarion Belinskii (1811-1848) was one of the most important proponents of Westernizers’ ideas. As the most significant and influential Russian literary critic of all time, “Belinskii saw the reformer as enlightenment, progress, and the true destiny of Russia.”\(^{95}\) His remarkably clear and comprehensive Westernizer view combined the rational faith of the Enlightenment with the new Romantic conceptualizing and theorizing. In 1837, Belinskii contended that if anyone wished to understand the destiny of Russia then one must “read the history of Peter the Great—it will explain to you everything.”\(^{96}\) As a reformer, Peter the Great did not educate his country, rather, he reeducated it; he did not create his country, rather, he recreated it. Although Peter the Great did not write or publish anything, unlike that of his successor Catherine the Great, he was “nevertheless as much the creator of Russian literature, as of Russian civilization, Russian enlightenment, Russia’s greatness and glory, in one word, the new creator of Russia.”\(^{97}\) As a literary critic, Belinskii believed that “to write a history of Russian literature without saying a word about Peter the Great is the same as to write about the origin of the world without saying a word about the creator of the world.”\(^{98}\)

Belinskii did not only mean to glorify Peter the Great, but he was also ready to defend him from his detractors. For example, Belinskii justified the introduction of Western dress and the cutting of beards by suggesting that “sometimes external appearance too is worth something. Let us say more: the external sometimes draws the internal after it.”\(^{99}\) It is true that these changes

\(^{95}\) Ibid., 125.
\(^{98}\) Ibid., 364-365.
occurred from the top down in Russian society, but they received a significant reaction from those affected by them. Indeed, Belinskii believed that Peter the Great had begun the transformation of Russia, and occasionally, referencing in his writings the gap that separated the educated public from the common people as a direct result of the Petrine reforms. Belinskii claimed that the existing unfair stratification of Russian society was part of Russia’s long-term historical development rather than a singular result of Peter I’s reforms. Belinskii’s devotion to the emperor was shared by many moderate Westernizers, who eventually joined ranks with the “pro-Petrine proponents of Official Nationality.”

Belinskii sought to champion Peter the Great because he believed many Russians had started to forget about his great accomplishments. Russians, Belinskii declared, paid insufficient attention to Peter the Great because they did not understand his concerns with the interest of humanity at large. He believed that Russian scholars “wasted their efforts on minute topics from the Russian past, although that past had no world significance: it was only with Peter the Great that Russia entered world history.” The Petrine reforms allowed for a true Europeanization of Russia, making Russia European in more than just the geographical sense. As a Christian nation, Russia could no longer belong to Asia, although it had been isolated from Europe so long under the Mongol Yoke. To be Asiatic was to be primitive and backwards, and Peter the Great brought them out of this dismal destiny.

According to Belinskii, Peter the Great finally allowed Russia to enter a period of consciousness. During the first decades of the nineteenth-century, it was the very doubts

---

100 Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), 131.
101 Ibid., 127.
concerning his work and the criticisms of him that led to a deeper understanding and a stronger affirmation of his historical role. A new contradiction emerged: while many educated Russians recognized the achievements of Peter the Great, their own opposition towards Europeanism pushed them back in the direction that the reformer sought to destroy. These critics championed the historical Russian nationality, and in their opinion, the reformer was revolutionary in his ideas, but like other revolutionary men, he could only mold his country because it had the potential for him to do so.

**Alexander Herzen**

Another author that contributed to the Westernizer scene was Alexander Herzen (1812-1870). In an article entitled “The Twenty-Eighth of January,” the day of the reformer’s death, Herzen made two main points: he argued in favor of “Lomonosov’s statement that Peter the Great went beyond human bounds and Victor Cousin’s declaration (on Napoleon) that revolution became man.”¹⁰² Herzen argued that “occasionally a comet seems to break the celestial order, and it takes a special effort of intellect to find its relationship to the laws of nature and its proper place in the total picture. Peter the Great was such a comet.”¹⁰³ Like Belinskii, Herzen, too, believed that Russian people did not fully appreciate the work of their Peter the Great. He believed that Russians belonged to Europe “as successors to Rome and Byzantium and, especially, as a Christian people.”¹⁰⁴

---

¹⁰² Ibid., 136.
¹⁰³ Ibid., 136.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 137.
Herzen’s earlier article would contribute to a number of themes that became popular in Westernizer literature, and even more broadly, among the intellectual Left. One specific theme that thrived was the idea of the explicit designation of Peter the Great as a revolutionary being a revolution itself. This revolution, he explained, led to the establishment of a “powerful modern autocracy” as well as other possibilities. In an article entitled “Moscow and Petersburg,” Herzen continues to reiterate his own controversial understanding of Peter the Great and his historical role. Written in 1842, Herzen explains that “Moscow is a rare coin, a remarkable but one,” but Petersburg is the “current coin,” the one that Russians “cannot do without.” From the day that Peter the Great sought to change the course of his country, “the necessity of Petersburg and the uselessness of Moscow were determined.” Peter I’s first step was inevitably to transfer the capital from Moscow to Petersburg. Petersburg was built at the cost of thousands of workers and stood on artificial stakes above the swamps of the North. Petersburg held “no ‘heartfelt connection with the country,’” which in Herzen’s view, allowed Peter I to move his entire country forward. Reformers such as Peter the Great were regarded as revolutionaries, as geniuses, as men who followed their own path. They made mistakes in many of their endeavors, but “they had great ambitions and achieved gigantic results.” Herzen also praised Peter I’s policy of expansion. St. Petersburg was thought to become an elevated version of Moscow, and everything was sacrificed for it.

105 Ibid., 138.
106 Ibid., 138.
108 Ibid., 35.
109 Ibid., 36.
110 Ibid., 36.
“Peter, a semibarbarian in appearance and spirit, but a man of genius and unshakable in
his great desire to have his country join the development of humanity, is very strange in his
savage rudeness next to the pampered and refined Augustuses and company. A man, who
renounced the entire past of his country, who blushed for it, and who was establishing the new
order by means of blood, contains in himself something revolutionary, even if he occupies a
throne.”¹¹¹

Exiled in 1847 until his death in 1870, Herzen continued to argue for his dialectical view
of Peter the Great. He kept holding an increasingly negative and bitter perspective of the existing
Russian government and system, which he saw as creations of Peter the Great. It is believed that
his shift in thought occurred around 1849. In his article, “La Russie,” Herzen explained: “Peter I
did infinite good and infinite evil to Russia; but the fact for which he deserves, above all, the
gratitude of the Russians, is that impulse that he gave to the entire country, that motion which he
imparted to the nation, and which, from that time on, has not slowed down.”¹¹² As Herzen
developed his argument, his view of evil seemed to outweigh the good. Herzen started to see
Peter the Great as lacking any creative originality and his reforms as merely a poor imitation of
the West.

It was only after his disillusionment with the Russian government, the emancipation of
serfs in 1861 “and the brutal suppression of the Polish rebellion in 1863,” that Herzen forever

469-474.
¹¹² A. I. Herzen, “La Russie,” op. cit., vol. VII, O razvitii revoliutsionnykh idei v Rossii,
42, break in the original.
turned against the Russian autocracy.\textsuperscript{113} By this time, Herzen had outlived the German Idealistic philosophy of his youth, and “he found what solace he could in his hopes for the Russian peasant commune and in a tragic affirmation of his individuality and his right to protest.”\textsuperscript{114} It was only his humane values that remained from his comprehensive and optimistic Westernizer ideology. For Herzen, Peter the Great became a largely negative figure in his outlook.

**Peter Through the Eyes of Slavophiles**

Both the Official Nationality and the Westernizers continued to develop their agendas through the mid nineteenth-century. Only with the rise of Slavophilism in the late 1830s, intellectuals would start to openly criticize the reformer. In this respect, the Slavophiles were the real innovators in this new intellectual climate. They highlighted the suffering and grief the Petrine policies brought upon ordinary Russians and the “wounded” national pride. Slavophiles believed in the entirety of Russian history and refused to recognized Peter the Great as the turning point in their history. They were all steeped in German idealistic philosophy and Romanticism, which influenced their interpretation of Russian history and the role of Peter the Great. In fact, Slavophilism came to represent “the fullest and most authentic expression of Romantic thought in Russia.”\textsuperscript{115} The Romantic idea became associated with Russia whereas the Age of Reason became associated with the West. This useful paradigm allowed Slavophiles to distinguish themselves from the Westernizers of the era.

\textsuperscript{113} Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), 141.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 141.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 143.
Slavophilism articulated a fundamental vision of “integration, peace, and harmony among men,” with the family representing this principle of integration and love to the utmost.\footnote{Ibid., 143.} Love, freedom, and cooperation stood at the base of their beliefs, and it was the Western ideas of rationalism, necessity, and compulsion that they desired to purge from Russian society.\footnote{Ibid., 143.} Their issues with Peter the Great largely stemmed from this ideology. He was the reformer who brought “the principles of rationalism, legalism, and compulsion into Russia,” and in doing so, he destroyed “the harmonious native development” that would have carried on the traditions of their country.\footnote{Ibid., 143.} Slavophiles believed that the future of Russia needed a clear shift back to these native principles, and that the country needed to overcome this dangerous “Western disease.”\footnote{Ibid., 143.} In turn, Russia would take “its message of harmony and salvation to the discordant and dying West.”\footnote{Ibid., 144.}

Slavophiles believed that Old Russia had been homogenous, harmonious, and organic before it was tainted by the class divisions, aristocracy, and compulsion of the West. They argued that Russian life had been distinguished by simplicity and that education had been based on the true learning of the Orthodox Church. Slavophiles continually struggled to understand what possessed Peter the Great to destroy the traditions of Old Russia and replace them with oppressive and rationalistic Western strategies and state management. They insisted that Peter I single-handedly introduced everything evil into Russia, sweeping away all the “freedom, harmony, and happiness” that had existed in abundance before his reign.\footnote{Ibid., 144.}
Some Slavophiles adopted an extreme position to the reformer and his work, renouncing the Russian government and society that resulted from Peter’s reign. In their opinion, Peter the Great was a despot. They believed that in his mission to mold the country with his rationalistic and utilitarian notions he led Russia to a direct imitation of the West and interrupted its prosperous and stable organic development. St. Petersburg was the perfect example for this argument. Slavophiles argued that St. Petersburg was the “very essence of rationalism, formalism, materialism, legalism, and compulsion:” it had been constructed out of nothing, without any cultural or historical tradition; even the land on which it was constructed was Finnish rather than Russian.\textsuperscript{122} This artificial and foreign city went against everything that was Russian, yet somehow it was the city that ruled the entirety of Holy Russia. The dichotomy favored by the Slavophiles was clear: Moscow represented the good in Russia; St. Petersburg the bad.\textsuperscript{123} Slavophiles continually attacked St. Petersburg as the enemy, claiming that it represented nothing but a negative phase of Russian history, and that the city had nothing positive to contribute to the history of the country. Before Peter the Great, only the useful information had been extracted from the West, allowing Russia to remain an independent state with its own traditions. Peter I, on the other hand, took everything from the West; not only the useful and the universal, but also the foreign Western life itself.

The denunciation of Peter the Great was not the only interpretation of his reign acceptable to Slavophiles, but as their movement progressed, this came to be regarded as their main strategy in order to distinguish themselves radically from the Westernizers. The weakness of this strategy arose from the Slavophiles’ acceptance that Peter the Great had been somehow

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 144-145.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 145.
necessary for Russian development. They argued that his reign was “extreme, negative, and essentially wrong,” but saw Peter’s rise to power as the nation’s inevitable reaction to a variety of vices that had been inherited from early Muscovy.\textsuperscript{124}

Thus, generally speaking, Slavophiles believed that Moscow represented the inner intelligence of the old Russian traditions rather than the superficial radiance that symbolized St. Petersburg. Moscow symbolized the “life of the Russian people” and the “life of the spirit.”\textsuperscript{125} The fact that it was no longer the capital and only a city of equal importance to all the others contributed to the humility surrounding the old Russian traditions. Whatever purpose St. Petersburg may have served in Russian history, Slavophiles were convinced that this period needed to come to an end.

\textbf{Conclusion}

From the time of its inception, Slavophilism developed in direct opposition to the Westernizers. The opposing circles read the same books, attended the same lectures, visited the same literary salons, wrote in the same periodicals, but their ideas of Peter the Great and his role in Russian history could not be more different. The Slavophiles denounced Peter the Great as an evil genius who destroyed the traditions of Old Russia and set the country on a destructive Western course. The Westernizers, on the other hand, staked the future Russia and its inhabitants on the success of the reformer and the need to continue Peter’s reforms. These two intellectual groups

\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Ibid.}, 146.
\textsuperscript{125} \textit{Ibid.}, 146.
championed opposing ideologies surrounding Peter the Great, but their discussions of the reformer were the very first attempt at re-assessing the Enlightenment image of Peter the Great.

As the intellectual climate began to change in the nineteenth-century, the single Enlightenment image of Peter the Great was replaced by three competing images. More accurately, the Russian Enlightenment image of Peter the Great had been split in two. Spearheading the first image, Official Nationality emphasized the elements of power and organization that played a leading role in European politics. The Westernizers stressed Peter’s awareness of modernity and the need for further modernization of Russia. While these two images fit together in their praise of the West, the third, and more appropriately, new image of Peter the Great focused on the negative aspects of his work, an image that has come to be associated in particular with the Slavophiles.

Whereas Official Nationality and Westernizer philosophy continued to praise the Enlightenment ideology of Peter the Great, the philosophy of Slavophilism found its roots in Romanticism rather than Reason. Ironically, while this movement represented the “most authentic expression of Romantic thought in Russia,” this “anti-Western” ideology developed from elements that were borrowed from Western thought. As was typically common after the reign of Peter the Great, Russia was continuing to borrow from the West. As historian Robert English points out:

fundamental elements of Slavophilism were indeed borrowed from European, primarily German thinkers, from the idea of the ‘organic’

---

nation to reverence for the traditional peasant commune.¹²⁷

In the early decades of the nineteenth-century, Romanticism and German Idealistic
philosophy became increasingly popular in Russian intellectual discourse, and as the two groups emerged, this philosophy replaced the previous Enlightenment thought.

In its fullest expression of Romanticism and German Idealistic philosophy, Slavophilism dissipated as its few members died out and the intellectual climate changed. These early Slavophiles were actually the only Slavophiles who ever existed, and as their successors never attached themselves to any movement, the essential structure of Slavophilism quickly disappeared. This group was very short-lived in Russia’s educated elite, but in the years this movement was active, it offered a new identity for educated Russians. While there were no historical successors of the movement, the impact of their movement was not only enough to establish Slavophilism in the first place, but ultimately, to establish its teaching as “a continuous part of Russian intellectual life and search for identity.”¹²⁸

For the Westernizers, as with their intellectual adversaries, “the philosophical interpretation of Russian history [began] with the role of Peter the Great.”¹²⁹ Like the Slavophiles, Westernizers found their roots in German Idealistic philosophy of the time, but they came to much different conclusions. The Slavophiles contained a more integrated view of Peter the Great within their group, but the Westernizers were much more diverse. They shifted in their

¹²⁷ Sergei Alschen, *In the Footsteps of Peter the Great*, (New Jersey, University of Dartmouth, 2013), 3.


¹²⁹ Sergei Alschen, *In the Footsteps of Peter the Great*, (New Jersey, University of Dartmouth, 2013), 3.
opinions rapidly, and while there were certain doctrines and opinions widely held by Westernizers, this consensus did not produce unity within their circle. The Slavophiles found solidarity in their focus on the uniqueness of Russia and the superiority this granted their country, while the Westernizers believed that “before Peter, Russia was only a people, while thanks to his reforms it became a nation.”\textsuperscript{130} In the process of championing Peter the Great, many members found themselves linked to new radical, liberal, or even conservative outlooks. In some cases, as with Herzen, Westernizers even renounced their views on Peter the Great, turning against their former idol and the core belief of their movement. By contrast, the Slavophiles continued to stand by their view of Peter the Great and his reforms as “un-Russian, artificial, [and] indeed inhuman.”\textsuperscript{131} Had historical Peter the Great not received the notoriety and attention that many believed he deserved, these two groups certainly would have invented another pro-Western Russian monarch to initiate and legitimize their discussions of Russia’s past and future. Peter the Great was the heart and soul of these movements, and the reconceptualization of his image allowed Westernizers and Slavophiles to flourish in nineteenth-century Russia.

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{131} Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, \textit{Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought}, (New York, Oxford University Press, 1985), 149.
Bibliography


*Nikolai I. Biografia I obzor tsarstvovaniia*. Moscow, 1918. *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiskoi*
imperii. XVIII. No. 12957 (August 11, 1767), 292, column 1.


http://lab.chass.utoronto.ca/rescentre/slavic/ukr/Cossacks/Pushkin-Poltava-text.pdf.


University Press, 2011.

Riasanovsky, Nicholas V. Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought. New York: Oxford
