



Peter the Great - His Life and World

By Robert K. Masses See also *Katherine the Great - Portrait of a Woman*, available on CD. Note the double headed eagle faces both east and west, symbolizing Russia's territories in both Europe and Asia.

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

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

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

running wild through the Kremlin; statesmen massacred. . . Moscow, the Kremlin, the royal family at the mercy of ignorant, rioting soldiers. The revolt helped create in Peter a revulsion against the Kremlin with its dark room and mazes of tiny apartments.

During the years Sophia ruled, there were certain ceremonial functions which only Peter and Ivan could perform. In 1683, when Peter was eleven, the two co-tsars received the ambassador of King Charles XI of Sweden. He wrote: *“Both Their majesties sat on a silver throne like a bishop’s chair, somewhat raised and covered with red cloth. . . The Tsars wore robes of silver cloth woven with red and white flowers, and instead of scepters, had long golden staves bent at the end like bishop’s croziers. . . The elder drew his cap down over his eyes several times and, with looks cast down on the floor, sat almost immovable. The younger had a frank and open face, and his young blood rose to his cheeks as often as anyone spoke to him. He constantly looked about, and his great beauty and his lively manner—which sometimes brought the muscovite magnates into confusion—struck all of us so much that had he been an ordinary youth and no imperial personage we would gladly have laughed and talked with him. . .”*

When Peter was 12 a German physician wrote: *He is a remarkable good-looking boy, in whom nature has shown her power; and has so many advantages of nature that being the son of the king is the least of his good qualities. He has a beauty which gains the heart of all who see him and a mind which, even in his early year, did not find it’s like.*

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

EdJudoxia Lopukhina 1st Wife - Natalya was annoyed by her son’s growing interest in foreigners, this preference far surpassed anything she had known in the moderately Westernized atmosphere of the home where she was raised. Peter was spending all of his time with several Dutchmen who treated him as an apprentice, not an autocrat. . . He was out of her control, he was consorting with unsuitable people, he was endangering his life. She thought a wife would change all this. A beautiful Russian girl, shy, simple and loving would distract him and give him something more interesting to do than running through the fields and splashing about in river and lakes. A good wife could convert Peter from an adolescent into a man. With luck, she could also quickly make him a father.

Peter accepted his mother’s wish without argument—not because he had suddenly become a dutiful son, but because the whole matter was of minimal interest to him. He agreed that the traditional collection of eligible young women be assembled at the Kremlin; he agreed that his mother should sort them out and choose the likeliest. Once this was done, he looked at the prospect, made no complaint and thereby ratified his mother’s choice. Thus painlessly, Peter acquired a wife and a Russia a new tsaritsa. She was twenty—three years older than Peter. EdJudoxia Lopukhina was said to be pretty, although no portrait of her at this age has survived. She was shy and totally deferential, which recommended her to her new mother-in-law. But Peter’s first marriage was a disaster. He lived with her on and off for a year and she him bore a son.

Peter described his half-sister Sophia to a foreigner as *“a princess endowed with all the accomplishment of body and mind to perfection, had it not been for her boundless ambition and insatiable desire for*

governing.” He deposed her and took control of the country. His mother Tsaritsa Natalya died at age of forty-two after an illness of only two days. Her death plunged 23 year old Peter into grief and depression. For several days, he could not speak without bursting into tears. Her funeral which was a magnificent state pageant, but Peter refused to attend. Only after her burial did he go her grave alone to pray. Her place was taken by his younger sister, Natalya, a cheerful girl. Who without understanding all of her brother’s objectives, always supported him wholeheartedly.

Peter’s Physical Appearance To those who were seeing the Tsar for the first time, his most awesome physical characteristic was his height; at six feet seven inches, the monarch towered over everyone around him, the more so because in those days the average man was shorter than today. Tall as he was, however Peter’s body was more angular than massive. His shoulders were unusually thin for a man of his height, his arms were long and his hands, which he was eager to display, were powerful, rough and permanently callused from his work in the shipyard. Peter’s face was round and almost handsome. He wore a small mustache and no wig, instead, he let his own straight, auburn-brown hair hang halfway between his ears and his shoulders.

His most extra ordinary quality, even more remarkable than his height, was his titanic energy. He could not sit still or stay long in the same place. He walked so quickly with his long, loose-limbed stride that those in his company had to trot to keep up with him. When forced to do paperwork, he paced around a stand-up desk. Seated at a banquet, he would eat for a few minutes, then spring up to see what was happening in the next room or take a walk outdoors. Needing movement, he liked to burn off his energy in dancing. When he had been in one place for a while, he wanted to leave, to move along to see new people and new scenery, to form new impressions. The most accurate image of Peter the Great is of a man who throughout his life was perpetually curious, perpetually restless, perpetually in movement.

It was however, during these years that a worrisome, often mortifying physical disorder began to afflict the young Tsar. When he was emotionally agitated or under stress from the pressure of events, Peter’s face sometimes began to twitch uncontrollable. The disorder, usually troubling only the left side of his face, varied in degrees of severity: Sometimes the tremors was no more than a facial tic lasting only a second or two; at other times, there would be a genuine convulsion. . . At its worst, when violent, disjointed motion of the left arm was also involved, the convulsion ended only when Peter had lost consciousness.

Not knowing the exact nature of his affliction, it is difficult to pinpoint a cause. Some ascribe it to the traumatic horror he suffered in 1682 when, as a ten-year-old, he stood by his mother and watched the massacre of the rampaging Streltsy. Others believe his condition can be traced to the shock of being awakened in the middle of the night seven years later and told the Streltsy were coming to kill him. Some have blamed in on his excessive drinking.

Maratha Skovronskaya 2nd Wife - was the daughter of Lithuanian peasants who died in the plague. She was taken into the household of Pastor Ernest Gluck, a Lutheran minister. In adolescence she grew into a comely, sturdy girl whose warm dark eyes and full figure attracted attention. The Swiss district of Dorpat fell into Russian hands and the Gluck family were prisoners. Seventeen-year-old Maratha was brought to the Field Marshals. She became a serving woman in his household and came to Peter’s attention sometime after his mother’s death.

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

Peter finally wed her in a ceremony privately performed in St. Petersburg without fanfare. For a while, even though she had borne him three, then four, then five children, he kept the marriage a secret from his people and his ministers and some members of his family. He had sent his first wife to a convent allowing him to remarry. In February 1712--this time with drums and trumpets playing and the diplomatic corps in attendance he married Martha. Before the ceremony she was baptized into the Russian church and re named Catherine. Her step-son, the Tsarevich Alexis, acted as her godfather.

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

Peter's death Peter suffered from a chronic infection of the bowels which may have resulted from his excessive drinking. On November 5th 1724 he felt twinges of pain and other symptoms but decided to travel by boat to visit another ironworks and an armament factory at Systerbeck on the Gulf of Finland. The weather was typical for early winter in the North; gray skies, high winds and rough, icy seas. Beyond the south of the Neva, Peter's yacht was approaching the fishing village of Lakhta when in the distance he saw a boat carrying twenty soldiers swept out of control by the wind and the waves. As he watched, the boat was driven aground on a shoal. There it's keel struck in the mud with waves pounding its side. The little vessel began rolling back and forth, threatening to capsize. Those inside obviously unable to swim, seemed incapable of doing anything to save themselves. Peter sent a skiff from his own yacht to assist, but his sailors were unable to refloat the grounded boat; the men inside, meanwhile did little to help, being almost paralyzed by fear of drowning. Watching impatiently, the Emperor order his own skiff to take him along-side the grounded boat. Unable to come close because of the waves, the Emperor suddenly jumped into the sea, plunging into the shallow icy water up to his waist and wading to the stranded boat. His arrival and presence galvanized the desperate men. Responding to his shouts, they caught lines thrown from the other boat, and with the help of other sailor now in the water beside the Emperor, the stranded boat was pulled and dragged off the shoal. Blessing themselves for their salvation, the survivors were taken ashore to recover in the houses of local fishermen.

Peter returned to his yacht to strip off his wet clothes and dress in something warm before anchoring at Lakhta. At first, although he had been immersed in the icy water for a considerable time, it did not appear that this exposure had affected him. Enormously pleased at his exploit in saving lives and refloating the boat, he went to sleep at Lakhta. During the night, however, he came down with chills and fever and within a few hours the pain in his intestine reappeared. He canceled his trip and sailed back to St. Petersburg, where he went to bed. From that moment on, the disease never relinquished it's

fatal grip. . . On January 22, he suffered a relapse and called for a priest. Then ordered the release of all state prisoners except murderers and granted amnesty to young noblemen punished for not joining the service.

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

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



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