

# The Rise of Russia

## Russia's Expansionist Politics Under the Tsars

- Mongol dominance of Russia lasted until the mid-15th century. Under Ivan III, Russia was liberated, and began its rise to power.
- Russian culture was not deeply changed by Mongol rule, but it had stagnated. The tsars began the process of reviving and recreating Russian culture, largely by tying its past to that of the Byzantine Empire.
- For the tsars, Russian independence meant territorial expansion, pushing back the Mongols. **Cossacks**, peasant-adventurers, were used to settle the newly-taken lands. The lands, in turn, could be used to buy the loyalty of the **boyars** or nobility. Russian expansion put an end to the periodic emergence of nomadic peoples from central Asia.
- The tsars began a deliberate policy of contact with the West, both commercially and culturally, establishing the enduring practice of following the Western lead. The **Time of Troubles**, a period of rebellion and invasion, was ended by the new Romanov dynasty.

## Russia's First Westernization, 1690–1790

- **Peter I, the Great**, looked with confidence to the west for guidance in restructuring his empire
- Ruling as autocrat, Peter the Great used bureaucrats to avoid reliance on the nobility. He also instituted the long-lived tradition of a secret police force.
- Peter regularized the organization of Russia's government, including provincial and urban governments. These changes, along with increased manufacturing output, added to the power of the central government. The tsar also undertook cultural changes, attempting to bring Russian dress and manners in line with other European countries. While his reforms brought change, they were also partial and were deeply resented by many.
- **Catherine the Great**, taking control of the Russian government from her husband, Peter III, continued many of Peter I's policies. Her reforms, too, were selective, restricting the freedom of peasants, and intellectuals wanting further reforms. Her dynamic leadership added to the territory of the Russian state, and improved the position of Russia in European politics. The reigns of Peter I and Catherine completely changed the political and cultural place of Russia in European developments.

---

## Themes in Early Modern Russian History

- Russian nobles had a more important role than their western counterparts, who, by this period, were largely ornamental.
- The position of serfs declined in the 1600s and 1700s, satisfying the nobility, who, in turn, effectively managed this agrarian population for the tsars. In fact, Russian serfdom closely resembled slavery. In other areas of eastern Europe, peasants were similarly exploited. While peasant society was largely self-governed, the status of the peasants declined throughout the 18th century.
- Russian society tended towards polarization, with only a small merchant class. Agricultural practices saw little improvement.
- Russian intellectuals, influenced by western ideas, called for reform. Peasant revolts were brutally repressed, including the Pugachev rebellion, put down by Catherine the Great.
- Eastern Europe in this period tended to fall into the western European sphere in this period. Copernicus, a Pole, was an example of an intellectual with close ties to western European developments. Some smaller countries were engulfed by more powerful neighbors. Poland is a notable example.

## Multiple-Choice Questions

1. In order to expand, Russia had to defeat all these neighboring states EXCEPT:  
(A) Austria.  
(B) Sweden.  
(C) Poland-Lithuania.  
(D) the Ottoman Empire.  
(E) the Khanate of the Golden Horde.
2. Russia did not experience either the Renaissance or Reformation because  
(A) Russia did not exist at the time of either movement.  
(B) Russia was engaged in a long war with the Ottoman Empire.  
(C) both revolutions were confined to Italy.  
(D) Mongol rule cut Russia off and isolated her from Western contacts.  
(E) Russia had no intellectual elites able to understand either movement.
3. The only group to support the tsars' attempts to modernize Russia and increase the power of the central government was  
(A) boyars.  
(B) urban artisans and merchants.  
(C) peasants.  
(D) clergy.  
(E) ethnic minorities.
4. Peter the Great's symbol of his reforms, westernization, and foreign policy was  
(A) his visit to the West to learn firsthand about institutions and technologies.  
(B) toleration of religious minorities and laws granting freedom of worship.  
(C) the shaving of the nobles' beards.  
(D) building St. Petersburg as the new capital and a port on the Baltic.  
(E) his conversion to Islam.
5. Although early modern Russia was paternalistic, evidence that reforms in Russia included women is proven by all these changes EXCEPT:  
(A) the right of women to sue in court and divorce their husbands.  
(B) the rule of four Russian tsarinas (empresses).  
(C) the right of women to appear in public.  
(D) the end to the marriage tradition in which a whip was handed from father to bridegroom.  
(E) decrees westernizing women's dress and manners and permitting education.

6. In order to accomplish her domestic goals, Catherine the Great
  - (A) followed Enlightenment ideas and democratized her government.
  - (B) supported peasant demands for reform and free land.
  - (C) abolished serfdom and slavery.
  - (D) supported the French Revolution when it broke out.
  - (E) allied with the nobles and gave them absolute control over their peasants.
7. As Russia expanded,
  - (A) it acquired a larger Russian population.
  - (B) it became a largely Muslim state.
  - (C) serfdom spread.
  - (D) the free population expanded.
  - (E) nobles lost their influence to merchants and artisans.
8. In contrast to American slaves, Russian serfs
  - (A) had fewer rights.
  - (B) could neither be owned nor sold.
  - (C) were largely skilled laborers working in export industries.
  - (D) grew mostly cotton, sugar, and tobacco.
  - (E) produced only for a domestic, local economy.
9. Economically, early modern Russia was
  - (A) largely agricultural and dependent on Western trade.
  - (B) largely industrialized.
  - (C) poor and backward with few items to export and unable to feed itself.
  - (D) self-sufficient enough to be uninterested in trade.
  - (E) one of the leading partners in international trade.
10. The greatest source of social unrest in early modern Russia was
  - (A) noble opposition to westernization.
  - (B) the clergy and religious opposition to the non-Christian minorities.
  - (C) rapid growth of towns and factories.
  - (D) the lack of real reform and especially rights for the serfs.
  - (E) caused by intellectuals and radicals opposed to the tsars' authority.

### Free-Response Question

*What motivated Russian implementation of reforms inspired by western Europe?  
What factors limited these reforms?*

## ANSWERS AND EXPLANATIONS

### Multiple-Choice Questions

- **1. (A) is correct.** All of the countries listed except Austria were neighbors of the growing Russian state.
- **2. (D) is correct.** The long period of Mongol control left Russia isolated from developments in Europe.
- **3. (B) is correct.** The reforms were resisted by the privileged classes such as the clergy and the boyars. The lower classes were unaffected by his reforms. However, increased contact with western Europe was welcomed by urban groups.
- **4. (D) is correct.** A and C were part of his reforms, but it was St. Petersburg that represented Peter's entire program of change.
- **5. (A) is correct.** All were part of Peter's reforms but the right of women to divorce.
- **6. (E) is correct.** Although Catherine was a reformer, her embrace of some of

---

the ideas of the Enlightenment was countered at home by more pragmatic measures.

- **7. (C) is correct.** Expansion of Russian control following the defeat of the Mongols meant the extension of serfdom in lands as the tsars sought to placate the landlords.
- **8. (E) is correct.** In general, serfs are freer than slaves and cannot be bought and sold. However, under the tsars Russian serfs came to resemble slaves.
- **9. (A) is correct.** While Russia cannot be characterized as backward, it did remain less industrialized than most of western Europe until the 20th century.
- **10. (D) is correct.** The failure to implement real reform, as opposed to the superficial window-dressing that was common, led to tensions between the tsars and those that were influenced by the ideas of the Enlightenment.

### ***Free-Response Essay Sample Response***

*What motivated Russian implementation of reforms inspired by western Europe?  
What factors limited these reforms?*

Peter the Great's motives for reform were a mixture of a sincere desire to emulate western European models, and a wish to consolidate his rule. His experience of military and industrial reforms in western Europe led him to implement these reforms in his own state. Catherine the Great also admired Enlightenment ideals and embraced them selectively. However, both rulers met resistance from privileged groups whose power was threatened. Moreover, real implementation of reform at all levels would have meant severe economic and social disruption and was not attempted. While the tradition of serfdom had essentially been ended in western Europe by the Black Death, it continued in Russia and indeed became more entrenched under the tsars. The peasants themselves were traditionalists and resisted reforms.