PART 1: PETER THE GREAT AND RUSSIA, 1682–1725

1 Establishing authority, 1682–1707

In this section we will look at the condition of Russia in 1682. We will consider the way in which it was governed, as well as the person of Tsar Peter himself. We will also look in some detail at the social and political structures, including the Church, the attempts at reform and the opposition to those attempts. In addition, we will take into account Peter's foreign policies and wars. We will look into:

- The political, economic and social position of Russia in 1682: the Tsars and the nobility; economic backwardness and serfdom; Russia as a traditional, Slav society.
- The Regency: the role of the Streltsy; Peter as joint ruler; the establishment of sole rule.
- Westernisation: influences on Peter as a child; the Great Embassy; the reasons for and significance of the development of St Petersburg.
- Early reforms: economic and financial; political and administrative; military; changes in society
- Opposition: the Church; the Streltsy.
- Foreign affairs and wars: wars against Turkey and Sweden.

The political, economic and social position of Russia in 1682

The Tsars and the nobility

Figure 1.1: Russia at the end of the 18th century

Key terms

Ottoman: the dynasty which governed the Turkish Empire. Often used as a name for the empire itself.

Khanate: a kingdom ruled by a khan, usually in southern or eastern Russia, usually Muslim, usually Mongol or Tartar foundations.

Autocracy: a system of government in which one person (the 'autocrat') has total power.

The state of Muscovy, the name still occasionally given to Russia in 1682, grew up in the centre of the great undulating plain which sweeps from eastern Europe to the Ural Mountains. It falls into three regions:

- North: tundra, a treeless region where the subsoil is frozen all the year round;
- Central: taiga, a coniferous forest;
- South: steppe, temperate grassland.

These regions stretch from Europe, across Asia to the shores of the North Pacific in three vast bands.

Moscow, the city upon which Muscovy was centred, lay on the Moscow River, a tributary of the southward-flowing River Volga, within the forested area. Muscovy was open to attack from all sides: from the Poles and Swedes to the north-west and west, from the **Ottoman** Turks (and their client **khanates**) to the south, and from Tartars, the descendants of the Mongol conquerors, to the east. Such a state must either expand or be overwhelmed. That in turn required a powerful military organisation and a strong, even ruthless, central government.

Russia thus emerged as an expanding **autocracy**. Tsar Ivan III ('the Great') (1462–1505) brought over two centuries of Tartar domination to an end, drove back the Polish-Lithuanian frontier westward, conquered the rival state of Novgorod to the north and even penetrated across the Urals into Siberia. His grandson, Ivan IV ('the Terrible') (1547–1584) reacted to a Crimean Tartar raid on Moscow by constructing a line of defensive forts from the River Dnieper to the Volga and by overrunning the khanates of Khazan and Astrakhan, thus linking the Volga to the

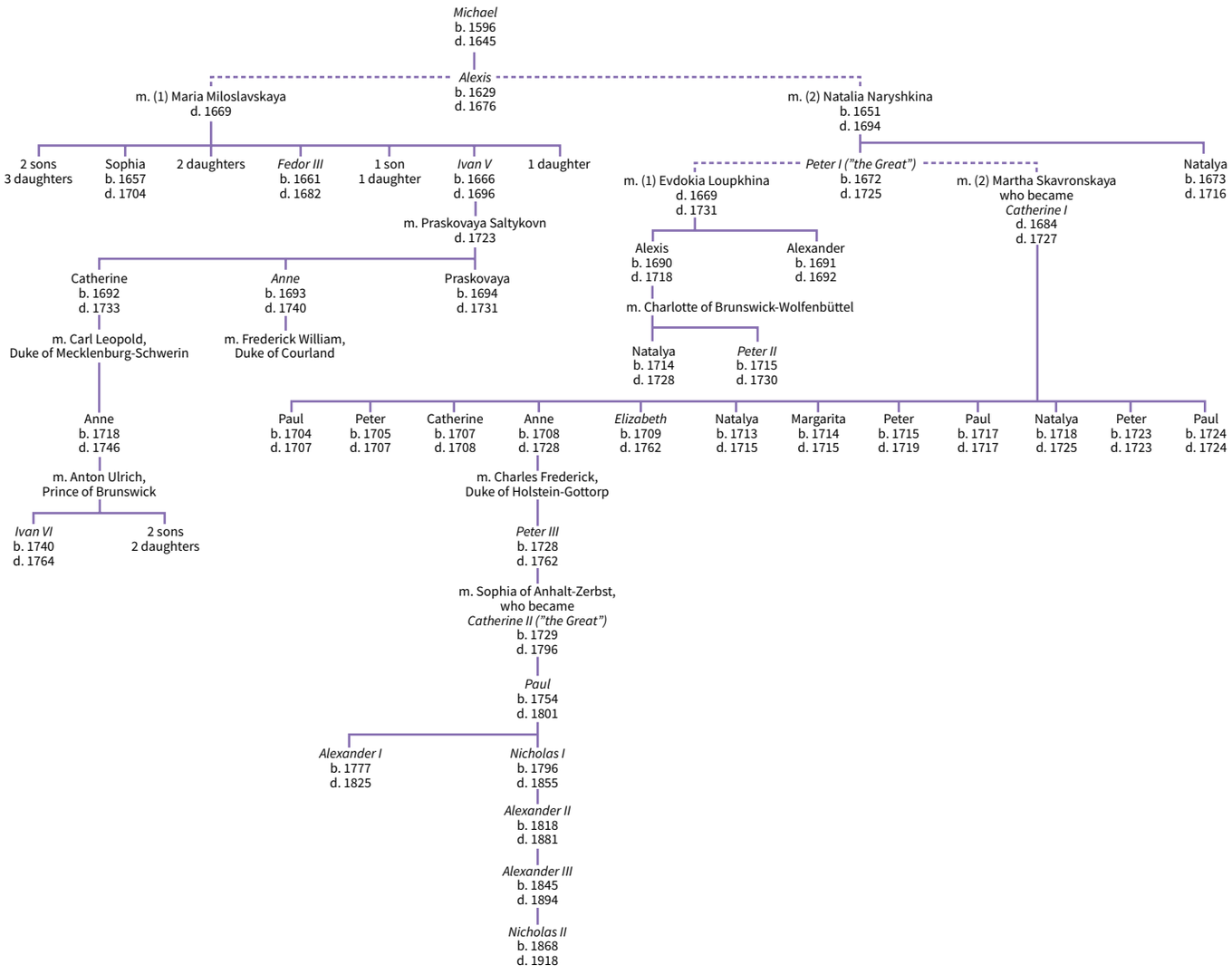

Figure 1.2: The Romanov family tree

Caspian Sea. However, on the steppe, Tartar cavalry was still superior to Russian forces, and in the west the state of Poland-Lithuania was too strong to disturb.

Thus the most dramatic expansion was eastwards beyond the Ural Mountains. Tsar Boris Godunov (1598–1605) and his successors' expeditions pushed eastwards through the forested vastness of Siberia against primitive tribes unable to match Russian arms. In 1639 a small band of **Cossacks** reached the Pacific, after which Russia pushed south. Southward Siberian expansion was only checked when Russians encountered the might of the Chinese Empire along the Amur River.

Key term

Cossacks: a member of one of the self-governing semi-military communities ('hosts') formed in southern Russia and Ukraine by refugees from Tsarist authority and serfdom. By the 18th century the Cossack hosts were loosely tied to the Russian state for military service.

The autocracy

Ivan III was the first ruler to call himself 'Tsar of all the Russias' and Ivan the Terrible was the first to adopt it as an official title. As an autocrat the Tsar had almost unrestricted power over his state and subjects, far beyond even that claimed by Louis XIV of France. Louis was an absolute monarch only within certain limits: he had to respect the privileges of the Church, the nobility and towns, privileges which generally carried exemptions from direct taxes. He could

Key terms

Zemsky zobor: 'Assembly of the Land', an elected body containing representatives of Church, nobility, towns and even some peasantry.

Boyars: the highest rank of the Russian nobility.

Duma: Russian council of nobles.

Patrimonial state: one in which the government has control over both public and private property, so that the two become almost indistinguishable.

'Modernisation': the theory of modernisation has been criticised as being applicable only to late 18th- and 19th-century Western Europe and North America. However, Professor Simon Dixon argues at the beginning of his book *The Modernisation of Russia, 1676–1825* that successive Russian rulers did indeed try to industrialise Russia and that the concept of 'modernisation' can be used to measure their progress.

Cottage industry: the production of goods such as yarn or cloth in rural homes rather than in factories.

ACTIVITY 1.1

Construct a diagram of the structure of Russian autocratic government. Use your own research to identify the names of the important *prikhazy*.

make laws without consulting a parliament but then had to submit them to constitutional courts for approval. Tsars knew no such restrictions: they could legislate, tax and conscript almost at will. The laws were executed by a civil service divided into ministries (*prikhazy*). The Russian parliament, the **zemsky zobor**, met rarely and not at all after 1684, while the Tsar's **Boyar** Council of nobles (or '**Duma**') was in decline and had no real power.

The Tsar could conscript the services and property of his subjects for state purposes, such as raising armies and building new cities, ports, fortresses and canals. The American historian Richard Pipes uses the term **patrimonial state** to describe the Russian autocracy, arguing that the Tsar had so much power over his subjects that state and private property were virtually the same. In a sense, the Tsar *owned* Russia and the Russians. Pipes's argument may appear rather extreme – he is a controversial figure – but it is certainly the case that in Russia private property was not protected and was frequently requisitioned.

Economic backwardness and serfdom

Muscovy began in the upper-Volga forests, producing honey, furs and beeswax, while conquests to the south yielded slaves and corn. The eastward expansion of the 17th century was driven by the fur trade. Ivan III opened the port of Archangel in the Arctic, thus enabling Muscovy to trade with Western Europe during the ice-free summer months. Exports of furs purchased Western metal-ware, including English cannon. The huge demand for furs encouraged over-hunting and thus the need for further eastward and northern conquest to reach fresh supplies. Ivan IV even managed to conquer the province of Ingria on the Gulf of Finland between 1558 and 1560, thereby opening access to the Baltic, through which about half of Russia's external trade passed. (Two decades later, Russia lost it again to Poland-Lithuania.)

Failure to make much headway against the Turks, Poles and Swedes highlighted the need for economic modernisation. Historians have often used the term **'modernisation'** to describe the process by which a state emerges from a largely agricultural economy, where industrial production is limited to **cottage industry** for local consumption, to one based on large-scale production in factories. With this process go urbanisation and the growth of an industrial middle class of businessmen and bankers, together with an industrial working class (or 'proletariat') to work in the factories and mines. The causes of this change are held to be a rising population, the availability of raw materials (such as iron ore and coal), abundant capital in the hands of a rising middle class, a free and mobile labour force, and good (usually waterborne) means of transport.

From the 1630s a number of iron works were established in the Moscow region and especially at Tula, a river port 120 miles (190 km) south of the capital, where Russia's major armaments works was founded in 1632. Linens came from the Tver and Moscow regions, Nizhny-Novgorod in the north produced leather, and salt came from Kama and the upper reaches of the River Volga. To get these enterprises off the ground technical expertise from abroad was needed, so foreign experts were encouraged to settle in Russia. By 1682 at least 20 000 of these immigrants were living in the country. But the result was modest: there were only

about 21 factories, four of them owned by the state, in the whole of Russia. Even in 1700 Russia was still a net importer of iron. In 1682 the economy remained primitive and overwhelmingly agricultural.

Russia as a traditional, Slav society

The Orthodox Church

Orthodox Christianity parted company with Catholicism, the religion of the West, in the Middle Ages and Constantinople, the capital of the Greek-dominated Byzantine Empire, became its headquarters. By 1453, when Constantinople fell to the Turks, Orthodoxy was firmly established in Muscovy and subsequently the concept developed of Moscow being the 'third Rome' (following Rome itself and Constantinople), making it the new centre of true Christianity. Because of this concept, the close working relationship between Tsar and Church was seen as modelled on the approach adopted by Christian Roman and Byzantine emperors.

Russia could thus be described as a **confessional state** in that the autocracy drew much of its authority from the Russian Orthodox Church, while the state supported, and even directed, the Church. The head of the Church was the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, the Russian Orthodox equivalent of the Pope. He lived in Moscow and his clergy taught that the autocracy was ordained by God. While rulers tolerated the non-Orthodox and non-Christian peoples whom they conquered, other forms of Christianity were not encouraged and were sometimes treated harshly.

Tsar Alexis (1645–1676) and Nikon, the Moscow Patriarch from 1652, had instituted reforms to bring the Russian Orthodox confession into line with its Greek parent. Nikon brought in foreign scholars, corrected the texts used by the Church and introduced changes, such as sermons, into church services. The traditionalists, the 'Old Believers', who saw the changes as a Roman Catholic conspiracy to undermine Orthodoxy, rejected all of Nikon's reforms and broke away from the official Church. Old Believers were fiercely persecuted – by the late 1680s over 20 000 of them had been burnt at the stake – but they survived in significant numbers right through the Tsarist period (and, to the present day).

The eminent 19th-century Russian historian Vasily Kliuchevsky saw this 'Great Schism' as a nationalist revolt against Westernisation. For him it represented conservative refusal to accept that the Church, the spiritual voice of the third and last Roman empire, was in fact backward and isolated. Nicolai Riasanovsky, a late 20th-century Russian historian working in the United States, saw it as an attempt to rejuvenate the traditional faith, and as a protest against the growing and oppressive autocracy of the Tsars. All of these factors seem to have been at work but their relative importance is still a subject for debate.

The nobility

The boyars, the Russian aristocracy, were not an autonomous class but **service nobility**. Whereas in Western Europe there was a sense of mutual obligation between ruler and nobles, in Russia the obligations all lay upon the nobles, and upon lesser landowners and gentry. They held their estates and **serfs**, not by right, but in return for compulsory service to the state. Although some did acquire

ACTIVITY 1.2

How far was Russia changing by 1682? Prepare a presentation on this subject for discussion in class. You'll need to consider a range of factors, such as political, social and economic forces.

Key terms

Orthodox Christianity: the Eastern branch of Christianity which formally separated from the Roman Catholic Church in the 11th century after centuries of undeclared drifting apart

Confessional state: a country in which the government supports, and is supported by, an official religion and encourages or compels its citizens to follow that religion.

Service nobility: landowners who had to perform compulsory service to the state (in the civil service or as military officers).

Serf: an unfree peasant, bound to their lord's estate. They have limited freedom of movement but are not slaves. They are obliged to provide labour and other services to the landowner

Developing Concepts

Make a list of the characteristics of modernisation according to 'modernisation' theory. Use the contents of this chapter to decide how many of these characteristics applied to Russia in 1682. Use your answers to decide how far modernisation theory can be applied to the study of Russian history at this time.

Key terms

Petrine: an adjective describing things to do with a 'Peter'. In Russian history, this invariably means Peter the Great. 'Pre-Petrine' – before Peter the Great

Bondage: a socio-economic status in which the one bonded is fixed in their position by a system of inflexible rules and conventions which limit their freedom.

substantial wealth, most pre-**Petrine** boyars lived very simply in wooden houses with very basic furniture and comforts. Such men were generally poorly educated and their manners were often crude. As they kept moving around the country on state business, they had comparatively little chance or inclination to build up local power bases, or to improve their estates. In 1682 even the *mestnichestvo*, the complicated system of precedence which limited the Tsar's ability to appoint officials on merit, was abolished. This was not a class well placed to offer resistance to the autocracy.

Peasants and serfs

Serfdom was central to Russian economy and society. Serfs were unfree peasants, bound to their lord's estate; they were not slaves. They were obliged to provide:

- to the landlord: labour and other services;
- to the state: taxes, labour (when called upon) and military service (which could be rewarded with freedom).

These burdens could be very heavy and most peasants were very poor. Serfs, however, had distinct rights: they belonged to a self-governing village commune or *mir*, elected their own village elders, conducted law suits and (within limits) made contracts.

Slaves, who comprised about 10% of the population, had none of these privileges. They included:

- members of conquered populations;
- prisoners of war;
- destitute peasants who sold themselves into **bondage**.

Because slaves were not liable for taxes or conscription, they were of limited use to the state; and because the very poor, who might otherwise have sunk into slavery, were often supported in peasant households, slavery died out in the Petrine period. Peter himself converted his household slaves into serfs in 1723. Serfdom, on the other hand, became far more burdensome.

Serfdom became firmly established in Russia at much the same time that it died out in most of Western Europe. It came about because both landowners and the state wanted a settled population: Tsars wanted taxes and soldiers, landowners wanted labour. Between 1500 and 1700 about half the peasants became the serfs of private landowners and the rest became 'state peasants' – in effect, serfs of the Crown. It can be further argued that all peasants were serfs of the Crown in that the state had first call upon their taxes and labour. From this it has been suggested that landowners, being only temporary proprietors of their serfs, cared little for their welfare and exploited them mercilessly.

How much truth is there in this analysis? Lindsey Hughes, an eminent British historian of Russia, has her own view.

Speak like a historian

Lindsey Hughes is Professor of Russian History in the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in the University of London. She has written extensively on the Petrine period, including a biography of the Regent Sophia.

> Received wisdom (underpinned by most Soviet writing) teaches that the great mass of the ploughing peasantry were impoverished and downtrodden, a view apparently confirmed by many contemporary accounts . . . Leaving aside the true extent of [foreigners'] knowledge of Russian peasants, it is probably true that most peasants had few possessions and lived on a simple diet. But it should not be assumed that the institution of serfdom meant that peasants' lives were not valued. On the contrary, peasants had a high value to their owners (as chattels to be sold or as payers of rent and agricultural producers) and to the State (as taxpayers, army recruits and labourers). The problem is that the State and estate owners were often in conflict, with the interests of the former frequently taking precedence over the latter . . . How could all claimants to a peasant's output get their fair share while allowing the peasant to satisfy his and his family's basic needs? This dilemma became particularly acute under an active, expansionist, demanding regime like Peter's, in a country where there was a wealth of land, but of relatively low quality, and a dearth of manpower.[1]

Discussion points

1. What does Hughes appear to mean by the 'received wisdom' on the condition of the peasants?
2. Why and to what extent does she reject this 'conventional wisdom'?

Town-dwellers

The British historian M.S. Anderson, by defining a town as a settlement of only 1000 inhabitants, calculates that perhaps 5% of Russians were town-dwellers. Moscow, with 150 000–200 000 people, was quite large even in European terms, but apart from distant Astrakhan, no other town was more than a tenth that size. The death rate in these settlements was high: crowded conditions produced deadly plagues and wooden houses were vulnerable to devastating fires. Thus, although the urban population was steadily growing, it was proportionately much lower than in Western European countries.

Towns were not self-governing, partly because of their generally tiny size and partly because more than a third of them were military settlements created to protect the southern and eastern frontiers. Thus, Anderson argues, perhaps 50% of town-dwellers were military or civilian employees of the state. Towns did not have taxation privileges, there was no independent middle class – there were no more than 400 wealthy merchants in the whole country – and there were few cultural activities to encourage independent thought and action. Indeed townsmen were as legally bound to their towns, as serfs were to their estates: in both cases, bondage made taxation simpler.

Key terms

Bandit: an armed robber; banditry is the practice of armed robbery.

Streltsy: the outdated Russian military units, with special privileges, abolished by Peter I

Conservatism: an attitude that prefers to postpone and minimise any change, and is suspicious of innovation of every kind.

Exiles and renegades: the Cossacks

Cossacks were steppe-dwelling Russian pastoralists living beyond the bounds of the Russian state. Originally they had been either peasant refugees from the growing Russian serfdom, or communities displaced by the Tartars. Their name comes from a Tartar word meaning 'horseman'. In 1654, having rebelled against Polish rule, they placed themselves under Russian protection on condition that they always retained their autonomy. In time that autonomy was eroded and serfdom introduced. As a result, Cossack revolts were common. On the other hand, Cossack regiments were the backbone of the Russian cavalry and Peter I had close Cossack advisers.

The growth of serfdom encouraged large-scale flight to Cossack and other frontier communities, leading to the rise of banditry. **Bandits**, offering violent resistance to the ever-increasing demands of landlord and state, sometimes became popular heroes, sheltered by peasant communities. Given such widespread sympathy and the vast size of Russia they were almost impossible to eradicate.

Thus Russian society developed as a paradox. Alongside the immense and increasing power of the state there emerged a level of popular resistance among peasants, among the Old Believers and along the southern and eastern frontiers.

The Regency

The role of the Streltsy

In 1676, when Peter was four, his father, Tsar Alexis, died unexpectedly. On his deathbed Alexis confirmed his eldest living (but very sickly) 15-year-old son as Tsar Feodor III. Peter and his mother were sent to Preobrazhensky, three miles outside Moscow, and their chief political ally, Artamon Matveev, was exiled to the far north. Feodor's mother's family, the Miloslavskys, were in control. However, by 1682 they had been gradually edged out of power by politicians connected to Peter's mother's relations, the Naryshkins.

Developing concepts

For each of these important concepts, write down a definition and give an example of what it meant in the context of Russian society and government around 1682.

- Autocracy
- Service nobility
- Serfdom
- Confessional state
- Patrimonial state.

When Feodor died in 1682 the Naryshkins moved quickly to establish control. Feodor's brother Ivan was seven years older than Peter but, although not as helpless as has sometimes been suggested, he was an invalid incapable of ruling alone. It was not difficult to persuade a hastily assembled *zemsky zobor* to dutifully proclaim Peter as sole heir. However, the late Tsar Alexis had also left a daughter called Sophia, and she turned out to be a political force not so lightly brushed aside.

Sophia's main weapon was the **Streltsy**. This was a military force, some 55 000 strong in 1682, formed in the 16th century to introduce modern firepower into Muscovy's armed forces. Membership was hereditary. Members were allowed to live in their own homes instead of in barracks, they could take part in trade and they could produce alcoholic beverages for their own consumption. However, by 1682 they were becoming discontented and insecure. There were many Old Believers among them and they harboured deep distrust of foreigners and of the boyars. Such **conservatism** was combined with the Streltsy's suspicions that they were being superseded. Their critics regarded them as outdated and increasingly

inefficient. They were therefore threatened (and felt threatened) by Peter's and his predecessors' experiments with more modern military methods. There were also genuine basic grievances. Some of their colonels often **embezzled** the men's pay, and the commander-in-chief, Prince Dolgoruky, was particularly unpopular. In 1682 it was not difficult for the Miloslavskys to encourage rumours that Feodor had been poisoned and that the Naryshkins meant to murder Ivan too.

On 25 May 1682 thousands of Streltsy forced their way into the Kremlin. The ten-year-old Peter, his mother Natalia, Ivan and Matveev met them on the Red Staircase, where Natalia encouraged them to speak to and touch Ivan to prove that he was still alive. But her courage did not halt the **coup**. Matveev was hurled to the floor below and butchered with halberds; several Naryshkins and some boyars were hunted down, dragged to a place of public execution and hacked into small pieces. Across Moscow murder and looting raged unrestrained for over a week. Peter and Natalia were unharmed – Sophia clearly had no intention of doing away with them – and they retired once more to Preobrazhensky. On 25 May a new *zemsky zobor* duly proclaimed one brother as 'first' Tsar as Ivan V and the other as 'second' Tsar as Peter I, so that officially they ruled together.

Key terms

Embezzle: to covertly steal money entrusted to one's care, often by falsifying accounts.

Coup: a sudden armed seizure of power by a small group.

ACTIVITY 1.3

Class debate: Which was the more important cause of the 1682 coup: Sophia's plotting or Streltsy grievances?

Peter as joint ruler

The joint rule of Ivan and Peter was, of course, a sham. Although government decrees were at first issued in their joint names, power really resided with Sophia, who was in practice Regent, or stand-in ruler, though she was never formally given that title. Her lover and chief adviser was Prince Vasily Golitsyn, a gentle cultivated man who lived in a strikingly Western style. Between them Sophia and Golitsyn brought in a number of far-sighted reforms. Legal procedure and the penal codes were made more humane and Golitsyn devised plans for educating young Russians abroad, for building a modern Western-style army and for easing the condition of the serfs. There was even a hint of a move towards gender equality: at some of his banquets women guests were entertained on the same terms as men. Though some of Golitsyn's aims were very close to those later espoused by Peter, his methods were quite different: Golitsyn preferred gentleness to relentless energy, humanity to brutal coercion.

In foreign policy, too, Golitsyn anticipated Peter's development of closer relations with Central and Eastern Europe. A treaty with Poland in 1686 confirmed the Russian acquisition of Kiev, and with it the conquest of the rich farmlands of northern Ukraine. Embassies were sent to no fewer than 11 European states between 1684 and 1688. In 1689, faced with the expulsion of the Russians from the Amur River basin, Golitsyn's government negotiated the Treaty of Nerchinsk with China. This was the first such agreement which implied equality of status, made by that empire with any foreign power, and the boundary it defined lasted for over 200 years.

The establishment of sole rule

Sophia always knew that Peter's existence was the greatest long-term threat to her rule. In 1684 she made Ivan marry, in the hope that he would produce an heir with a claim stronger than Peter's. She exchanged the unofficial title of 'Regent' for that of 'Autocrat', implying that her own status was as good as Ivan's or Peter's. In 1687

ACTIVITY 1.4

Evdokia Lopukhina was Peter's first wife. Use this book and your own research to compose a one-page biography for class presentation.

some of her adherents suggested another coup to put her on the throne, but she still stopped short of the obvious course: murder.

None of this, however, could keep Peter out of the picture for long. In 1688, when he was 16, he began to take an interest in government and attend meetings of the Boyar Council. It was now impossible to pretend that he was still a minor. In January 1689, aged 17, he married Evdokia Lopukhina, a bride chosen by his mother, whom he quickly made pregnant – so it appeared that the 'second' Tsar, not the first, was about to strengthen his position by producing an heir. Moreover, as we shall see, Peter possessed his own private army in the form of two regiments that he had developed at Preobrazhensky. At the same time, Sophia's position was seriously undermined by two failed campaigns, led by Golitsyn, against the Crimean khanate in 1687 and 1688.

In the late summer of 1689 Sophia, seeing that a showdown could no longer be postponed, planned another Streltsy coup. On the night of 7 August she set them in motion towards Preobrazhensky to seize Peter in his sleep and kill him. Warned at the last moment, Peter escaped to the monastery of Troitsa-Sergeev, 40 miles away and out of Sophia's reach. Troitsa-Sergeev became a base around which the Naryshkins and their allies rallied, while Sophia's forces dwindled. The fickle Streltsy were divided and hesitant: after all, Peter's conservative mother was now more to their taste than Sophia's reforming regime. In September General Patrick Gordon, a Scot in the Russian service and a friend of Peter's, together with some other foreign officers commanding new-style regiments, threw in his lot with Peter. Sophia's position was now hopeless. She handed over her advisers to Natalia's faction and retired to the hospitality of a convent just outside the Kremlin. Golitsyn was sent to the far north, where he died in 1714.

The roles of the joint Tsars were now superficially reversed. Ivan was ignored while Peter became the only Tsar who mattered. But, as Anderson puts it, he reigned but did not rule. Even during the coup against Sophia he had been the passive agent of his mother's faction. Now, and for five successive years, power was exercised by his mother, Natalia, and exercised in the interests of conservatism. Diplomatic contacts with the outside world, especially Poland, were wound down. The Jesuit priests previously admitted to serve the Catholics in the Foreign Quarter were immediately expelled. When Patriarch Joachim, who had wanted to expel all non-Orthodox foreigners, died in March 1690 he was replaced by the even more reactionary Adrian, Metropolitan of Kazan. Peter's failure to prevent this appointment was a measure of his impotence at this time.

However, Peter was powerless less because Natalia overruled him than because he was not yet much interested in governing. His central concerns were still primarily military and, increasingly, naval. He built small ships, partly with his own hands, on Lake Pleshcheev, some 200 miles from Moscow, where he spent as little time as possible. In 1692 he even had to be begged to return to receive an important embassy from Persia. He conscripted his Preobrazhensky soldiers to work as shipwrights and, for the first time, imported foreign experts to direct them. In 1693 and again in 1694 he visited Archangel, still Russia's only port, and saw the sea for the first time. Thereafter he lost interest in Lake Pleshkeev and fixed his mind upon an ocean-going navy under his Swiss drinking companion, Franz Lefort. With

the exception of Gordon, his foreign companions were all like Lefort: adventurers of a crude ill-educated stamp with a strong penchant for heavy drinking and womanising. Central to this activity was his club of intimates, the 'Jolly Company', later titled 'The All-Joking, All-Drunken Synod of Fools and Jesters', to mock tradition in general and the Church in particular. Mentally and physically, the young Tsar was still at play.

Two deaths forced Peter to take a more active and responsible role. His mother's demise in January 1694 forced him to take some part in the wider concerns of government. When Ivan V died in 1696 he had no choice: he was now sole Tsar. However he was a Tsar of a type hitherto unknown. Rather than the traditional remote figure, hardly ever venturing beyond the Kremlin walls and surrounded by endless formal ceremony, Russians were confronted with a brash young man who despised tradition, yet had no clear ambitions of his own. The stage was set for a long vigorous period of unprecedented and often unwelcome change, too frequently backed by force.

Westernisation

Influences on Peter as a child

The most important formative event of young Peter's childhood was the terrifying coup of 1682. Forever after he loathed the Kremlin, and the memory made him shudder even in adulthood. He carried the mark – an uncontrollable

Voices from the past

Figure 1.3: General Patrick Gordon

General Patrick Gordon, 1635–1699

Born into a family of minor gentry in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, Patrick Gordon was typical of many poor Scots gentry who, unable to find military employment at home, sought service in the armies of other states. As a Roman Catholic he was doubly disadvantaged before 1660, when King Charles II was restored to the thrones of England and Scotland, and after 1688, when the Catholic James II was overthrown in the 'Glorious Revolution'.

Gordon received his university education at a Catholic Jesuit College in Prussia. From 1653 to 1660 he served in the armies of Sweden and Poland, changing sides three times, before finally entering the Russian service under Tsar Alexis. After a diplomatic mission to England, he distinguished himself in campaigns against the Turks and the Crimean khanate. In 1687–88, while stationed at Preobrazhensky, he befriended Peter and in 1689 his support ensured the success of Peter's coup. In 1694 he accompanied Peter on naval exercises out of Archangel and in 1697 was entrusted with the refortification of newly captured Azov. In 1698, during Peter's absence in the West, he crushed a dangerous Streltsy revolt. Peter thought very highly of Gordon and after Sophia's downfall paid him the unprecedented compliment of visiting him for dinner. For historians of Russia, the surviving volumes of Gordon's personal diaries are invaluable primary sources.

ACTIVITY 1.5

What were the long- and short-term reasons for Sophia's fall from power? Were any of these factors more important than the others?

Figure 1.4: Peter the Great as a child

facial twitch – for life. No wonder then that he dreaded and despised the Streltsy, and the primitive, ignorant and superstitious conservatism that they represented. With them he associated his half-sister, whom he hated and distrusted, and the entire Miloslavsky family. He spent the following years outside Moscow, not in an exile imposed by Sophia, but by choice.

Peter's main residence was at Preobrazhensky, a palace on the River Yauza, where he was isolated from court life and politics. Here he acquired no sense of the issues facing his future realm and certainly knew little if anything of Sophia's and Golitsyn's innovations. His Orthodox-based conventional education, which had already given him a biblical knowledge good enough to one day impress the Bishop of Salisbury, came to an end. Instead he developed in other directions.

Military games

When Peter had turned 11 in 1683, he had been given real guns for the first time and some small-scale cannon. In time he acquired a collection that took several carts to move it from residence to residence. He recruited servants and serfs into his own toy regiments, with which he could carry out mock parades, marches, battles and sieges. Out of these games grew two real regiments, the green-uniformed Preobrazhensky Guards and the blue-clad Semenovsky Guards, which in turn became the core of the reformed Petrine army.

The management of his regiments led Peter to acquire skills in military engineering and gunnery, knowledge that he could only acquire from foreigners in the Sloboda, Moscow's 'German' suburb, where foreigners were obliged to live. These were practical technicians, not scholars, who had learned their professions on the job, just as Peter was doing and continued to do throughout his life. Theodor Sommer schooled him in the handling of artillery and Franz Timmerman taught him navigation by the stars, arithmetic, ballistics and fortification. Timmerman was with him when he came across an old English boat, which the Dutchman Karsten Brand later repaired and equipped with a new mast and sails. Infinitely handier than the traditional Russian flat-bottomed river barges, the vessel gave birth to Peter's fascination with ships and the sea.

Thus by the age of 17 Peter had emerged as a vigorous master of multiple practical trades, with a smattering of foreign languages, a very inadequate formal education and a restless impatience with tradition.

The Great Embassy

In March 1697 Peter left Russia and did not return until September of the following year. Under the transparent pseudonym of 'Peter Mikhailov' he travelled via northern Germany to the Dutch Republic and to England, returning by way of Vienna, thus becoming the first Tsar to venture beyond the bounds of Russia. The journey raises two key questions:

1. Why did Peter undertake such a prolonged visit to the West? As we shall see in the following section, his early innovations had stirred violent resentment among Russian conservatives: there could not have been a more dangerous moment to have turned his back on his domestic enemies.
2. How far did Peter's experiences lead him to attempt to Westernise Russia?