

From Voltaire, *The History of Peter the Great: Emperor of Russia*

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DESCRIPTION OF RUSSIA

THE empire of Russia is the largest in the whole globe, extending from west to east upwards of two thousand common leagues of France,¹ and about eight hundred in its greatest breadth from north to south. It borders upon Poland and the Frozen Sea, and joins to Sweden and China. Its length from the island of Dago, in the westernmost part of Livonia, to its most eastern limits, takes in near one hundred and seventy degrees [almost half the globe], SO that when it is noon in the western parts of the empire, it is nearly midnight in the eastern....

The country now comprehended under the name of Russia, or the Russias, is of a greater extent than all the rest of Europe, or than ever the Roman empire was, or that of Darius [of Persia] subdued by Alexander; for it contains upwards of one million one hundred thousand square leagues. Neither the Roman empire, nor that of Alexander, contained more than five hundred and fifty thousand each; and there is not a kingdom in Europe the twelfth part so extensive as the Roman empire; but to make Russia as populous, as plentiful, and as well stored with towns as our southern countries, would require whole ages, and a race of monarchs such as Peter the Great.

The English ambassador, who resided at Petersburg in 1733, and who had been at Madrid, says, in his manuscript relation, that in Spain, which is the least populous state in Europe, there may be reckoned forty persons to every square mile, and in Russia not above five. We shall see in the second chapter, whether this minister was mistaken. Marshal Vauban, the greatest of engineers, and the best of citizens, computes, that, in France, every square mile contains two hundred inhabitants. These calculations are never very exact, but they serve to show the amazing disproportion in the population of two different countries....²

Formerly we called Russia by the name of Muscovy, from the city of Moscow, the capital of that empire; and the residence of the grand dukes: but at present the ancient name of Russia prevails....

PETER'S EUROPEAN TRAVELS

At his return to Amsterdam [Peter] resumed his former occupations, and completed with his own hands, a ship of sixty guns, that he had begun himself, and sent her to Archangel; which was the only port he had at that time on the ocean. He not only engaged in his service several French refugees, Swiss, and Germans; but he also sent all sorts of artists over to Moscow, and he previously made a trial of their several abilities himself. There were few trades or arts which he did not perfectly well understand, in their minutest branches: he took a particular pleasure in correcting with his own

¹ A French league contains three English miles, so multiply all numbers by three to get miles.

² From Chapter 2 [Where Voltaire makes his own calculations]:

By the same calculation, it is impossible that the total of the inhabitants of Russia should amount to less than twenty-four millions. At this rate, there are eight persons to every square mile. The English ambassador, whom I have mentioned before, allows only five; but he certainly was not furnished with such faithful memoirs as those with which I have been favoured.

Russia therefore is exactly five times less populous than Spain, but contains near four times the number of inhabitants: it is almost as populous as France or Germany; but, if we consider its vast extent, the number of souls is thirty times less.

hands, the geographical maps, which at that time laid down at hazard the positions of the towns and rivers in his vast dominions, then very little known.

He remained at Amsterdam, constantly employed in his usual occupations of shipbuilding, engineering, geography, and the practice of natural philosophy, till the middle of January 1698, and then he set out for England, but still as one of the retinue of his ambassadors.

King William sent his own yacht to meet him, and two ships of war as convoy. In England he observed the same manner of living as at Amsterdam... he took an apartment near the king's dockyard, at Deptford, where he applied himself wholly to gain instruction. The Dutch builders had only taught him their method, and the practical part of shipbuilding. In England he found the art better explained; for there they work according to mathematical proportion. He soon made himself so perfect in this science, that he was able to give lessons to others. He began to build a ship according to the English method of construction, and it proved a prime sailor. The art of watch making, which was already brought to perfection in London, next attracted his attention, and he made himself complete master of the whole theory. Captain Perry, the engineer, who followed him from London to Russia, says, that from the casting of cannon, to the spinning of ropes, there was not any one branch of trade belonging to a ship that he did not minutely observe, and even put his hand to, as often as he came into the places where those trades were carried on.

In order to cultivate his friendship, he was allowed to engage several English artificers into his service, as he had done in Holland; but, over and above artificers, he engaged likewise some mathematicians, which he would not so easily have found in Amsterdam. Ferguson, a Scotchman, an excellent geometrician, entered into his service, and was the first person who brought arithmetic into use in the exchequer in Russia, where before that time, they made use only of the Tartarian [Mongol] method of reckoning, with balls strung upon a wire; a method which supplied the place of writing, but was very perplexing and imperfect, because, after the calculation, there was no method of proving it, in order to discover any error. The Indian ciphers, which are now in use [in Western Europe], were not introduced among us till the ninth century, by Arabs; and they did not make their way into the Russian empire till one thousand years afterwards. Such has been the fate of the arts, to make their progress slowly round the globe. He took with him two young students from a mathematical school, and this was the beginning of the marine academy, founded afterwards by Peter the Great. He observed and calculated eclipses with Ferguson. Perry, the engineer... acknowledges, that Peter made himself a proficient in astronomy; that he perfectly well understood the motions of the heavenly bodies, as well as the laws of gravitation, by which they are directed. This force, now so evidently demonstrated, and before the time of the great Newton so little known, by which all the planets gravitate towards each other, and which retain them in their orbits, was already become familiar to a sovereign of Russia, while other countries amused themselves with imaginary vertices, and, in Galileo's nation, one set of ignorant persons ordered others, as ignorant, to believe the earth to be immovable....

We must not forget to observe, that a set of English merchants... gave Peter fifteen thousand pounds sterling, for the permission of vending tobacco in Russia. The patriarch, by a mistaken severity, had interdicted this branch of trade; for the Russian church forbade smoking, as an unclean and sinful action. Peter, who knew better things, and who, amongst his many projected changes, meditated a reformation of the church, introduced this commodity of trade into his dominions.

Before Peter left England, he was entertained by King William with a spectacle worthy such a guest: this was a mock sea-fight... William made him a present of the vessel in which he used to go over to Holland, called the Royal Transport, a beautiful yacht, and magnificently adorned. In this vessel Peter returned to Holland the latter end of 1698, taking with him three captains of ships of war, five and twenty captains of merchant ships, forty lieutenants, thirty pilots, as many surgeons, two hundred and fifty gunners, and upwards of three hundred artificers. This little colony of persons skilful in all branches, sailed from Holland to Archangel, on board the Royal Transport, and from

thence were distributed into all the different places where their services were necessary. Those who had been engaged at Amsterdam went by the way of Narva, which then belonged to the Swedes...

THE END OF PETER'S TRAVELS

Peter was ready to set out from Vienna, in order to proceed to Venice, to complete his tour of instruction, when he received the news of a rebellion, which had lately broke out in his dominions.

Tsar Peter, when he left his dominions to set out on his travels, had provided against every incident, even that of rebellion. But the great and serviceable things he had done for his country, proved the very cause of this rebellion.

Certain old boyars, to whom the ancient customs were still dear, and some priests, to whom the new ones appeared little better than sacrilege, began these disturbances... Care was taken to spread abroad the danger to be feared from the introduction of foreigners to instruct the nation. In short, who would believe, that the permission which the czar had given to import tobacco into his empire, contrary to the inclination of the clergy, was one of the chief motives of the insurrection?

Superstition, the scourge of every country, yet the darling of the multitude, spread itself from the common people to the [Streltzy](#), who had been scattered on the frontiers of Lithuania: they assembled in a body, and marched towards Moscow, with the intent to place the princess Sophia on the throne, and for ever to prevent the return of a tsar who had violated the established customs, by presuming to travel for instruction among foreigners. [Peter's] forces, commanded by Schein and [Gordon](#), who were much better disciplined than the Streltzy, met them fifteen leagues from Moscow, gave them battle, and entirely defeated them: but this advantage, gained by a foreign general over the ancient militia, among whom were several of the burghers of Moscow, contributed still more to irritate the people.

To quell these tumults, the czar sets out privately from Vienna... and at length arrived at Moscow, where he surprised everyone with his presence: he then confers rewards on the troops who had defeated the Streltzy, (Sept. 1698,) of whom the prisons were now full. If the crimes of these unhappy wretches were great, their punishment was no less so. Their leaders, with several of their officers and priests, were condemned to death; some were broken upon the [wheel](#), and two women were buried alive; upwards of two thousand of the Streltzy were executed, part of whom were hung round about the walls of the city, and others put to death in different manners, and their dead bodies remained exposed for two days in the high roads, particularly about the monastery where the princesses Sophia and Eudocia resided.³ Monuments of stone were erected, on which their crimes and punishments were set forth. A great number of them who had wives and children at Moscow, were dispersed with their families into Siberia... This punishment was at least of service... to the state, as they helped to cultivate and people a large tract of waste land...

DESCRIPTION OF ST. PETERSBURG

On the borders of Estonia lies the Gulf of Finland. To the eastward of this sea, and at the junction of the Neva with the lake Ladoga, is situated Petersburg, the most modern and best built city in the whole empire, founded by Tsar Peter, in spite of all the united obstacles which opposed its foundation.

³ Captain Perry, in p. 181 of his memoirs, says, that these executions being performed in the depth of winter, their bodies were immediately frozen; those who were beheaded, were ordered to be left in the same posture as when executed, in ranks upon the ground, with their heads lying by them: and those who were hanged round the three walls of the city, were left hanging the whole winter, to the view of the people, till the warm weather began to come on in the spring, when they were taken down and buried together in a pit, to prevent infection. This author adds, that there were other gibbets placed on all the public roads leading to Moscow, where others of these rebels were hanged.

This city is situated on the bay of Kronstat, in the midst of nine rivers, by which its different quarters are divided. In the centre of this city is almost an impregnable fortress, built on an island, formed by the main-stream of the river Neva: seven canals are cut from the rivers, and wash the walls of one of the royal palaces of the admiralty, of the dock-yard for the galleys, and of several buildings of manufactories. Thirty-five large churches contribute to adorn the city; among which five are allotted for foreigners of the Roman Catholic, Calvinist, and Lutheran religions: these are as so many temples raised to toleration, and examples to other nations. There are five palaces; the old one, called the summer palace, situated on the river Neva, has a very large and beautiful stone balustrade, which runs all along the river side. The new summer palace near the triumphal gate, is one of the finest pieces of architecture in Europe. The admiralty buildings, the school for cadets, the imperial college, the academy of sciences, the exchange, and the merchants' warehouses, are all magnificent structures, and monuments of taste and public utility... In the environs of the city are several villas or country-seats, which surprise all travelers by their magnificence. There is one in particular which has water-works superior to those of Versailles. There was nothing of all this in 1702, the whole being then an impassable morass.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

1. What did foreign observers note about Russia in terms of its size and population density?
2. By what name had Russia previously been known to Europeans?
3. What subjects did Peter study during his travels in Europe?
4. In what two places did Peter spend most of his time?
5. Of the subjects Peter studied, which interested him the most?
6. Why did Peter have to return to Russia?
7. What powerful groups opposed Peter's reforms? On what grounds did they oppose these reforms?
8. How did Peter respond to the challenges to his authority?