

# Examine the ways in which the Romanovs changed Russia between 1613 and 1725

Reuben Thomas

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## Michael: 1613–1645

In 1613, Russia was in a Bad Way. It was suffering from the Time of Troubles, which was a sort of national identity crisis brought on by Ivan the Terrible, who was totally mad, and had killed lots of people, including the entire population of Novgorod, which the Russians did not like very much. This was the ideal moment for the Romanovs to become Tsars while no-one else was looking. Michael was the first Romanov Tsar, but his Patriarch, Filaret, told him what to do until he died in 1633.

Filaret immediately became embroiled in a series of allegiances and wars which were highly confusing and contradictory, as well as all the places involved having completely unpronounceable names like Pskov, and which were therefore much less important than what went on in Russia. The most important event was the convention of a *zemsky sobor*, which was a body of people convened to talk about one thing, say, a war, and instead complained about how high taxes were, how foreign merchants were ruining the economy, and how peasants kept on running away and were so hard to catch. Much more useful for administering the country were the *prikazy*, or chancelleries, which were notable for having names completely unconnected with their function: for instance, the *Posolsky*, or Diplomatic *prikaz* was concerned with the collection of taxes. This system confused foreigners so much that no-one ever attempted to invade and take over Russia. Michael continued in this vein, introducing several new chancelleries such as the *Chelobitnyi* or Petition, which was concerned with rebuilding Moscow, and telling the townspeople how *well* everything was going.

At the start of Michael's reign, taxes were based on the *sokha*, meaning a plough, which was a unit of land. Curiously, although the *boyars* (nobles) had all the land, the peasants had all the *sokhas*, which meant they had to pay all the taxes. Michael changed the system so that extraordinary levies could be collected from people who actually had money, so that he could finance his armies, which managed to conquer large tracts of Russia which were previously uninhabited. This enabled a massive expansion of agriculture, as peasants who had too many *sokhas* moved east, pursued by the *knout*-wielding *boyars* (a *knout* was a large thonged whip with which peasants were beaten when they lied about the number of *sokhas* they possessed). Although many peasants were carried off by Tartars, and others joined the Cossacks, who had no *sokhas*, there were enough left to farm the Steppes, and vastly increase the total grain production of Russia, and the number of *sokhas*, much to the delight of the *Boyars*.

The Russians were not as good at industry and trade, in which areas they tended to pay foreigners to do all the work and amass the huge profits to be gained in these areas for them: thus the metal mines were given to a Dutchman, and the English traders were exempted from customs duties. This pleased the English greatly, and

ensured that Russian merchants were hard pressed to survive, and so made them stick to things that Russians were better at, like farming. In 1645, worn out by the pressures of government, and by failing to marry his daughter because he would not let anyone see what she looked like, Michael died.

## Alexis, Sophie and others: 1645–1689

There was a lot of confusion at Alexis' accession, because there were several other people pretending to be him, who fooled a lot of people, despite the fact that they had different names, such as Timofei and Vasily. One of the first things that Alexis did after ascending the throne was to conclude another perpetual peace with the Polish king Koleslaw IV, which lasted for several years.

In order to uphold the perpetual peace, Alexis needed a huge army. The nobles enjoyed this at first, because it meant they could charge their horses around showing off to the peasants, but then it was realised that this was not very effective in terms of actually winning battles, and so they had to learn how to fire cannon instead, which was much less fun. The ordinary soldiers had to learn how to march properly and they were given long and complicated books to help them, such as *Uchenie i khitrost ratnogo stroeniia pekhotnykh liudei*, or *The Drill and Strategy of the Military Formation of Foot Soldiers*, which were not terribly useful, as few of them could read.

Alexis' reign was notably revolting: some of the nobles revolted because he would not let them play at government, and the peasants revolted because he taxed salt, and they did not see why he should have any more than them just because he was Tsar. There were even some rather revolting expeditions to Siberia on which the explorers had to eat rotten carcasses to survive (without salt, of course). There were dividends from these expeditions, however, including tribute from the people living in Siberia called *iasak*, which was a bit like *sokhas*, except that ploughs were useless on frozen tundra, and thus were not employed.

One problem with laws in Russia was that no-one knew what they actually were, because no-one had thought to write them down. In 1649 Alexis corrected this oversight, and the *Ulozhenie*, or Code, was produced. This made absolutely sure that the peasants realized their place, by calling them serfs instead, and firmly put them In Their Place, where they stayed until 1861.

All these reforms cost a lot of money, so Alexis abolished the *sokha* in favour of the household, of which many more were extant. He also rationalised the system of local government: as well as the local *voevoda* or sheriffs, he also drew up *razriady* or districts, which made the map look much more complicated, and hence made Russia more credible abroad, as well as there being more administrators to collect taxes, and hence less revenue. He also realized that paying English merchants to be rich was not very profitable, and so made them pay duties, and stopped them from selling things, which meant that Russian merchants finally became a realistic proposition.

When he died in 1676, Alexis left the throne to his eldest son, Theodore, but he was a Sickly Youth, and did not get to the throne fast enough, as his half-sister, Sophie, beat him to it. She did not occupy the throne for very long, as Peter, who was bigger than her, soon pushed her off, although it took him until 1689 to do this, by which time Theodore had died. Ivan V was senior Tsar over Peter until he died in 1696. Neither Sophie nor Ivan did anything of importance whilst on the throne, both being too busy trying to keep Peter off. Thus arrived the most important Tsar for many years.

## Peter the Great: 1689–1725

The secrets of Peter's success were:

1. He was great (about 6' 7"), which helped a lot when telling people that No, he knew what he was talking about, and pushing them off thrones.
2. Peter was the first Tsar to realize that the government of Russia was essentially a farcical affair, and should not be taken at all seriously. To this end, instead of having a cabinet or privy council, he had 'The Most Drunken Council of Fools and Jesters' which consisted entirely of men who could drink almost as much as he could, and were much more successful at governing than their predecessors, and many of their successors.

Although Peter continued to expand the army, and indeed, created the War College and many schools to educate the officers, so that they could read the instruction manuals, his greatest contribution to the military was the founding of the Navy. In his youth, Peter had been to Holland to find out how to build boats, and he put his by now considerable experience into practice, so that by the end of his reign he had built well over 150 ships, employing between them in excess of 28,000 sailors.

Peter's reign was a time of great activity for the peasants (many of whom were now serfs), who were invited to collaborate in, among other things, the construction of Azov, the fortress on the Black Sea; St Petersburg, the replacement capital for Moscow which Peter was building; and many canals, bridges, and similar schemes.

By now it will be obvious to the observant reader that Peter had a mania for organisation. This was further expressed in a maniacal reshuffle of central and local government, consisting of a lot of renaming, and moving people around. Many historians claim that it was actually more effective this way, but these historians are probably bureaucrats themselves. Another project was yet another document called the Table of Ranks, which contained fourteen *punkty*, or points, of explanation, none of them in the least intelligible.

Despite the Tsars, the population of Russia had by now grown significantly since 1613, with a total of 7,570,376 souls and 15,577,854 people now inhabiting Russia. Most of them farmed in much the same way as they had done since long before 1613, growing rye, oats, wheat, barley, millet, buckwheat, peas, tobacco, flax, hemp, and other things; as before they still did not consume very much of what they grew.

Peter was much better at economics than his predecessors, and he actually got the balance of trade in Russia's favour during his reign. He also continued the good work with merchants and heavy industry, which thrived, though this time in Russian hands. All round, Peter was a Good Thing for the Russian economy, even if he was a bit of a show-off. He was a modernist, and brought Russia Up To Date. It is curious that, despite all the other amazing things he did for Russia, he is best remembered for his West Window.