

VOLTAIRE'S PORTRAYAL OF PETER THE GREAT

VOLTAIRE'S PORTRAYAL OF PETER THE GREAT IN
HISTOIRE DE CHARLES XII, ANECDOTES
SUR LE CZAR PIERRE LE GRAND AND
HISTOIRE DE L'EMPIRE DE RUSSIE
SOUS PIERRE LE GRAND

by

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TITLE: Voltaire's Portrayal of Peter the Great in Histoire de Charles XII, Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand and Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand.

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SCOPE AND CONTENTS: The purpose of this dissertation is to examine Voltaire's portrayal of Peter the Great in his three histories, Histoire de Charles XII, Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand and Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand, in an attempt to assess the degree of historical accuracy in his presentation and to determine Voltaire's attitude towards Peter.

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INTRODUCTION

Voltaire's interest in Russia dates from 1717, when as a young man, he saw the Tsar Peter I during the latter's visit to Paris. He wrote to Thieriot years later in 1759, saying: "Quand je le vis, il y a quarante ans, courant les boutiques de Paris, ni lui, ni moi ne nous doutions que je serais un jour son historien" (Best. 7627). Voltaire did not wait so long to write about Peter because he had already given a significant role to the Russian tsar in his Histoire de Charles XII published in 1731. He remained interested in Peter the Great and his achievements, and when in 1745, France and Russia renewed their diplomatic relations, Voltaire took advantage of the cordial situation to offer to write the history of Peter's reign. Although his proposal was rejected, he published anonymously in 1748 a portrait of the Tsar in a short work entitled Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand. In 1757, Voltaire was surprised to receive an invitation from Russia to write Peter's history. The political situation in Europe had brought about a change in the Russian attitude. Since 1756 war had divided Europe: Austria, Russia and France were in alliance against Prussia and England, thereby replacing the formerly predominantly English orientation in Russia with

one which was decidedly French.¹ One of the principal representatives of this "francoomania" in the Russian court was Count Ivan Shuvalov, Chamberlain and favorite of the Empress Elizabeth. Like most of the educated people in Russia, he was an ardent admirer of Voltaire. Voltaire was already well known in Russia and was to become "probably the most widely read, translated and published foreign author in Russia in the eighteenth century . . .".² When the Empress Elizabeth invited Voltaire to write a history of Peter's reign, it was not without knowledge of the author's influence. She was aware of Voltaire's popularity and recognized that it would be in Russia's interest to have a well known philosophe spreading the Petrine legend in a language understood in almost all the courts of Europe.³ Voltaire had a reputation for fighting against injustice, prejudice and intolerance; he introduced new ideas to the Russian reader in a clear and often witty fashion; he represented everything that the Russian nation was yearning

¹Václav Černý, L'Apothéose de Pierre le Grand (Prague: Editions de l'Académie tchécoslovaque des sciences, 1964), p. 16.

²Valerie A. Tumins, "Voltaire and the Rise of Russian Drama", Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, XXVII (1963) 1689-1701, p. 1690.

³A further indication of Voltaire's popularity with the Russian court can be seen in the generous support of both Elizabeth and Catherine for Voltaire's edition of Corneille's works in 1764. Voltaire encouraged Shuvalov

for: "Il était enfin le pontife du progrès, le terrasseur des traditions; quelle attitude pouvait être plus selon le coeur des élèves de Pierre le Grand?"⁴ Voltaire was more than pleased to accept the Empress's offer. He replied enthusiastically: "Vous me proposez ce que je désirais depuis trente ans; je ne pouvais mieux finir ma carrière qu'en consacrant mes derniers travaux et mes derniers jours à un tel ouvrage" (Best. 6843). Thus it was that Voltaire started to write the history of "l'homme du monde qui me paraît le plus savant dans l'histoire" (Best. 7281).

This study attempts to assess Voltaire's portrayal of Peter the Great in his capacity as a soldier in the Great Northern War, as a king, legislator and reformer of his country, and as a man of indomitable will, revered by foreigners and hated by his own subjects. This study will endeavour to determine the value of this portrayal and to investigate why it is of this nature. In an examination of these problems an attempt will be made to define development in Voltaire's attitude towards Peter. This thesis will be based on three of Voltaire's histories in which Peter the Great plays a significant role: Histoire de Charles XII

to urge additional subscriptions on numerous Russian aristocrats with references to the favorable comments he proposed to make in his Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand.

⁴Emile Haumant, La Culture Française en Russie 1700-1900 (Paris: Librairie Hachette et Cie., 1913), p. 110.

(1731), Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand (1748), and Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand (1759).

Before undertaking this study I intend to outline Peter's reputation in France up to 1725.

In the interest of simplicity, I have abbreviated the sources most frequently used for inclusion in the text of the thesis. The spelling of the French has been modernised on all occasions.

Anecdotes: Voltaire, Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand, in his Oeuvres Historiques, edited by René Pomeau (Paris: La Bibliothèque Pléiade, 1957).

Charles XII: Voltaire, Histoire de Charles XII, in his Oeuvres Historiques, edited by René Pomeau (Paris: La Bibliothèque Pléiade, 1957).

Histoire: -----, Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand, in his Oeuvres Complètes (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1878), XVI.

Best.: Voltaire's Correspondance. Ed. Theodore Besterman. 105 vols. (Geneva: Institut et Musée Voltaire, 1953-1965).

Florinsky: Michael T. Florinsky, Russia: A History and an Interpretation, 2 vols. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1953).

Lortholary: A. Lortholary, Le Mirage Russe en France au XVIIIe siècle (Paris: Boivin et Cie., 1951).

Oliva: L. Jay Oliva, Russia in the Era of Peter the Great (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969).

Sumner: B. H. Sumner, Peter the Great and the Emergence of Russia (New York: Collier Books, 1962).

CHAPTER I

PETER'S REPUTATION IN FRANCE UP TO 1725

Before the reign of Louis XIV, Russia and France had virtually ignored each other politically. The French held a patronizing attitude toward the Russians. They tended to think of Russia in terms of a mysterious land of perpetual ice and snow, located in a remote part of the world, clinging to its superstitions and oriental culture. The Russians were considered to be nothing other than barbarians and worthy only of contempt. Grimm, according to Lortholary, captured the sentiment of the average Frenchman of the seventeenth century when he remarked, in 1766, that "on était alors en France dans l'heureuse persuasion que tout ce qui n'était pas français mangeait du foin et marchait à quatre pattes. Cette opinion a duré fort longtemps, ainsi que la vanité et l'ignorance sur lesquelles elle est fondée".¹ France was not alone in this opinion. In his book Russia in the Era of Peter the Great, L. J. Oliva describes the condescending attitude the whole of Europe had toward Russian emergence:

¹Grimm and others, Correspondance Littéraire, Philosophique et Critique, ed. M. Tourneaux (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1878), VI, 466.

The emergence of Russia as a great European power seemed often to be treated by its Western neighbours as some unique event, different in nature from the emergence of other European powers and thus requiring some specially tailored explanation. Such special explanations have often proceeded from ideas of the monolithic quality of "western civilization" and of the unique or even oriental quality of Russian civilization. It sometimes seems that these explanations were rooted in a Western European ethnocentricity which considered it highly unlikely that a Slavic or Orthodox society could ever really raise itself by any inner resources to match arms and wits with the true tabernacles of civilization . . . (Oliva, 172-3)

Given France's attitude of superiority toward Russia, aggravated by the great distance separating the two countries, the establishment of cordial relations was not even anticipated.

As late as the end of the seventeenth century any rapprochement between France and Russia was impossible for reasons both political and personal. Politically, France's allies, Sweden, Poland, and Turkey were Russia's mortal enemies, and on a more personal level, the mutual antipathy which existed between Louis XIV and Peter I discouraged any attempt at rapprochement. Peter had very little use for the French. "I need", Peter is said to have declared, "the English on the sea, Germans on the land and Frenchmen nowhere."² He was far more interested in attracting

²D. S. Von Mohrenschildt, Russia in the Intellectual Life of Eighteenth-Century France (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), p. 10.

the Germans, Dutch and English, noted for their skill in ship-building and in the practical arts. The first Frenchmen in Russia under the rule of Peter the Great were a group of Protestants fleeing persecution after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes. In addition to this group, the only other Frenchmen were a few court officials brought to Russia in the capacity of tutors or as personal friends and advisors of the Tsar.

Russia's decisive victory over the Turks in Azov in 1696 was an important event in Peter's reign. It marked the end of the mock battles he used to stage between his play-regiments and the beginning of a serious military career which was to give Russia only thirteen months of peace over a period of thirty-five years. Peter's conquest of the Ottoman Porte was also responsible for precipitating Europe's interest in Russia and for deepening Peter's desire for a first-hand knowledge of the West.

His first trip to the West in 1697-1698 established a precedent: he was the first tsar to travel outside his realm on a peaceful mission. In addition to educating himself and the members of his party in the practical arts of ship-building, navigation, and engineering, the official purpose of Peter's journey was to effect an alliance with Western countries, notably England, Holland and Germany, against the Ottoman Empire. France was deliberately avoided on this journey; she was Turkey's ally, Russia's traditional

enemy and "the supporter of a rival candidate for the throne of Poland", and as such, Peter did not look for political cooperation from her (Sumner, 39). What is more, Peter gave as much importance to the fact that France had never corrected an error in diplomatic etiquette in which the Russian ambassador to Paris had been slighted ten years previously (Sumner, 40). Whether this lapse in courtesy was real, or whether it was a misinterpretation of circumstances due to cultural differences, is difficult to ascertain, but France remained out of Russia's favour for twenty years. Peter had very little understanding of European diplomacy; he had expected assistance with his war against Turkey, but he found western countries far too preoccupied with their own internal affairs, and with the question of the Spanish succession, to make any commitments with a country as little known as Russia. An alliance with Russia could involve Europe in a war in the Mediterranean lands which were so commercially advantageous to her.

Thus Peter returned without having accomplished his diplomatic mission, but he did manage to secure military and naval equipment, and to recruit hundreds of men to serve in Russia, many of whom were skilled engineers, doctors, architects and seamen:

He returned, moreover, with the ineffaceable impression of what wealth, trade, manufactures, and knowledge meant to a country in terms of power and prosperity. He had known at second hand that Muscovy was backward in these respects, but his journey to the West was a turning-point, in that

now he had a personal concrete experience of the material superiority of the West. At the same time he had an equally strong conviction that Russians could learn rapidly, to match the West. (Sumner, 42)

A serious attempt at political rapprochement came with Peter's visit to France in 1717. Having successfully terminated his wars with Turkey, Peter realized that to maintain his dominion, he would have to negotiate an alliance with a strong European power. Despite their former disagreements, Peter looked to France for this alliance. To strengthen the proposed relationship, he sought "to sound the attitude of the French court with regard to the possible marriage of his daughter, Elizabeth, to the young Dauphin, the future Louis XV",³ although at the time, Louis XV and Elizabeth were only seven and eight years old respectively. Peter failed in both his objectives. Unlike his first voyage to the West, Peter was now travelling to France as a powerful, internationally-known sovereign. But France had very little factual knowledge of Russia and this led her to maintain a defensive attitude and to greet with suspicion any overture on the part of the Russians. Despite subsequent diplomatic encounters between the two countries, and Elizabeth's attempt at a closer rapprochement with France during the Seven Years

³Ibid., p. 13.

War, Louis XV was convinced that an alliance with Russia was undesirable. He was unsympathetic toward Russia throughout his reign and for the most part seems to have remained uninterested and aloof in his correspondence with the Empress.⁴

The six weeks Peter spent in Paris made a formidable impression on the French. They remarked on his simple costume, his complete disregard for social etiquette, his impulsiveness, his amazing capacity for food, drink and revelry. For many Frenchmen the novelty of Peter's personality quickly faded. They found him "bourgeois", "fatigant", "né tout au plus pour être contremaître d'un vaisseau hollandais" (Lortholary, 19), and looked forward to his early departure. Members of the Royal Court adopted a predictably superior attitude: the Russian tsar was "un homme assez médiocre, parce qu'il portait toujours un habit brun et qu'il était assez mal coiffé" (Lortholary, 282). In the midst of this hostility there was a small minority able to see beyond Peter's external quaintness. One of these was Louis de Rouvroi, duc de Saint-Simon, a contemporary chronicler and one of the first "russophiles français" (Lortholary, 19). Although Saint-Simon was a member of the

⁴Ibid., pp. 17-18.

Court, and as interested in the niceties of diplomatic etiquette and social prerogatives as any courtier, he was far more politically astute than his contemporaries. He immediately grasped the political significance of Peter's visit and endeavoured to persuade the Regent of the importance of the sovereign France was entertaining. Saint-Simon was greatly impressed by the Tsar and reported his personal observations and impressions of Peter in his Mémoires. He described Peter in glowing terms as a prince comparable to the great men of ancient times, a leader who had won the admiration of his contemporaries and who would continue to win the admiration of generations to come.⁵ He recognized the Tsar as a man of keen intelligence and an insatiable curiosity which "atteignit à tout et ne dédaigna rien dont les moindres traits avaient une utilité suivie, marquée, savante, qui n'estima que ce qui méritait de l'être, en qui brilla l'intelligence, la justesse, la vive appréhension de son esprit. Tout montrait en lui la vaste étendue de ses lumières et quelque chose de continuellement conséquent".⁶ This high praise may have been, in part, a compensatory reaction to the general hostility shown toward Peter in Paris,

⁵ Saint-Simon, Mémoires Complètes et Authentiques (Paris: A. Santelet et Cie., 1829), XV, 74.

⁶ Ibid., XV, 81-82.

but it is more probable that Saint-Simon's sentiments were entirely sincere. He believed the French were wrong to mock the Tsar; he thought Peter's desire to form an alliance with France could only benefit all concerned. He wrote in his Mémoires: "Le czar avait une passion extrême de s'unir avec la France. Rien ne convenait mieux à notre commerce, à notre considération dans le Nord, en Allemagne et par toute l'Europe . . . on ne peut nier qu'il ne fût une grande figure en Europe et en Asie, et que la France n'eût infiniment profité d'une union étroite avec lui . . . En vain je pressais souvent le régent sur cet article . . .".⁷ Saint-Simon predicted the time would come when the French would "repentir . . . du fou mépris que nous avons fait de la Russie".⁸ Despite Saint-Simon's exhortations to the contrary, the Regent could not be persuaded of Russia's importance as a political ally. Although Peter's visit to France was an apparent failure, it did open the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations between France and Russia in 1721.

Peter's journey to the West was given much attention by men of letters who were attracted by the growing Petrine

⁷Ibid., XV, 94-95.

⁸Ibid., XV, 96.

legend. It was chroniclers and historians like Saint-Simon who were largely responsible for contributing to this legend by continually describing Peter as "un prodige . . . dont la singularité et la rare variété de tant de grands talents et de grandeurs diverses, feront toujours un monarque digne de la plus grande admiration jusque dans la postérité la plus reculée . . .".⁹ The idea of a ruler of genius who had both the wisdom and the strength to penetrate the wall of blind superstition and ignorance, who could change a barbarous nation into a civilized society by means of progressive legislation was congenial to those striving to bring about a change in the intellectual attitude of the nation.

No one was more willing to help establish this myth than Peter himself. He was aware that Europe considered Muscovy to be a barbarous country. In order to establish Russia as an emerging nation, it was first necessary for Peter, by means of careful propoganda, to change European opinion. This, in part, accounts for his strong desire for an alliance with France, not only one of the strongest political powers in the West, but also a nation whose language was known throughout Europe: "Il entreprend en Occident, particulièrement en France et en Hollande, une

⁹Ibid., XV, 93.

propagande, qui soigneusement entretenue, remplira tout le siècle. Que la Moscovie avant lui fût barbare, nul ne le crie plus haut que lui . . .mais il ne veut pas que l'Occident ignore ce qui s'est fait depuis, grâce à lui" (Lortholary, 16). Accordingly, Peter engaged an agent by the name of Postnikov, "chargé de prôner ses victoires et son oeuvre de réforme" (Lortholary, 16).

During his visits to the West, we have seen that Peter was as much concerned with recruiting skilled men to help further the advancement of Russia, as he was preoccupied with forming political alliances. One of the men he employed was the philosopher Leibniz, an ardent admirer of Peter. Before Peter, Leibniz had regarded Poland as the only stronghold between Europe and the barbarians of Asia. But with the rise of Russia under the new Tsar, he began to place his faith in Peter to stop the expansion of the Ottoman Empire. In a letter written after the battle of Poltava in 1709, he said:

The Tsar henceforth will attract the consideration of Europe, and will have a very great part in general affairsAs for me, who am for the good of the human race, I am very glad that so great a nation is putting itself in the ways of reason and order, and I consider the Tsar in that respect as a person whom God has destined to great works . . .I shall be charmed if I can help him make science flourish in his country.¹⁰

¹⁰L. Jay Oliva, Peter the Great (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 112.

Leibniz acted as an educational, legal and administrative adviser to Peter and supplied him "with memoranda, notably on an academy of sciences, reform of justice and government and various geographical and scientific projects" (Sumner, 80). By attempting to transplant European arts and sciences into a developing nation, Leibniz "contributed to the westernizing of Russian institutions" (Sumner, 80).

After the Tsar's death in 1725, the Petrine legend gained momentum. The more disagreeable aspects of his reign were quickly forgotten or, rather, deliberately ignored; Peter was acclaimed a "true Russian", "father of the Fatherland" and "most illustrious and most sovereign emperor and autocrat of all Russia".¹¹ Peter's reputation was further enhanced by a comparison with his immediate successors, Catherine I, Peter II, Anne, and Ivan VI, all of whom were decidedly unimpressive beside Peter the Great. His funeral oration delivered by Feofan Prokopovich, Archbishop of Norgovod, is typical of the uncritical admiration responsible for the elaboration of the Petrine myth. The Tsar was Russia's Samson, her Japhet, her Moses, Solomon, David and Constantine: "As he has shaped Russia, so will she remain: he has made her lovable to good men, and she will be loved;

¹¹Marc Raeff, (ed.), Peter the Great, Reformer or Revolutionary? (Lexington, Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1963), p. 76.

he has made her fearful to her enemies, and she will be feared; he has glorified her throughout the world, and her glory will not end. He has left us spiritual, civil and military reforms. For if his perishable body has left us, his spirit remains".¹²

The extent of the interest shown in Peter the Great throughout Europe, and especially in France, can only be comprehended by a careful study of contemporary literature. Peter was the hero of tragedies by La Harpe and Dorat;¹³ almost all of the political writers of the time commented on his reforms, and numerous collections of anecdotes were produced concerning the Tsar's eccentricities and personal habits.¹⁴ Two notable men of the eighteenth century, Fontenelle and Voltaire, both with a common interest in history and progress, presented similar views of Peter, Fontenelle in an éloge of the Tsar, and Voltaire particularly in a history of his reign.

¹²Ibid., p. 78.

¹³Dorat's tragedy Amilka: ou Pierre-le-Grand, published in 1767, aimed at glorifying Peter the Great and at proving, as he said in his introduction, that a king could be cruel in the interests of humanity.

La Harpe's tragedy Menzicoff produced in 1775, was apparently written to please Grand Duke Paul of Russia, La Harpe's correspondent. However like most eighteenth-century drama of a political nature, the plays met with mediocre success due to their historical inaccuracies, dramatic defects and their poor presentation of local characters and customs (Von Mohrenschildt, pp. 260 and 264).

¹⁴Von Mohrenschildt, p. 34.

In his Eloge du Czar Pierre I, Fontenelle described the country before Peter's reign: "La Moscovie ou Russie était encore dans une ignorance et dans une grossièreté presque pareilles à celles qui accompagnent toujours les premiers âges des nations".¹⁵ The country existed in "une extrême dépravation de mœurs et de sentiments",¹⁶ but under the enlightened rule of Peter the Great, Russia was lifted from her ignorance and placed on a level with civilized European nations. Peter "aura eu l'avantage de prendre tout dans l'état où l'ont mis jusqu'à présent les nations les plus savantes et les plus polies, et elles lui auront épargné cette suite si lente de progrès qu'elles ont eue à essayer; bientôt elles verront la nation russe arriver à leur niveau, et y arriver d'autant plus glorieusement, qu'elle sera partie de plus loin".¹⁷ Peter's genius had created a new nation and, for Fontenelle, his feat was all the more commendable because he had accomplished it alone, "sans secours, sans instruments".¹⁸ He considered Peter greater than the Roman emperor Augustus, for if the latter "se vantait d'avoir

¹⁵Fontenelle, "Eloge du czar Pierre I^{er}", Oeuvres (Paris: Jean-François Bastien et Jean Servièrre, 1792), VII, 163.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 165.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 191

¹⁸Ibid., p. 173.

trouvé Rome de brique et de la laisser de marbre, on voit assez combien à cet égard, l'empereur romain est inférieur à celui de la Russie".¹⁹ As secretary of the Academy of Science, of which Peter was made an honorary member shortly after his visit to France, Fontenelle's purpose in his Eloge du czar Pierre I was to honour the Tsar "en qualité d'académicien, mais académicien roi et empereur, qui a établi les sciences et les arts dans les vastes états de sa domination".²⁰ An éloge is not the occasion on which to level criticism at the methods Peter used to achieve these aims. But to ignore some of the better known incidents, such as the Streltsy Affair and the death of the czarevich Alexis, which had given Peter his former reputation as a ruthless barbarian, would have been suspect. Fontenelle does mention them briefly, careful to emphasize Peter's judicious nature. On the Streltsy uprising, Fontenelle explained that the Tsar "les cassa tous sans hésiter, plus sûr du respect qu'ils auraient pour sa hardiesse, que de celui qu'ils devaient à ses ordres".²¹ On the issue of his son, Fontenelle maintained that Peter's publication of the original transcripts of the trial "et la confiance avec laquelle il a fait l'univers juge

¹⁹Ibid., p. 194.

²⁰Ibid., p. 163.

²¹Ibid., p. 173.

de sa conduite, prouve assez qu'il ne se reprochait rien".²² Fontenelle wisely added, to still any further controversy: "Nous devons toujours nous souvenir de ne pas prendre pour règles de nos jugements des moeurs aussi délicates, pour ainsi dire, et aussi adoucies que les nôtres".²³ For Fontenelle, Peter's civilizing reforms began with the development of commerce: "Toutes les richesses, et même celles de l'esprit, dépendent du commerce".²⁴ It is for this reason that Peter opened Russia to foreigners: "Il attira chez lui tout ce qu'il put d'étrangers capables d'en apporter [i.e., les connaissances et des lumières] à ses sujets".²⁵ Fontenelle especially praised Peter's religious reforms which separated the Church from the State. Religion in Russia was in a deplorable state and "à peine méritait le nom de religion chrétienne".²⁶ In order to rectify the situation, Peter abolished the patriarchate and made himself supreme head of the Russian Church. He was then in a position to "retrancher aux églises ou aux monastères trop riches l'excès de leurs biens, et l'appliqua à son domaine. On n'en

²²Ibid., p. 196.

²³Ibid., p. 195.

²⁴Ibid., p. 174.

²⁵Ibid., p. 174.

²⁶Ibid., p. 192.

saurait louer que sa politique, et non pas son zèle de religion, quoique la religion bien épurée pût se consoler de ce retranchement. Il a aussi établi une pleine liberté de conscience dans ses états, article dont le pour et le contre peut-être soutenu en général, et par la politique, et par la religion".²⁷ This show of admiration by an influential writer, whom many of his contemporaries deemed the outstanding propagator of new ideas, established the Petrine legend in a definitive form for the best part of the eighteenth century. Fontenelle's Eloge presented Peter as the embodiment of an ideal of intellectual, political, social and economic liberation: "Tout le programme du siècle tenait dans cet éloge: refus de la tradition, tolérance religieuse, foi dans la science ou mieux dans la technique, regardée comme la source du progrès" (Lortholary, 23-24).

²⁷Ibid., p. 193.

CHAPTER II
PETER THE SOLDIER

For most seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rulers, foreign policy was often judged more important than the internal welfare of the state, and in this respect, Peter was no exception: "Wherever these monarchs of the early modern era aspired to centralize their states, to destroy the forces of internal opposition, to arrogate absolute power to the crown, and to protect themselves from their like-minded rivals, they found the army the traditional and most logical instrument with which to work their will" (Oliva, 54). Peter was aware that the reputation and the progress of Russia depended on the strength and discipline of the army. The foreign policy Peter inherited was largely determined by the geography and the historical development of his nation. The fundamental obstacle he had to surmount was Russia's lack of access to the West. If he was to wrench Muscovy from its mediaeval existence and transform it into a prosperous and enlightened nation, Peter realized he would require the benefit of western commerce and technology. To reach his goal, he had either to regain the Baltic coast from Sweden in the North, or overcome the Tatars who were blockading the Black Sea at the port of Azov in the South,

the only two practicable routes to the West. This necessitated a successful war based on the knowledge of the technical skills used by his enemies.¹

Peter's first introduction to these skills came with his contact with the Foreign Quarter, a suburb of Moscow purposely designed to isolate foreign diplomats and merchants from the rest of orthodox Russian society. The inhabitants of the Foreign Quarter retained their western traditions and maintained a lively interest in the politics of their native lands; they imported a variety of modern technical instruments and "received from abroad the journals of the period, books of science and history, novels and poems".² It was in the Foreign Quarter, "a nucleus of superior civilization",³ that Peter began his education in western ideas and European affairs, an education he was to pursue during his two voyages to the western world in 1697-1698 and 1717.

Peter had always had a predilection for soldiers, guns, ships and military history. When, as a young boy, his mother removed him from Moscow to the suburban village of

¹Oliva, Peter the Great, p. 7.

²E. Schuyler, quoted by L. J. Oliva (ed.), Russia and the West from Peter to Krushchev (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1965), p. 3.

³Ibid., p. 3.

Preobrazhensky to protect him from the plots of his half-sister Sophia who sought the title of Regent, Peter took advantage of his relative freedom from diplomatic etiquette and from the ceremony of the Russian court to develop his interest in military ventures. He gathered around him young men from all social classes to form toy regiments. He engaged his troops in elaborately planned military games, in which the manoeuvres were calculated beforehand, and a detailed account was kept of battle formations and camp positions. Peter's army was taught basic navigational and martial techniques, it experimented with different types of artillery and learned how to build fortifications. Members of the Foreign Quarter who lent their skill and direction to the organization of Peter's army were the Genevan, Lefort, Peter's close friend and advisor, and General Patrick Gordon, an experienced Scottish soldier "who as the Russian folk song has it, 'had fought in seven hosts, under seven kings'".⁴ As time went on, Peter began to take these military encounters more seriously, and the mock battles he used to stage were "tantamount to serious manoeuvres" (Sumner, 32). This was evidenced on one occasion when twenty-four soldiers were killed and fifty were wounded.⁵ These battles formed an

⁴Vasili Klyuchevsky, Peter the Great, trans. Liliana Archibald (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1958), p. 19.

⁵Ibid., p. 23.

important part of Peter's military education and served to prepare him for a thirty-five year reign in which "only one year, 1724, was completely peaceful; in all the rest it is possible to find only thirteen months of peace".⁶

Before Peter's reign there were very few regular troops in Russia. In the seventeenth century, the Muscovite army consisted of two groups of soldiers: a militia which was only summoned in national emergencies, and a standing army which was largely composed of streltsy. B. H. Sumner describes the streltsy as "part palace guard, part standing army and police force, organized in twenty-two regiments each about a thousand strong and stationed mainly in Moscow, . . . more addicted to armed outbursts than fitted for serious military operations . . . They were a hereditary, privileged force, recruited for the most part from the townsfolk, partly engaged in trade and handicrafts, living apart in their own quarters, an incitable hotbed of superstition, pride, reaction, and religious dissent" (Sumner, 19). It was commonly believed at the time that the organization of Peter's play-regiments was originally for his own amusement, but it is difficult to believe that his actions were wholly gratuitous or devoid of "political calculation" (Sumner, 32). It was Voltaire's

⁶Ibid., p. 58.

opinion that Peter's games were part of a well-devised plan to raise an army as a necessary means of protection against the intrigues of Sophia, as well as against the streltsy and the enemies of the State (Histoire, 446). "Ses premières tentatives pour former des troupes ne parurent . . .qu'un jeu. C'était pendant la régence de Sophie: et si l'on eût soupçonné ce jeu d'être sérieux, il eût pu lui être funeste" (Histoire, 444). Voltaire had only harsh words for the streltsy; he believed that "pour établir l'ordre en Russie, il fallait les casser; rien n'était ni plus nécessaire, ni plus dangereux" (Histoire, 421). The ignorance, traditionalism and rebelliousness of the streltsy was as abhorrent to Peter, the ruler who was striving to eradicate these very elements from his country, as it was to Voltaire, the champion of Peter's cause. Modern history is in complete agreement with Voltaire's opinion of this military faction. They were an undesirable and divisive community within Russian society and their mutinous conduct represented a "permanent menace to the government of the Kremlin" (Florinsky, 308). It was clearly time to reform the entire military procedure.

The organization of the army proved to be difficult and time-consuming; it was fully fifteen years before it was accomplished (Sumner, 55). Previously all the regiments were disbanded during times of peace, and recruits in the event of war were drawn from those men on reserve who had

military experience. This method was unreliable at the best of times, but when Peter began mobilizing forces for the Northern War, most of these reserves had since been depleted. Peter was forced to augment the ranks of the existing army with freed serfs, peasants and foreign mercenaries, and to rely on western officers for training: "Thanks to this recruiting system, the conscript units, so hurriedly organized and trained by Germans, were nothing more than conglomerations of worthless soldiers, recruited from the rabble . . .".⁷ The Battle of Narva was eloquent testimony of their total lack of military ability and the true beginning of Peter's concentrated effort "to raise, equip and train an efficient standing army" (Sumner, 55). Peter first reformed the method of recruitment; he extended the obligation to serve in the army to social classes hitherto exempt from military service.⁸ Now serfs, peasants, noblemen and clerics all served in the same regiment, a change which modified existing social relationships and bore out the Tsar's insistence on the value of merit over birth. Peter had already extended to foreigners the opportunity to

⁷Klyuchevsky, p. 79.

⁸Ibid., p. 84.

serve in the Russian army; in 1702 he published this invitation throughout Europe: ". . .we have endeavoured to improve our military forces, which are the protection of our state, so that our troops may consist of well-drilled men, maintained in perfect order and discipline. In order to obtain greater improvement in this respect, and to encourage foreigners, who are able to assist us in this way, as well as artists and artisans profitable to the State, to come in numbers to our country, we have issued this manifesto . . .".⁹ Despite these measures, constant conscriptions were required to fill the vacancies left by soldiers as a result of desertion, sickness, and death: "Under the system . . .in force it was the duty of the communities to supply a new recruit for every soldier who dropped from the ranks for whatever reason, the soldiers thus being 'immortal'" (Florinsky, 356). Enlistment was for a period of twenty-five years and conditions were such that one was fortunate to survive so many years. Klyuchevsky quotes Weber, an eighteenth-century historian, who reported that, "because of faulty organization, more recruits died from hunger and cold than in battle".¹⁰ Training programmes were evolved in

⁹E. Schuyler quoted in L. J. Oliva (ed.), Russia and the West from Peter to Krushchev, p. 9.

¹⁰Klyuchevsky, p. 82.

accordance with western models; discipline was rigorous and punishment severe.

In addition to effectively reorganizing the army, Peter is also credited with having created the Russian navy. Peter's interest in ships was not entirely unprecedented; his father, Alexis, had brought Dutch shipbuilders and carpenters to Russia with the idea of establishing a mercantile fleet in order to foster trade with Persia (Histoire, 443-4). This enterprise was never realized and the project was forgotten. Later, Peter's desire to learn how to sail, in the middle of a largely land-locked nation, seemed as fanciful as his military games (Histoire, 444). But Peter persisted; he had a vision of Russia as a maritime power of the future. He travelled to Europe to learn the art of shipbuilding from those countries which "excellaient dans la marine, qu'il regardait comme l'art le plus nécessaire" (Histoire, 443). A knowledge of this art later inspired the construction of shipyards throughout the land, as well as the founding of Saint Petersburg. The navy subsequently played an important role in the conquest of the Baltic coast, and established itself as an integral part of Russia's armed forces. Throughout his reign, Peter gave precedence to the requirements of his forces both on the land and on the seas, in an effort to build a military machine which "would serve as the primary force in unifying the population, repressing

internal resistance, and protecting and expanding the glory of the State" (Oliva, 55).

It was Peter's intention to instil in all his forces a devotion to the "interests of the State" (Sumner, 58). By posing as an exemplary ruler, and by raising himself from the lowly rank of an inexperienced bombardier in the Battle of Azov in 1696, to the victorious commander-in-chief of the Russian forces and "Father of his Country" in 1721, Peter gave "visible substance to the conception, new to Russia, of the tsar as first servant of the state" (Sumner, 33). His desire to experience every military position reflected a personal conviction that by raising himself through the ranks, he would gain the necessary experience to command his troops knowledgeably. It also reflected a personal preference to do everything himself, be it practising dentistry or building a warship. In Peter's words, "a monarch would feel ashamed to lag behind his own subjects in any craft".¹¹ Voltaire admired this principle; he believed it would encourage the Russian people to serve more willingly: "On n'osait refuser un maître qui avait donné l'exemple" (Histoire, 465). He further comments: ". . .par

¹¹Oliva, Peter the Great, p. 6.

cet exemple [Pierre] voulait faire sentir à toute la noblesse qu'il faut mériter les grades militaires pour en jouir" (Histoire, 453). Peter Henry Bruce, a military officer in the Russian service at the time of Peter the Great, noted in his memoirs that "the Czar took no notice of people on account of their high birth and family, but promoted merit in every station, even in the meanest plebeian, saying, that high birth was only chance, and if not accompanied with merit ought not to be regarded".¹² Voltaire had nothing but praise for this principle of rule by example. He followed with interest Peter's development as a soldier, noting each progression through the ranks, ". . .servant d'abord comme tambour, ensuite soldat, sergent et lieutenant dans la compagnie" (Histoire, 445-446). In 1767, eight years after Voltaire published the history of Peter's reign, a modified version of this idea was found in L'Ingénu. The main character, the Huron, outlined his requirements for France's ideal minister of war:

J'exigerais qu'il eût été lui-même officier, qu'il eût passé par tous les grades, qu'il fût au moins lieutenant-général des armées, et digne d'être maréchal de France: car n'est-il pas nécessaire qu'il ait servi lui-même, pour mieux connaître les détails du service? et les officiers n'obéiront-ils pas avec cent fois d'allégresse à un homme de cabinet qui ne peut que deviner tout au plus les opérations d'une campagne, quelque esprit qu'il puisse avoir?¹³

¹²Peter Henry Bruce, Memoirs of Peter Henry Bruce Esq. (Dublin: J. & R. Byrn, 1783), p. 182.

¹³Voltaire, Romans et Contes (Paris: Editions

This is not exactly the same thought that Voltaire presented in L'Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grande. In L'Ingénu the man in question is a minister, not a king, and his military training is to start with that of an officer, not that of a bombardier. It could be that, despite his apparent enthusiasm, Voltaire believed that Peter's rise through the ranks was somewhat ingenuous. Regardless of Peter's current rank, and his desire to be treated as a common soldier, he was inevitably recognized and given the respect his position commanded: that of the Tsar of Russia. Voltaire states that during the Battle of Poltava, although Peter, "n'ayant alors que le titre de maréchal général, et semblait obéir au général Sheremetoff, . . .il allait, comme empereur, de rang en rang . . .exhortant les capitaines et les soldats, et promettant à chacun des récompenses" (Charles XII, 163-164). However, Voltaire's modification of this idea more probably stems from the fact that he believed Peter's example was conduct more appropriate to Russia than to France. Voltaire has shown himself to be a relativist on more than one occasion. He did not believe in universal systems; he always considered the local situation. For example, in La Dictionnaire

Garnier Frères, 1960), p. 276.

philosophique (1764), Voltaire upheld absolutism as the most stable form of government for France, while at the same time endorsing autocracy in Russia. Voltaire realized that a system which works in one country is not necessarily either desirable or practical in another. It is our opinion that Voltaire was sincere in his approval of Peter's military education. He believed Peter's example was instructive and provided the incentive needed to inspire in all his troops a desire to serve the State.¹⁴

Despite the changes Peter brought about in the organization of the army and the rigorous training to which he subjected his troops, he had to wait for the experience of a war to transform his men into an efficient fighting force. The army faced its first test with two campaigns against the port of Azov which barred Russian access to the Black Sea. A war in this area necessarily included Turkey and Poland; Peter had inherited an alliance with Poland dating from 1686, which involved him in a rivalry begun twenty years earlier between Poland and Turkey for the Cossack

¹⁴In his Eloge du Czar Pierre Ier, Fontenelle finds Peter's example curious behaviour for a ruler but also remarks that it is not without merit: "Si c'était-là une espèce de comédie, du moins elle était instructive, et méritait d'être jouée devant tous les rois". Fontenelle, "Eloge du Czar Pierre Ier", Oeuvres (Paris: Jean-François Bastien et Jean Servièrre, 1792), VII, 177.

lands on the east side of the Dneiper river. These lands had changed hands a number of times since the division of the Ukraine in 1667, and in 1676 a full-scale war was waged between Muscovy and Turkey for their possession. No definite peace was agreed upon and in 1687 Golitsyn, chief minister to the Regent Sophia, failed in both his attempts to attack the Crimea. Thereafter Russia had remained inactive in the south despite the fact that her ally, Poland, continued to fight the Turks in an effort to drive them from the Polish Ukraine.¹⁵ It was not until Poland asked the Tsar for relief in 1695 that Russia resumed open hostilities. It was Voltaire's opinion that Peter recognized the trouble in the Crimea as, both an opportunity for his troops to gain first-hand military experience and a chance to acquire control of the Black Sea, thereby enabling him to renew his father's project of establishing trade with Persia: "Pierre profita de ces circonstances pour aguerrir ses troupes, et pour se donner, s'il pouvait, l'empire de la mer Noire Le projet était de chasser pour jamais les Tartares et les Turcs de la Crimée, et d'établir ensuite un grand commerce aisé et libre avec la Perse par la Géorgie" (Histoire, 450 and 452). Modern historians support Voltaire's judgment of

¹⁵B. H. Sumner, Peter the Great and the Ottoman Empire (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1949), p. 14.

the situation.¹⁶ B. H. Sumner offers an additional reason for Peter's interest in the area. He believed the Tsar hoped to suppress the "Zaporazhian Cossacks [who] were raiding heavily and brazenly insulting . . ." (Sumner, 35). Azov was strongly fortified and Peter's first attack was an unmitigated failure. Voltaire attributed the Russians' lack of success to their inexperience: "Tout commencement éprouve toujours des obstacles. Les Russes n'avaient point encore fait de siège régulier. Cet essai ne fut pas d'abord heureux" (Histoire, 45). Michael Florinsky in his book, Russia: A History and an Interpretation, says that "popular rumours fixed the responsibility [for this failure] on the the Tsar's favorite, Lefort, who in spite of his ignorance of military matters, was in his capacity of general and admiral among the leaders of both expeditions" (Florinsky, 336). Peter himself later admitted: "We were very boxed up . . .by multiple command" (Sumner, 36). Russia lacked experienced officers; nor did she have a fleet which could prevent reinforcements from reaching Turkey by sea.

Peter spent months after the first campaign laboriously preparing for his second attack on Azov. He had

¹⁶Refer to Bernard Pares, A History of Russia (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), pp. 82-83, and Klyuchevsky, p. 23.

engineers sent from Russia and Austria and began shipbuilding operations at Voronezh, a small town up the Don river, close to needed building supplies, but out of reach of Tatar raids.¹⁷ During the first campaign, the Russian navy, in the true sense of the word, was practically non-existent. Voltaire observed that: "Des barques longues, semblables aux saïques turques, construites par des Vénitiens, et deux petits vaisseaux de guerre hollandais, sortis de la Véronise, ne furent pas assez tôt prêts, et ne purent entrer dans la mer d'Azof" (Histoire, 450). However, the situation improved greatly for the second attack on Azov. Voltaire was able to report: "Il laissa trente-deux saïques armées devant Azof, et prépara tout pour former contre les Turcs une flotte de neuf vaisseaux de soixante pièces de canon, et de quarante et un portant depuis trente jusqu'à cinquante pièces d'artillerie" (Histoire, 452). Voltaire was clearly impressed by Peter's ability to create, from a few small boats, a fleet large enough to cause alarm in the Turkish ranks: "La Turquie devait être alarmée d'un tel armement, le premier qu'on eût jamais tenté sur les Palus-Méotides" (Histoire, 452). In 1696 Peter again lay siege to Azov and this time was successful in forcing the port to capitulate. He took

¹⁷ Sumner, Peter the Great and the Ottoman Empire, p. 18.

immediate measures to secure his victory by building harbours along the coast and by "a stream of edicts . . .for the compulsory colonization and fortification of the new acquisitions and the construction of Russia's first naval station" (Sumner, 36). Peter was overjoyed; it was Russia's first victory over the Turks. He arranged for a grand triumphal march into Moscow with the troops who had fought against the Turkish vessels leading the parade.

The Azov campaigns forcibly demonstrated to Peter his need for a first-rate army and navy, and these needs in turn prompted his first journey to the West. For Peter, Europe was the source of the technical knowledge, financial aid and the allies he required in his struggle against the Ottoman Empire. As we have noted previously, Peter's diplomatic mission failed to secure European aid against the Turks. But it was suggested to him on various occasions during his European journey that, rather than concentrate on the South, he redirect his policy from the Black Sea to the Baltic Sea. This idea was pursued in an interview Peter had with Augustus II, Elector of Saxony and elected King of Poland. Augustus' policy represented little more than an unscrupulous desire to ensure the continuation of his dynasty by recovering Polish provinces which had come under Swedish rule. Augustus was supported by a Livonian nobleman and refugee, Reinhold Patkul, who had been convicted of treason when he spoke out against Charles XI's policy of

reducing the land and privileges of Swedish noblemen (Sumner, 52). Patkul was sent by Augustus in 1699 to persuade Peter to join an alliance with Saxony and Denmark against Sweden. It had become increasingly clear to Peter during his European tour that, although he could find no one willing to support him against Turkey, there were a number of countries who would sympathize with Russia against Sweden. As he was nearing the end of peace negotiations with Turkey, he was receptive to Patkul's proposal. Peter secretly joined the coalition in 1699 on the understanding "that for Russia the object of the war was to be the regaining of the lost provinces of Ingria and Karelia, and that Russia would not declare war until she was assured of peace with Turkey" (Sumner, 52-3). This latter proviso was to prevent Russia from being involved in a war on two fronts at the same time. The possession of Ingria and Karelia was important for Peter, not only in terms of territorial expansion, but also as an opportunity for Russia to gain an ice-free port on the Baltic Sea; Russia could not hope to obtain any foreign trade until she had both an accessible sea-board and a fleet, an enterprise which was realized only after a twenty-one year struggle in the North. When the protracted negotiations with Turkey were finally concluded on August 18, 1700, Peter declared war on Sweden the very same day. In L'Histoire de Charles XII Voltaire explained Peter's reason for waging war with Sweden: "Il alléguait, pour raison de la guerre, qu'

on ne lui avait pas rendu assez d'honneurs lorsqu'il avait passé incognito à Riga [1697], et qu'on avait vendu les vivres trop cher à ses ambassadeurs. C'étaient là les griefs pour lesquels il ravageait l'Ingrie avec quatre-vingt mille hommes" (Charles XII, 85). Voltaire is being deliberately ironical in this passage in order to show Charles, the hero of this particular history, in a more favourable light than his rival, Peter I. In L'Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand, the emphasis changes from Charles to Peter, and the reason cited for the Tsar's action in L'Histoire de Charles XII is rejected for a more justifiable one: "Le czar Pierre pensait à se saisir de l'Ingrie et de la Carélie. Les Russes avaient autrefois possédé ces provinces. Les Suédois s'en étaient emparés par le droit de la guerreUne nouvelle guerre et de nouveaux traités pouvaient les donner à la Russie" (Histoire, 471). Voltaire neglected to mention, in L'Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand, Peter's obvious duplicity in his affairs with Sweden. At the same time that the Tsar was negotiating an alliance against Charles XII, he was assuring "the Swedes with protestations of friendship and the solemn reconfirmation of the previous Russo-Swedish treaties . . ." (Sumner, 53). In L'Histoire de Charles XII, this duplicity did not go unnoticed; in fact, Voltaire noted rather pointedly that: "Le jeune prince, [Charles], plein d'honneur, ne pensait pas qu'il y eût une

morale différente pour les rois et pour les particuliers" (Charles XII, 84-5). It is difficult to know whether the discrepancy in the two texts is due to a difference in literary style or in source material. Lionel Gossman, in his article "Voltaire's Charles XII: history into art", believes that Voltaire used his incomparable literary style to apply irony in order "to emphasize the theatricality of his hero".¹⁸ But by the time he wrote L'Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand, almost thirty years after L'Histoire de Charles XII, Voltaire's views on history had changed. His account of Russia at the time of Peter the Great reflects this change; the tone is more serious, the protagonist is not at all theatrical, and the text is better documented. This latter point suggests a second consideration for the discrepancy in the two histories. It is very probable that at the writing of L'Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand, Voltaire had considerably more information at his disposal, and that he was, perhaps, not even aware of Peter's real reason for waging war with Sweden when he wrote L'Histoire de Charles XII in 1731.

History has now proven that Peter entered this new alliance with Saxony and Denmark far too hastily. He greatly

¹⁸Lionel Gossman, "Voltaire's Charles XII: history into art", Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, XXV (1963), 694.

underestimated Sweden; despite the fact that all his defenses over the past five years had been directed to the South, he was confident that his troops, after their decisive victory at Azov, and subsequent training, were ready to challenge a European power in the North. He believed his allies to be strong and reliable and his adversary to be weak. All his conjectures proved erroneous. But "Peter was much too impressed by this new attention and much too willing to be brought into a common enterprise with [the northern monarchs] which would establish him as one of the new powers in the north" (Oliva, 59). Thus Russia entered a war, as Peter admitted twenty-four years later at the celebration of the Peace of Nystadt, ". . .blindly, with no thought of her own weakness or the enemy's strength" (Oliva, 59), a war which Peter believed would be a simple occupation campaign, but which, in effect, was to last twenty-one years and to place an incalculable burden on the Russian people.

The enmity between Russia and Sweden dates from the thirteenth century. During the reign of Ivan the Terrible (1558-81) Sweden, in conjunction with Poland, defeated Muscovy's attempt to expand westward by occupying Estonia. Later during the Time of Troubles (1598-1613), so-called for the social and economic upheavals which led to civil unrest,

a peace settlement between the two countries in 1583 forced Muscovy to concede more territory. Sweden received all the Russian possessions in Livonia, as well as the provinces of Ingria and Karelia which included all the land on the shores of the Gulf of Finland from Narva to Lake Ladoga. By 1700 Sweden possessed, in addition to the territories already mentioned, "western Pomerania . . .the port of Wismar in Mecklenburg, and Bremen and Verden lying between the Elbe and the Weser . . .giving her a dominating position at the outlets of both these rivers into the North Sea" (Sumner, 51). Sweden was the undisputed ruler of the Baltic Sea. During the reign of Alexis, father of Peter the Great, a short war was waged (1656-8) between Russia and Sweden for the control of Poland and Lithuania. Sweden was again victorious and the Baltic Sea continued to remain inaccessible to Russia. Thus it was entirely predictable that in 1700 Peter the Great would be open to the suggestion of war against Russia's traditional enemy. The time seemed ripe: Sweden was considered to be weak, drained of resources and man-power by her previous wars. Moreover, it was believed that a nation ruled by a seventeen-year old youth who, it was rumoured, spent most of his time playing "riotous practical jokes",¹⁹

¹⁹Pares, p. 189.

would easily succumb to the northern alliance. Even Sweden was apprehensive: "On avait raison de tout craindre sous un jeune roi qui n'avait encore donné de lui que de mauvaises impressions. Il n'assistait presque jamais dans le conseil que pour croiser les jambes sur la table; distrait, indifférent, il n'avait paru prendre part à rien" (Charles XII, 78). It came as a great surprise then, to both Sweden and the northern alliance, when "on le vit renoncer tout d'un coup aux amusements les plus innocents de la jeunesse. Du moment qu'il se prépare à la guerre il commença une vie toute nouvelle dont il ne s'est jamais depuis écarté un seul moment. Plein de l'idée d'Alexandre et de César, il se propose d'imiter tout de ces deux conquérants, hors leurs vices. Il ne connut plus ni magnificence, ni jeux, ni délassements" (Charles XII, 78-9). Charles resolved "de ne jamais faire une guerre injuste, mais de n'en finir une légitime que par la perte de [ses] ennemis" (Charles XII, 78). Voltaire portrays Peter's rival as a conquering warrior, a fearless adventurer and an intransigent ruler of insurmountable obstinacy possessing a fierce desire for personal glory and power: "Le seul moyen de le plier était de le piquer d'honneur: avec le mot de gloire on obtenait tout de lui" (Charles XII, 62). Charles is an attractive and dramatic figure; his history makes for interesting and often exciting reading. In a letter to Voltaire in 1749, Fredrick the Great remarked that "Charles XII a été le seul homme de tout ce siècle qui eût ce

caractère théâtral . . ." (Best. 3514). Voltaire recognized this quality and made full use of it to create a highly romanesque biographical history of Charles XII.²⁰ In any history dealing with the events of the Great Northern War, Peter the Great must inevitably appear, and in this the first of Voltaire's histories, Peter emerges as a character of considerable importance, all the more striking in contrast to Charles XII of Sweden. The Tsar, like Charles, was also a dauntless warrior and a man of indomitable will, but their aims were directly antithetical. Peter was more purposeful and constructive; he worked methodically and indefatigably to educate himself so as to transform Russia by practical reforms. Charles was a destructive monarch who drained his country by wars born of his personal ambition. Charles was a great hero but Peter was a great man. Voltaire based his comparison of these two rulers on their achievements rather than on their personal qualities,²¹ for although Voltaire deplored the Swedish king's desire to emulate Alexander and Caesar, he believed that "Charles XII avait en effet une valeur personnelle, dont aucun prince n'approche" (Best. 7090). Similarly he greatly admired Peter the Great as a prince, legislator and founder of the Russian nation,

²⁰See Lionel Gossman, "Voltaire's Charles XII: history into art", Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century, XXV (1963), 691-720, for a discussion of the romanesque aspect of L'Histoire de Charles XII.

²¹J. H. Brumfitt, Voltaire, Historian (London:

"mais on ne peut aimer l'homme" (Best. 1260). If Voltaire had had his way, he would have preferred both kings to be different: "Il eût été à souhaiter, pour le bonheur des hommes que Pierre le Grand eût été moins cruel, et Charles XII moins opiniâtre" (Charles XII, 299). Whatever reservations Voltaire may have had about the personal characters of his protagonists, there was no question in his mind as to whose activity deserved the most praise. In his correspondance of June 1759, he wrote: "J'aime les créateurs: tout le reste me paraît peu de chose. Je suis bien aise de faire voir que les héros n'ont la première place dans ce monde. Un législateur est à mon sens bien au-dessus d'un grenadier, et celui qui a formé un grand empire vaut bien mieux que celui qui a ruiné son royaume" (Best. 7633). By virtue of the task Peter the Great had set himself, Voltaire is able to portray the progressive development of the Tsar in his effort to achieve his goal. Voltaire uses Charles's destructive obsession with "la folie des conquêtes" (Charles XII, 55) as a device whereby he measures, and at the same time implicitly enhances the varied and constructive career of Peter the Great. It is interesting to note that Voltaire takes greater advantage of this device in L'Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand, in which he includes some disparaging remarks concerning Charles' cruelty and

pride, comments he neglected to include in L'Histoire de Charles XII.²² In doing this Voltaire does not alter his previously established portrait of Peter and Charles, but rather he changes its emphasis. By offering additional episodes of Charles' destructiveness in L'Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand (Histoire, 503 and 509), Voltaire is able to give even greater importance to Peter's achievements.

The war between Charles and Peter, the former, the formidable leader of the best army in Europe, and the latter, a mere bombardier in the inexperienced Russian ranks, started in a predictably disastrous fashion. Unknown to the Tsar, Sweden had already won an easy victory over one of his allies; Denmark had capitulated without a fight and had signed the Treaty of Travendal, pledging not to aid Sweden's enemies. Ironically Denmark signed the treaty on the same day that Peter received news of a Turkish peace and declared war on Sweden. Also unknown to Peter were Augustus's difficulties in Livonia; Augustus II had been unable to secure the support

²²These remarks are found in Histoire, 495 and 522.

of the Livonian landlords and had been forced to retreat from Riga. Thus Russia entered the Great Northern War ignorant of the fact that one of her allies had already been defeated and the other was in retreat. "It was the day when Muscovy unconsciously shifted from a peripheral role in a European coalition to the centre of the northern European stage" (Oliva, 60), a role she was ill-prepared to play.

Peter chose to attack the Swedish fortress of Narva, "a port of consequence at the junction of Estonia and Ingria" (Sumner, 55). He was confident that he could take the Swedish stronghold before Charles arrived but, after two weeks of bombarding the garrison, the Russians had used up nearly all their ammunition without reducing Narva to surrender. The Russian army consisted of 40,000 men, of which only one regiment had ever participated in a prolonged campaign. The rest were undisciplined, inexperienced recruits who had little confidence in their foreign generals. The scarcity of food, freezing temperatures and perilously low supplies caused a sharp decline in morale; desertion became commonplace. The Muscovite army was in a wretched position and stood very little chance against the seasoned troops of Charles XII. On the eve of the battle, Peter decided to leave for Novgorod and appointed a foreign general, Duke Von Croy, supreme commander of the Russian forces. A number of theories have been advanced in an attempt to account for Peter's hasty departure. Many of the Tsar's contemporaries,

especially Charles XII, thought his behavior was contemptible and charged him with cowardice. Others believed that he left to avoid the embarrassment of an easily predictable defeat. In L'Histoire de Charles XII, Voltaire describes Peter's conduct as "méprisable" (Charles XII, 86); he believed the Tsar's departure was unnecessary and seemingly resulted from fear: "Il fit alors un démarche qui l'eût rendu méprisable, si un législateur qui a fait de si grandes choses pouvait l'être. Il quitta son camp, où sa présence était nécessaire, pour aller chercher ce nouveau corps de troupes, qui pouvait très bien arriver sans lui, et sembla, par cette démarche, craindre de combattre dans un camp retranché un jeune prince sans expérience, qui pouvait venir l'attaquer" (Charles XII, 86). In L'Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand, Voltaire does not explain Peter's reason for leaving; he merely states: "Le czar, comptant sur la prise de la ville, était allé à Novgorod . . ." (Histoire, 471-2). This difference in the texts is another example of the way in which Voltaire changes emphasis in recounting an event to favor either Charles or Peter, depending on the history he is writing. The statement in L'Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand does not alter the historical accuracy of the events at Narva, but it does attribute to Peter a sense of optimism and confidence which was lacking in the account given in L'Histoire de Charles XII. This more positive portrayal of the Tsar before the battle of

Narva in L'Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand may well have been due to Voltaire's reluctance to offend Elizabeth, and later Catherine II, for whom he was writing the history of Peter's reign. This interpretation is suggested by Voltaire's personal correspondence, in which he tends to present a more outspoken point of view. In a letter to A. M. de Saint-Lambert, in 1760, Voltaire is of the opinion that neither the Swedish nor the Russians are to be commended for their actions at Narva. He accused Charles of imprudence and Russians of gross lack of discipline and misjudgment:

Je trouve que c'était une horrible imprudence d'attaquer cinquante ou soixante mille hommes, dans un camp retranché à Narva, avec huit mille cinq cents hommes harassés, et dix pièces de canon. Le succès ne justifie point, à mes yeux, cette témérité. Si les Russes ne s'étaient pas soulevés contre le duc de Croÿ, Charles était perdu sans ressource. Il fallait un assemblage de circonstances imprévues, et un aveuglement inouï, pour que les Russes perdissent cette bataille (Best. 8642)

It is now widely held, and corroborated by an entry in the Tsar's journal, that Peter left to hasten the arrival of reinforcements and to erect more fortifications.

The Swedes, numbering only 18,000, took the Russians by surprise on November 30, 1700 in the middle of a violent snowstorm and threw the Russian camp into total confusion. Voltaire described the disorder that ensued: "Chacun quitte son poste; le tumulte, la confusion, la terreur panique se répand dans toute l'armée. Les troupes suédoises n'eurent

alors à tuer que des hommes qui fuyaient. Les uns courent se jeter dans la rivière de Narva, et une foule de soldats y furent noyés; les autres abandonnaient leurs armes et se mettaient à genoux devant les Suédois" (Histoire, 473). In this carnage, Charles lost fewer than 2,000 men, killed nearly 6,000 Russians and took 10,000 prisoners (Oliva, 61).

The battle of Narva caused a great stir throughout Europe and had considerable consequences for Peter I and Charles XII. The prestigious reputation Peter had gained two years earlier at Azov was completely undermined by this humiliating defeat. Charles, on the other hand, believed too weak and too young to lead the Swedish army, had proven to be an extraordinary military commander: "Le roi de Suède, vainqueur en moins d'une année des monarques de Danemark, de Pologne, et de Russie, fut regardé comme le premier homme de l'Europe, dans un âge où les autres n'osent encore prétendre à la réputation" (Histoire, 474). His first taste of glorious victory gave Charles an unjustifiable contempt for his enemy and a totally exaggerated notion both of his own invincibility and of Russia's weakness.²³ The weakness of his judgement was borne out by future events.

Charles' gross underestimation of his rival led him to turn his attention from Russia to more challenging issues

²³Robert Nisbet Bain, Charles XII and the Collapse of the Swedish Empire 1682-1719 (New York: Books for Librarians Press, 1969), p. 78.

in Poland (Olivia, 62). His aim was to force Augustus II from his throne and to elect as his successor Stanislas Leszcynski. It was to Peter's credit that he recognized the defeat at Narva "not as dishonor, but as a stage in the development of his army and Russia herself".²⁴ Peter recorded in his journal:

It is incontestable that the Swedes won a magnificent victory over our troops, who were still only an undisciplined militia . . . this battle were better called an infants' game than a serious affair It is true, however, that this victory caused us great sorrow and made us despair of any happier success for the future . . . if we had won such a victory over the Swedes at that time, being so little instructed in the arts of war and politics, into what abyss might this happiness have led us? . . . We, after this terrible setback which was a true blessing in disguise for us, were obliged to redouble our efforts and to make up by our care and circumspection for our lack of experience. And it was thus the war continued²⁵

Peter realized the value of the time Charles had unwittingly given to him by engaging in political activities in Poland. In order to secure this much needed respite, Peter sent money and troops to support Augustus in his struggle to maintain the Polish throne. He then set himself the task of reconquering "Ingria, while holding the Swedes on the defensive in Livonia" (Sumner, 55). To accomplish this, Peter requested that all resources be made available for the service of the

²⁴Ian Grey, Peter the Great (New York: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1960), p. 179.

²⁵Oliva, Peter the Great, p. 26.

State. He ordered mining experts to produce new artillery and had all the church bells of northern Russia collected to be melted down and recast as cannon. He began building fortifications against the Swedish garrisons Charles had left along the Baltic coast; the Russian navy was transferred from the Sea of Azov to the Baltic and was to prove instrumental in the reconquest of Ingria between 1701 and 1704: "All these activities represented the mobilization of a war state, a mobilization which the commitment to the coalition in 1700 had not forced but which the defeat at Narva made inevitable" (Oliva, 62).

Peter had little trouble accomplishing the reconquest of Ingria. So assiduously had he carried out his military reform, Voltaire reports, that, "un an après la bataille de Narva, le czar avait déjà des troupes si bien disciplinées qu'elles vainquirent un des meilleurs généraux de Charles" (Histoire, 477). Charles had withdrawn most of his troops for his campaigns in Poland, leaving only very small garrisons to protect Swedish interests on the Baltic coast. Peter systematically attacked these forts, and in 1702, with the help of the Russian army, he captured the city of Noteburg on Lake Ladoga. Voltaire noted the significance of this capture: "C'était une entreprise bien plus importante qu'on ne pensait; elle [la forteresse de Notebourg] pouvait donner une communication avec la mer Baltique, objet constant des desseins de Pierre" (Histoire, 479). In May 1703, Peter

secured his conquests in northern Ingria by founding the fortress of Saint Petersburg at the mouth of the Neva river. The defeat of Ingria was made complete in 1704 when Russia captured the garrison of Narva in her first real naval victory. Charles, unwisely, paid no attention to the Tsar's activities and remained unconcerned about the loss of Ingria. He was confident that he would overcome the Russians in due time, a misconception which cost him dearly at Poltava:

"Charles les dédaignait, et depuis le jour de Narva [1700] il méprisait ses ennemis, et leurs efforts, et leurs triomphes" (Histoire, 480). Voltaire thought that Charles's activities in Poland were even less pardonable and more irrational than his imprudence at Narva in 1700: "Une faute plus impardonnable, c'est d'avoir laissé prendre l'Ingrie, tandis qu'il s'amusa à humilier Auguste" (Best. 8642).

He praised the constructive use Peter made of Charles's absence: "Pour lui, non seulement il commençait à être grand homme de guerre, mais même à montrer l'art à ses Moscovites: la discipline s'établissait dans ses troupes; il avait de bons ingénieurs, une artillerie bien servie, beaucoup de bons officiers; il savait le grand art de faire subsister des armées . . . bien plus, il avait formé une marine capable de faire tête aux Suédois dans la mer Baltique" (Charles XII, 124). Peter had effectively accomplished what he had set out to do, and finding himself without allies in 1707, he attempted to negotiate a peace settlement with Sweden. This

proved unsuccessful as Charles demanded that Peter surrender Saint Petersburg and the surrounding territories, a proposal the Tsar adamantly refused to comply with: "C'est alors que Pierre dit: 'Mon frère Charles veut faire l'Alexandre, mais il ne trouvera pas en moi un Darius'" (Histoire, 494).

Hostilities were resumed. Charles moved his campaign to Grodno, a town highly esteemed for its strategical position which allowed easy access to both Moscow and the Baltic provinces. Charles judged that a direct march on Moscow would be too dangerous at this juncture and accordingly decided to proceed to Mogilev to await reinforcements and supplies from Livonia. When these were not forthcoming he turned southward into the Ukraine, whose fertile soil would easily support his army. It was also in the Ukraine that Charles had the strongest hope of finding allies.

Mazepa, formerly loyal to the Tsar, to whom he owed his position as Hetman of the Ukraine, saw in Charles XII an opportunity for his small country to gain its independence by assisting the Swedish army in overthrowing Russian authority. In a secret alliance Mazepa promised to supply Charles with troops and artillery. When Peter finally learned of Mazepa's treachery he ordered General-Major Menshikov to storm the Ukrainian capital of Baturin before the Swedes could reach it, so as to prevent Charles from seizing the vast quantities of military supplies stored there. Mazepa fled to the Swedish camp. Peter had him

publicly excommunicated and hanged in effigy in every church in Russia (Histoire, 501). Charles was understandably shaken by this turn of events; he had desperately been relying on Mazepa's reinforcements, and now, here was his ally who "devait lui amener vingt mille hommes et des provisions immenses, mais il n'arriva qu'avec deux régiments, et plutôt en fugitif qui demandait du secours qu'en prince qui venait en donner" (Histoire, 500).²⁶ But Charles's pride would not allow him to withdraw from the battle; his reputation was at stake. The inflated opinion Charles had of his military prowess often led him to ignore the counsel of his advising officers: "The king thinks about nothing except war", wrote one of his generals; "he no longer troubles himself about the advice of others, and he seems to believe that God communicates directly to him what he should do" (Oliva, 61). Furthermore he was inflexible once he made a decision. He insisted on attacking Poltava, a small city on the Vorskla river, five hundred miles south of Moscow. Charles thought that a victory at Poltava would open the

²⁶There is frequent discrepancy in the figures that Voltaire gives in L'Histoire de Charles XII and L'Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand. In Charles XII Voltaire records that Mazeppa had promised 30,000 men as opposed to the figure given here as 20,000. Similarly in an encounter at Lesnaya in 1708, Voltaire attributes 40,000 men to Peter in Charles XII (p. 240) but reduces this number to 20,000 in Histoire (p. 499). During the writing of L'Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand, Voltaire was better informed on these military details, and the difference arises from Voltaire's failure to extend these corrections to L'Histoire de Charles XII.

road to Moscow after which it would only be a matter of time before he occupied the capital city and unseated the Tsar.

The climactic moment of the Great Northern War was approaching. It was generally believed by observers that this battle would decide the future of Sweden and Russia and have a considerable effect on the balance of power in Europe. Charles was the obvious favorite; the Swedish army had been victorious in all its endeavours during the previous nine years, whereas the Russians had known, for the most part, only difficulty and defeat. Voltaire describes Poltava as a decisive battle "entre les deux plus singuliers monarques qui fussent alors dans le monde . . ." (Charles XII, 161). In L'Histoire de Charles XII, he gives a very detailed account of the military action and devotes little space to personal commentary. In L'Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand the emphasis is reversed; the narration of events is subordinate to their analysis. However in both texts Voltaire's opinion remains constant; he supports Peter the Great because he is convinced that the Tsar is working for the good of his nation, but he is very critical of Charles' behaviour. Voltaire believed that Charles's determination to attack Poltava was the irrational decision of a desperate man: "Le siège de Pultava, dans l'hiver, pendant que le czar marchait à lui, me paraît, . . . l'entreprise d'un désespéré qui ne raisonnait point. Le reste de sa conduite, pendant neuf ans, est de don Quichotte" (Best. 8642). What is more,

"si Charles perdait une vie tant fois prodiguée, ce n'était, après tout, qu'un héros de moins, . . . la Suède enfin, épuisée d'hommes et d'argent; pouvait trouver des motifs de consolation; mais si le czar périssait, des travaux immenses, utiles à tout le genre humain, étaient ensevelis avec lui, et le plus vaste empire de la terre retombait dans le chaos dont il était à peine tiré" (Histoire, 506).

Peter appeared before Poltava with over 40,000 men; Charles' army did not exceed 22,000. From the beginning of the siege Charles "s'aperçut . . . qu'il avait enseigné l'art de la guerre à ses ennemis" (Charles XII, 160). The battle went very badly for Charles; his troops were no match for the numerically and now militarily superior Russians. The Swedes were utterly defeated and "Charles XII fut obligé de fuir devant celui qu'il avait tant méprisé" (Histoire, 507).

There was great rejoicing in the Russian camp at this unprecedented victory over the Swedes. Peter was exultant; he had defeated his mortal and reputedly invincible enemy. In his correspondence Peter wrote: "Now with the help of God the final stone in the foundation of Petersburg has been laid" (Oliva, 69). The whole of the Baltic coast was now securely in Russian hands. Poltava was an important battle and Peter was not long in recognizing its significance. He referred to it as "our resurrection" (Oliva, 69) and saw it as the vindication of the battle of Narva in 1700 where the

situation of the two monarchs had been entirely reversed (Florinsky, 342). The victory at Poltava served to confirm for Peter the emphasis he had placed on military organization and discipline (Oliva, 69).

For Voltaire,

ce qui est le plus important dans cette bataille, c'est que de toutes celles qui ont jamais ensanglanté la terre, c'est la seule qui au lieu de ne produire que la destruction, ait servi au bonheur du genre humain puisqu'elle a donné au czar la liberté de policer une grande partie du mondeIl n'y a point d'exemple dans nos nations modernes d'aucune guerre qui ait compensé par un peu de bien le mal qu'elle a fait; mais il a résulté de la journée de Pultava la félicité du plus vaste empire de la terre. (Histoire, 508-509)

Voltaire's statements are highly contestable. It is well known that the constant expansion of the Russian frontiers, the abolition of familiar customs and traditions, the internal class struggles, the secularization of culture, the incredibly heavy tax burden and the influx of foreigners and their western manners did nothing to win Peter the support of the people. Captain John Perry, an English naval engineer employed by Peter, wrote a memoir in 1716 entitled The State of Russia under the Present Czar.²⁷ Captain Perry observed

²⁷ Captain Perry's book was one of Voltaire's sources. Other sources he acknowledged in his correspondence were Strahlenberg's account, the English report by Whitworth, Algarotti's letters on Russia, D'Allainval's anecdotes and the memoirs of Rousset de Missy. In addition to these, Voltaire relied heavily on the material he received from Shuvalov, and information obtained from the Russian ambassadors in Paris (Von Mohrenschildt, p. 221).

that "it is certain, that not only the Cossacks, but the Russians too, who had before taken up arms in several places, and had been defeated, would, if the Czar had lost the Battle of Poltava, have made a general revolt in the hope of relief for their grievances complained of in the Czar's administration . . .".²⁸ Although the battle of Poltava had effectively put an end to a century of Swedish supremacy in northern Europe, it had failed to live up to the expectations of the Russian and Swedish people by bringing an end to the war. Their respective rulers were far too ambitious and stubborn to allow the war to finish in 1709. Charles' intention to excite Turkey against Russia, and to stage a comeback by invading Russia from the south, and Peter's "abounding overconfidence and desire to expand the significance of his victory as widely as possible" (Oliva, 69) led both their countries into another twelve years of misery and hardship before the Peace of Nystadt was finally signed in 1721.

Most countries were quick to appreciate that the emergence of Russia would considerably alter the balance of power in Europe. The nations which had previously refused to listen to Peter's proposal of an alliance against Sweden now lost no time in aligning themselves with the victor.

²⁸Captain John Perry, The State of Russia under the Present Czar (London: Benjamin Tooke, 1716), p. 27.

Russia was becoming less and less isolated and beginning to play an increasingly important role in European diplomatic circles. With his newly found power Peter forced Stanislas Leszcynski to flee to Pomerania and reinstated Augustus II as king of Poland. In October 1709 Russia concluded a military alliance with Denmark and Prussia and pressed forward to capture the remaining Swedish possessions in Finland and along the Baltic coast. By 1710 Peter had occupied Karelia, Courland and Estonia. But he suffered a major setback on the Pruth; the Turkish campaign of 1711 ended in an humiliating defeat for the recent conqueror of Charles XII. Peter found himself surrounded by his enemy without sufficient supplies or reinforcements. To avoid certain defeat, he was obliged to accept the Turkish terms of peace. He agreed "to return Azov to Turkey, to raze a number of adjoining fortified cities, to refrain from interfering with Poland and the Cossacks, and to grant free passage through her territory to Charles XII" (Florinsky, 344). Thereafter for the next few years Peter concentrated on consolidating his dynasty by proposals of diplomatic alliances and marriage to rulers in Germany (1712), Finland (1713), and France (1717). The death of Charles XII in 1718 finally brought the Great Northern War to an end. By the terms of the Peace of Nystadt in 1721 Russia gained possession of the Baltic coast from Riga to Viborg, the provinces of Livonia, Estonia,

Ingria and part of Karelia. The declaration of peace was joyfully received by the Russians. In their celebrations the Senate conferred upon Peter the titles of "Father of the Country", "Great", and "Most August Emperor of all the Russians" (Histoire, 612).

Despite its debilitating effect on Russia and Sweden, Voltaire believed Peter's part in the Great Northern War was basically useful to the nation, and therefore more excusable than Charles's actions: "Il faisait servir tous ses succès à l'avantage de son pays. S'il prenait une ville, les principaux artisans allient porter à Saint-Pétersbourg leur industrie. Il transportait en Moscovie les manufactures, les arts, les sciences des provinces conquises sur la Suède: ses Etats s'enrichissaient par ses victoires; ce qui de tous les conquérants le rendait le plus excusable" (Charles XII, 245). By establishing Russia on the Baltic coast, and by his frequent journeys to the West, Peter succeeded in expanding the frontiers of his empire both geographically and ideologically. Russia became increasingly active in European affairs; in fact, having taken over the hegemony of the north from Sweden, she was a power Europe could not ignore. Perhaps two of the most obvious results of the war were the modernization of the army and the creation of a Russian fleet. So as to form a more effective fighting force, Peter eliminated the dependence of the country on one particular group such as the

streltsy, and imposed the obligation of military service on every one of his subjects, thereby creating a centrally controlled army under the Tsar's command (Oliva, 76). Military and naval colleges were established to train new recruits and give lessons in basic navigational and martial skills. The Russian navy was little more than one of Peter's boyhood dreams in 1700. But by 1725 there were shipyards at Saint-Petersburg, Kronstadt and Olonetz: "The startling aspect of this naval growth can be appreciated if one recalls that in 1710 there had not been one Russian battleship in the Baltic, while fifteen years later the Muscovite fleet was larger than that of the Danes and Swedes combined" (Oliva, 76). By the end of Peter's reign the regular army numbered 200,000 soliders, not counting approximately 100,000 Cossacks and other native troops. The navy consisted of 28,000 sailors, 800 galleys, twenty-five men-of-war ships and numerous other smaller vessels.

We have tried to show Peter's growth as a soldier and his change of fortune throughout the war, either as a result of his own efforts, or of his confrontation with Charles XII, and it can now be seen that in all instances Peter's military development was inseparable from some attempt at reform within his nation. Peter's war represented more than just territorial expansion. It required the complete reorganization of his realm to achieve and maintain

military victory, but at the same time, it was the war which provided the inspiration and the impetus behind Peter's reforms: "As with other successful monarchs of his day, the organization for conquest lasted longer and with more significance than the conquest itself" (Oliva, 75).

CHAPTER III
PETER THE KING

The attempts of Peter the Great to repossess Russian territory forced him to the realization that the traditional sanctions of authority and previously accepted relationships between neighbouring states were changing rapidly; that if he valued the external security and the internal welfare of Russia, it was necessary to have a strong military establishment (Oliva, 55). But it was equally important to support that establishment with a form of government which would guarantee the sense of order he was seeking. Peter, not unnaturally, depended on his autocratic power as the Tsar to reconquer Russian lands and to accomplish domestic harmony.

A study of Russian history reveals that autocracy has long been Russia's traditional form of government; indeed E. N. Williams in his book, The Ancien Régime in Europe, refers to the autocratic form of the Russian government as its "most striking internal characteristic".¹ This concept of absolute power was part of the legacy of the Byzantine Empire to mediaeval Russia. Two and one half

¹E. N. Williams, The Ancien Régime in Europe 1648-1789 (London: The Bodley Head Ltd., 1970), p. 230.

centuries of Tartar domination² not only influenced the superficial organization of Muscovite society but were instrumental in transforming Muscovy from a country of independent principalities into an absolutist autocracy.

The autocratic system, both for the Tartar khan and later for the Muscovite tsar, was one in which the ruler shared his sovereignty with no one and his authority was free from all formal constraints. In this respect he was truly an unlimited ruler, but on the other hand, "the vastness of the Russian territory, coupled with the inadequacy of the means at the government's disposal, imposed on the tsar's power natural limits far more effective than any constitutions or consultative bodies might have done".³ The Tsar was recognized as the undisputed head of all government departments; however the definition of the functions of these departments developed only gradually in response to the demands of foreign policy and to changes within the Russian society itself.

After the fall of the Byzantine Empire the Orthodox Church of Russia transferred its allegiance from Constantinople to Moscow. Theologians hailed Moscow as the third

²Tartar domination of Russia lasted from approximately 1223 to 1480.

³Karamzin, Karamzin's Memoir on Ancient and Modern Russia, trans. and ed. Richard Pipes (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 13.

Rome and strengthened the newly established autocracy by preaching the divine origin of royal power. The Tsar was portrayed as a semi-sacred person who physically resembled other men but whose power was similar only to God's.

During the Time of Troubles, the period of civil unrest from 1598-1613, Tsar Michael Romanov used his autocratic power to suppress dissent forcibly within his country. Absolutism, then, was beginning to justify itself not only by divine right but also by the visible order it was bringing to Russia (Oliva, 11). By the late seventeenth century the autocracy was well established. The Tsar held undivided political, economic, military and religious authority: "Political, in that the Tsar was the only political authority; economic, in that he claimed ownership of the totality of the land; military, in that he led the country in war; religious, in that he ruled by divine right and was committed to maintain and defend the rights of Orthodoxy".⁴ Such was Peter the Great's inheritance: a form of government whose features he perfected to such an extent that his reign is now considered to represent the ultimate expression of Russian autocracy.

Although Peter realized that his authority as tsar was secured by tradition he also required the undivided

⁴Kochan, p. 36.

support of the army, the church, and the bureaucracy in order to exercise that power effectively. He accordingly undertook a programme of reform of the existing administration, part of which was directly aimed at further strengthening the autocracy. Not the least of these changes was to guarantee by legislation the extent and substance of the Tsar's power. The Army Regulations of 1716 stated that: "His Majesty is an absolute monarch who is not responsible to anyone in the world for his deeds; but he has the right and power to govern his realm and his lands as a Christian sovereign, according to his will and wisdom (Florinsky, 426).

It has already been demonstrated that Peter's insistence on compulsory service to the state, together with the formation of his own play-regiments and the elimination of the streltsy were important for the creation of a stronger and more centrally controlled army; these measures were equally instrumental in developing a stronger autocracy. Peter's concept of state service also extended to all social institutions; the church was no exception. His subjection of the church administration to the state allowed him, as the military commander, to use the church's vast wealth and large land-holdings to mobilize his country for war. State service and the centralization of government created a need for a bureaucracy to aid in the administration of an increasingly regimented society and was directly

responsible for the destruction of local autonomy and the breakdown of traditional Russian institutions. Allegiance to a particular group or community was replaced by a loyalty to the Tsar and to the country. Thus Peter's reform of the military organization, the subordination of the Church to the State, the creation of a bureaucracy, the insistence on compulsory state service, and the destruction of local autonomy and traditional loyalties all served to strengthen the power of the absolute sovereign and his centralized administration.

The reaction of historians to the nature of Russia's government has been fairly consistent from Peter's time to the present day: it was believed that the nature of the Russian people demanded autocracy; it was the only viable political doctrine in Russia's historical situation which could unite and restore the country.⁵

With specific reference to the reign of Peter the Great, Fontenelle, in his Eloge du Czar Pierre I^{er} (1725) defended autocracy and believed that Peter could not have accomplished what he did "avec une autorité partagée".⁶

⁵This opinion was shared by Feofan Prokopovich (1681-1736), archbishop of Novgorod and a strong supporter of Peter's government, Lomonosov (1711-1765), an important figure in the intellectual history of Russia, and Karamzin (1776-1826), the first Russian historian of importance.

⁶Fontenelle, "Eloge du Czar Pierre I^{er}", Oeuvres (Paris: Jean-François Bastien et Jean Servièrre, 1792), VII, 170.

And if this "autorité despotique, alors si légitimement employée, n'était qu'à peine assez puissante",⁷ it was because the Russian people were possessed of an implacable obstinacy. According to Fontenelle, Peter's use of extreme methods was justified because the people equated superiority with a show of strength:

Aussi, pour lier la nation à des nouveautés utiles, fallait-il porter la vigueur au-delà de celle qui eût suffi avec un peuple plus doux et plus traitable; et le Czar y était d'autant plus obligé, que les Muscovites ne connaissaient la grandeur et la supériorité que par le pouvoir de faire du mal, et qu'un maître indulgent ne leur eût pas paru un grand prince, et à peine un maître.⁸

Although Voltaire did not devote a particular chapter, or even a part thereof, to a discussion of the nature of Russian autocracy as such, we are able to gather his opinion both from remarks made in his histories and from his general approbation of Peter's activities. Voltaire realized that every nation must determine a form of government in accordance with its own particular historical situation. Thus, while he admired republicanism in Geneva and upheld absolutism in France, he did, at the same time fully endorse autocracy in Russia. He believed that autocracy was necessary to civilize a country which was still essentially primitive: "La population demandait tous les

⁷Ibid., p. 174.

⁸Ibid., pp. 174-175.

soins d'un législateur" (Histoire, 464). Voltaire praised the Russian system of government because it endowed Peter with the absolute power to enlighten a recalcitrant nation: "Le czar . . . avait dans tous ses établissements ce grand avantage de pouvoir, sans contradiction, choisir l'utile et éviter le dangereux" (Histoire, 603). Unlike the kings of Poland and England who were forced by the nature of their governments to negotiate with their subjects, Voltaire remarked that Peter the Great "avait l'avantage d'être toujours obéi" (Histoire, 473) and could therefore implement reforms and initiate military activity with greater speed and effectiveness than his European counterparts. But despite the advantages of the autocratic system, the possession of absolute power by a man as impulsive and as strong-willed as Peter the Great could, and often did, result in despotism. Voltaire was aware of the duality of Peter's nature; he was able to praise Peter's achievements as a reformer and a legislator, but his admiration did not blind him to Peter's periodic displays of despotism. Voltaire's portrayal of Peter in his histories revealed his ambivalent attitude to the Tsar. Peter is described as "un souverain despotique" (Histoire, 466), "roi mal élevé" (Anecdotes, 335) and "sauvage" (Charles XII, 76) and "un prince . . . éclairé" (Histoire, 466). Although Peter's despotism could not be ignored, Voltaire chose not to emphasize it and was quick to justify

the Tsar's harshness with the same argument Fontenelle had used almost thirty-five years earlier: Peter was dealing with uncivilized ignorant people and, in the circumstances, "l'extrême rigueur était alors nécessaire" (Histoire, 451).⁹ Voltaire was also careful to contrast the Tsar's despotic actions, necessary as they were, with his more redeeming features. Voltaire would have us remember that if Peter sometimes forced his people to obey by means of rigorous punishment he also obtained their cooperation by his exemplary behaviour (Charles XII, 73).¹⁰

Voltaire praised Peter's use of autocracy, which he considered, in the circumstances, to be enlightened; unlike other absolute rulers who sacrificed the lives of their people without accomplishing anything of lasting merit, Peter's exercise of absolute power, while also involving a measure of despotism, was far more justifiable because it resulted in an appreciably higher level of

⁹It is interesting to note that immediately following this comment on the necessity for despotism during the time of Peter I, Voltaire contrasts it with the clemency and indulgence which characterized the reign of the Empress Elizabeth, ruler at the time of the composition of the Histoire. In this way Voltaire honours both Peter, for having civilized the nation, and Elizabeth, for continuing her father's work. This is an essentially superfluous remark given that the context is a discussion of the Battle of Azov, but it serves to illustrate that Voltaire was not unaware at whose request he was writing the history of Russia; his integration of Elizabeth's achievements with those of her father, though very obvious on Voltaire's part, was nevertheless very diplomatic (Histoire, 451).

¹⁰Voltaire's use of contrast is also evident when

civilization for his nation (Charles XII, 245).

Modern historians are in agreement with Voltaire; they believe that autocracy was essential for Russia's development. E. N. Williams is of the opinion that without Peter and his rigorous autocracy, Russia would have fallen into a second Time of Troubles.¹¹ It is also interesting to note that Mikhail Shcherbatov, a Russian prince and historian, appointed by Catherine the Great to collect the private and public papers of Peter I, found, through mathematical calculation, that Russia would have required over 200 years in the most favorable circumstances, to obtain by her own efforts, the state of enlightenment she enjoyed at the time of Catherine II, without the autocratic rule of Peter the Great. Autocracy offered Russia the most effective way to preserve the integrity of her nation, both on the domestic and international level; it was needed to wrench the people from the past and to introduce them into the modern world. Autocracy represented an important phase in the country's historical evolution, one which Russia had "to pass through and master if it was to survive".¹²

he follows a discussion of the severity the Tsar used against the streltsy with an illustration of Peter's humanity and generosity on the occasion of Lefort's death (Histoire, 464).

¹¹E. N. Williams, p. 221.

¹²Roger Wines, (ed.), Enlightened Despotism: Reform or Reaction? (Boston: D. C. Heath & Co., 1967), p. 13.

It is to Peter's credit that he recognized that if he was to dispel the ignorance of the Russian people and to make of Russia a prosperous, powerful and enlightened nation, he would have to open the country to foreign influences. Peter never had a consistent policy of westernization. He was not a theorist but rather an opportunist whose actions were dictated by the exigencies of the immediate situation. He realized that the western world had something to offer and it was his intention to open Russia to all its intellectual and material resources.

Peter the Great was not the first to recognize the need for reform in Russia; there had been others before him who had tried to eliminate the inefficiency of traditional institutions by establishing new administrative departments, foreign embassies and a new code of laws. It is a misconception to believe that Russia was a cultural, commercial and political desert before the accession of Peter the Great, and it was Peter alone who had drawn his country into the arena of western civilization. The way had been partly paved by his father Alexis Romanov (1645-1676).¹³ Although

¹³During the reign of Alexis, wars with Poland involved contact with the West. Foreign technicians were called upon to organize industries and develop mines. An increasing number of diplomats and merchants were going to Russia and a colony of immigrants was established in Moscow in 1650. Contact with the Germans and the Poles introduced Russia to western art and music. Alexis had a German orchestra and allowed a theatre to be built for the presentation of biblical plays. He also permitted the importation of western furniture and French customs. See William and

it was largely due to Peter's domineering personality and amazing energy and strength of will that forced Russia to become part of the contemporary European system, it must be remembered that Peter's reforms would not have been as far-reaching as they were had contact with the West not been initiated by former Tsars.

Voltaire was an enthusiastic exponent of the view expressed, for the most part, by slavophiles and westerners who "agreed not only in extolling the personality of Peter but also in considering his reign as a turning-point in the history of the country, as a clear breach with the past" (Florinsky, 428). Voltaire virtually disregarded the social and political development of Russia before Peter. Despite his observation that "l'esprit de la famille de Romano fut toujours de policer l'Etat" (Histoire, 432), Voltaire gave very little attention or credit to Peter's ancestors for their contribution to the civilization of Russia. He tended to exaggerate the westernizing influence of Peter the Great; according to Voltaire, eighteenth-century Russia was the product of his civilizing reforms. Before Peter the Great Voltaire tells us that Muscovites were less civilized than the Mexicans when Cortez discovered them: "Ils croupissaient

Ariel Durant, Age of Louis XIV Part VIII (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963), pp. 375-6.

dans l'ignorance, dans le besoin de tous les arts, et dans l'insensibilité de ces besoins qui étouffait toute industrie" (Charles XII, 69). Thus Voltaire portrayed Peter as the founder of a virtually barren land; it was up to Peter to create a new nation and to lead Russia from the apparently eternal ignorance to which she had been thus far condemned (Histoire, 427). In a vastly oversimplified statement Voltaire declared: "Ils [les Russes] possédaient les plus vastes états de l'univers et tout y était à faire. Enfin Pierre naquit, et la Russie fut formée" (Histoire, 427). This portrayal of Peter the Great was essentially a manifestation of Voltaire's "great man" theory of historical causation. This concept is based on the belief that from time to time there exist men of extraordinary character and ability whose actions are responsible for changing or determining the course of history. Additional evidence of this view can be seen in the opening paragraph of the Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand: "Il y a grande apparence que toutes les nations sont demeurées grossières pendant des milliers de siècles, jusqu'à ce qu'il soit venu des hommes tels que le czar Pierre, précisément dans le temps qu'il fallait qu'ils vinssent" (Anecdotes, 323).

It was the requirements of the army, above all, which had first necessitated the hiring of foreigners, and had emphasized dependence on trade and contact with the

West" (Sumner, 19); it was also military motives which had inspired Peter's first journey to Europe and so, too, was military activity largely responsible for providing the impetus and direction for his reforms. L. J. Oliva reminds us that "Peter, intentionally or not, was a full-time warrior and Russia was first and always a war state".¹⁴ Although Voltaire grants that the war served to encourage Peter's reforms (Histoire, 455), he does not give the impression, as modern historians do, that the Tsar's military activity was the primary motivating force for the reorganization of the country. Voltaire would rather have us believe that the Petrine reforms were born of a desire to bring about a cultural change in Muscovy, "d'appeler les arts dans sa patrie" (Histoire, 443). In L'Histoire de Charles XII Voltaire ascribes no particular motive to Peter's decision for reform: "Son puissant génie . . . se développa presque tout à coup. Il résolut d'être homme, de commander à des hommes, et de créer une nation nouvelle" (Charles XII, 71). It is generally believed today that Peter's interest in introducing the benefits of western culture to Russia was secondary to his determination to acquire European skills and technology

¹⁴L. J. Oliva (ed.), Peter the Great (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 7.

needed to wage war successfully. In his notes for an intended history of the Swedish war, Peter confirmed the connection between his reforms and his military activity. He proposed that the "history was to contain a discussion of everything connected with the war, not only the measures taken to organize military affairs, but also civil and ecclesiastical affairs, as well as a study of industrial and commercial development".¹⁵ Because they were the result of military necessity, Peter's reforms did not follow a formal plan, and it was only after the Battle of Poltava in 1709 that he increased his legislative activity to make permanent the temporary innovations he had hurriedly introduced during the most strenuous years of the Great Northern War from 1700-1709. Although the reforms were not organized at the beginning of Peter's reign, they were united "by their contribution to the creation of a war state and by the principle assumed by Peter in propagating them, the concept of state service".¹⁶ Military reform was Peter's primary consideration and his endeavour to raise the necessary funds to recruit and equip men and to finance the war, eventually led to a reorganization of the national economy. The rest of the reforms followed inevitably.

¹⁵Klyuchevsky, p. 76.

¹⁶Oliva, Peter the Great, p. 10.

E. N. Williams remarks:

The directives that poured out of Peter's headquarters, whatever they happened to be -- whether they ordered new taxes, reorganized central and local government, further subjected the Church, dealt with mass education or economic planning -- all were designed in some way to intensify the call-up of men and money, or to improve the nation's capacity to produce them.¹⁷

Peter's increasing military obligations represented a constant strain on the state treasury. In an effort to secure the money necessary for the maintenance of the army, Peter abandoned his former method of collecting taxes from every household and imposed a tax on "every male irrespective of age and condition in every village, commune, or town inscribed in the census return" (Sumner, 143). The results of the poll-tax were in every way successful from the standpoint of the national economy; the revenue almost trebled. But its effect on the taxpayer was entirely negative. By extending the poll-tax to the entire servile population Peter effectively eliminated class distinctions among the peasants and brought them all under the control of the State (Florinsky, 364).

Voltaire makes very little mention of Peter's financial reform in his Histoire de Charles XII. It is

¹⁷E. N. Williams, p. 237.

understandable that Voltaire's account of individual reforms should be kept to minimum in a history which is primarily concerned with illustrating the fundamental antithesis between the destructive obsession with war of Charles XII and the constructive and progressive reform of Peter the Great. Thus Voltaire pointed out that Russia's real poverty lay not in her lack of money but in her lack of skilled men to help bring about the transformation of the country (Charles XII, 74). But it is curious, in a work of the dimensions of the Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand in which it was Voltaire's plan to "donner . . . une idée précise de tout ce que l'Empereur Pierre-le-Grand a fait, depuis son avènement à l'Empire, année par année" (Best. 6483), that fiscal reform should be discussed and dismissed in the space of a short paragraph (Histoire, 465). Voltaire states that Peter's new administration of finances met with some difficulty and that as a result, he was forced to try more than one method before arriving at a satisfactory compromise; but Voltaire neglected to elaborate on the nature of the opposition or to describe the financial system finally adopted by Peter. Nowhere does Voltaire specifically mention that inequitable assessment of taxes together with insufficient means to support the growing demands of Peter's forces placed an intolerable burden on the Russian people. According to B. H. Sumner,

three-quarters of the revenue in 1701 was allotted to the army and the navy; by 1710 this figure became four-fifths (Sumner, 141). In addition to direct taxation of individuals, Peter established a committee of "profit-makers" whose duty it was to devise new ways to increase the state revenue. As a result, new taxes were levied on a variety of items such as beards, caftans, baths, beehives and coffins. The State held monopolies on the production and sale of widely used items such as salt and vodka, with the result that "every aspect of Russian life was touched by Peter's continual drive to raise revenue".¹⁸ Whereas Voltaire did not indicate in the Histoire de Charles XII or in the Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand that any of Peter's reforms were deliberately undertaken for the purpose of increasing the state revenue, in his Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand he assumed a different attitude. Here Voltaire reported that, so as to obtain new funds, Peter opposed a religious law forbidding Russians to smoke tobacco: "Il manqua d'argent à Londres, des marchands vinrent lui offrir cent mille écus pour avoir la permission de porter du tabac en Russie . . . le czar prit les cent mille écus, et se chargea de faire fumer le clergé lui-même" (Anecdotes, 326). This is a rather humorous presentation of a reform which was not taken lightly by the Russian

¹⁸E. N. Williams, p. 238.

people,¹⁹ but it is typical of the tone evident in the Anecdotes. One has only to read Voltaire's account of Peter's reforms, "qui faisaient [ses] amusements" in Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand (329) to appreciate his irony and his use of caricature (Lortholary, 45). For example, Voltaire described the revolt of the streltsy as follows:

Il fut obligé de revenir en hâte à Moscou, sur la nouvelle d'une guerre civile causée par son absence et par la permission de fumer. Les strélitz . . . [furent excités] à la révolte par quelques abbés et moines, moitié grecs, moitié russes, qui représentèrent combien Dieu était irrité qu'on prît du tabac en Moscovie, et qui mirent l'Etat en combustion pour cette grande querelle. Pierre, qui avait prévu ce que pourraient des moines, et des strélitz, avait pris ses mesures. Il avait une armée disciplinée, composée presque toute d'étrangers bien payés, bien armés, et qui fumaient sous les ordres du général Gordon, lequel entendait bien la guerre et . . . n'aimait pas les moines (Anecdotes, 327).

All this information is true but Voltaire's clever use of language does not predispose the reader to take him seriously. On the other hand, the flippant tone of Voltaire's Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand allows him to point out Peter's inconsistencies and eccentricities without creating in the reader's mind the impression that he is seriously criticizing the Tsar. According to Lortholary,

¹⁹When Voltaire mentioned this incident in Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand, he remarked that "la permission que le czar avait donnée de vendre du tabac dans son empire, malgré le clergé, fut un des grands motifs des séditieux" (Histoire, 463).

Voltaire's portrayal of Peter in Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand is, "des trois portraits que Voltaire a laissés de son tsar . . . celui qui fausse le moins la vérité" (Lortholary, 44). Lortholary goes on to say that he believes that the tone of the work resulted from the refusal by the Russian court of Voltaire's offer to write the history of Peter's reign. The Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand was published anonymously in 1748; it is Lortholary's opinion that in this particular work one feels Voltaire "partagé . . . entre sa mauvaise humeur et le désir de ne pas diminuer son héros" (Lortholary, 44). There may be an element of truth in Lortholary's statement, but we are of the opinion that the discrepancy between the presentation of Peter's reforms in Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand and Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand was due, to a great extent, to the different audiences to which the two works were directed. The Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand was written for a largely French public, who, as we noted earlier, assumed that "tout ce qui n'était pas français mangeait du foin et marchait à quatre pattes".²⁰ Voltaire takes advantage of

²⁰Grimm and others, Correspondence Littéraire, Philosophique et Critique, ed. M. Tourneaux (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1878), VI, 466.

this attitude of superiority to amuse the French with the primitive nature and peculiar customs of the Russian people. The Histoire de l'Empire de Russie, on the other hand, was essentially written for the Empress Elizabeth, and later Catherine II, and Voltaire would naturally be reluctant to offend the monarch which had specifically requested him to write the history of their country. As a result L'Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand contains a few conciliatory remarks which Voltaire did not see the necessity to include in Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand.²¹

The increasing financial exactions created a need for administrative reforms which would facilitate the registration of all potential taxpayers and the subsequent collection of the money. Russia was divided into eight provinces in 1707²² in an effort to improve the existing centralized fiscal system. The primary aim of the provincial division was to make various tax-paying

²¹When Voltaire describes a custom peculiar to European readers, he will explain that "tout cela est éloigné de nos moeurs, et n'en est pas moins respectable" (Histoire, 429) or that "il ne faut pas juger des moeurs et des lois d'une nation par celles des autres" (Histoire, 583).

²²The number of provinces was increased to nine in 1711 and twelve in 1719.

districts responsible for the maintenance of its local military unit (Florinsky, 367). Provincial administrations were later entrusted with health, educational and economic problems. This apparent decentralization of administrative duties did nothing to restore local autonomy. Each province was ruled by a resident governor, personally chosen by, and directly responsible to the Tsar. Therefore, like the senate, the governors were instruments of the Tsar's personal power.

The senate was created in 1711 to compensate for the disintegration of central administration and to act as the supreme authority in the absence of Peter the Great. By 1715 the growing inability of the senate to cope with all the tasks of the former central administration could not be ignored. As western Europe had successfully shown Peter the technical skills and knowledge necessary for modern warfare, he again turned to the West for instruction in civil government. In 1715 he ordered an intensive study to be made of the collegial system of government, which was currently popular in a number of German states, Prussia, Denmark and Sweden. Voltaire mentioned in his Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand that Peter had collected a number of ideas and experiences on his voyages to the West and that he took "de ces différentes nations ce qu'il crut qui convenait à la sienne" (Histoire, 601). Unfortunately, one

finds no subsequent elaboration of the nature of the material that Peter borrowed from the West, nor is there a discussion of the steps that Peter took to improve the efficiency of his administration. Although Voltaire noted briefly in his Histoire de Charles XII that Peter had established colleges (Charles XII, 71), it is quite possible that he lacked the details necessary to discuss Peter's administrative reforms at any length.

The nine colleges Peter formed in 1717²³ were administered by an eleven-man council and usually included an experienced foreign adviser. There is no doubt that the colleges offered a more rational distribution of power than the old department system, but they did not last long. After the dismissal of most of the foreigners in 1722, the colleges took on the characteristics of the previous administration so that "the collegial boards for the most part functioned, in fact, as the tools of their presidents" (Sumner, 115). To complete the hierarchy of authority, Peter created, in 1722, the office of the procurator-general, the most powerful position in the country after that of the Tsar. It was the duty of the procurator-general to preside over the Senate and to supervise the

²³The nine colleges were as follows: "foreign relations; state revenue; justice; state control; army; admiralty; commerce; extractive industry and manufactures; and state expenditure" (Florinsky, 375).

administration of the colleges in an effort to search for possible sources of inefficiency and corruption.

In a further attempt to organize the population for state service Peter changed the existing social structure by instituting the Table of Ranks in 1722. The table was divided into military and civil classifications, each containing fourteen grades. Position in the Table of Ranks was based on merit rather than on wealth or birth. Both civil servants and soldiers started their service at the bottom of the scale and worked their way to the top. Civilians who reached the eighth rank and soldiers who attained the first were entitled to "the privileges of the landowning class, notably those of owning serfs and being exempt from the poll-tax" (Sumner 138). Voltaire is full of praise for Peter's reform of the social system: "Il n'y avait pas jusqu'à la société qui ne fût son ouvrage. Il régla les rangs entre les hommes, . . . sans aucun égard pour la naissance, ayant toujours dans l'esprit, et voulant apprendre à sa nation, que des services étaient préférables à des afeux" (Histoire, 602). The egalitarian spirit implied in this system was much greater in principle than in practice. In fact, wealth and birth were not completely disregarded and it was, generally speaking, difficult for men of humble origin to rise to positions of importance.

The Table of Ranks had a lasting significance;²⁴ government service became the prerequisite for social status and the source of property. What is more, it created a bureaucracy which owed its position to the Tsar and thereby strengthened Peter's autocratic government.

Other social reforms mentioned by Voltaire included the establishment of hospitals, schools and orphanages (Histoire, 481), and the improvement of the position of women in Russian society. Before Peter's rule, women were, for the most part, kept isolated from men, and it was unheard of for a man to see the girl he was about to marry before he reached the church. Furthermore, if the marriage was not a happy one, the husband was entitled to kill his wife, but the woman was not given the same right. Therefore, Voltaire tells us, "pour rendre les mariages moins malheureux et mieux assortis, il [Pierre] introduisit l'usage de faire manger les hommes avec elles, et de présenter les prétendants aux filles avant la célébration" (Anecdotes, 328-9). Voltaire thought this was very progressive legislation indeed: "C'est beaucoup d'introduire une espèce de société chez un peuple qui n'en connaissait point" (Anecdotes, 329).

²⁴The Table of Ranks existed with few changes until the revolution of 1917.

But it was Peter's decree which ordered Russians to wear German dress and shave their beards which met with the greatest opposition. "Western dress -- with the greater freedom of bodily movement it afforded -- became the symbol of the kind of transformation Peter wanted to bring about."²⁵ Accordingly, "on suspendait aux portes de la ville des modèles de justaucorps: on coupait les robes et les barbes à qui ne voulait pas payer [une taxe]. Tout cela s'exécutait gaiement, et cette gaieté même prévint les séditions" (Histoire, 468). One must disagree with Voltaire here; in fact, there was no gaiety involved at all. The majority of the people were steadfastly opposed to Peter's insistence on foreign dress, for the disappearance of their beards and caftans symbolized the destruction of traditional customs and beliefs.

War also dictated the development of industry and commerce. The production capacity of Muscovy's domestic industries could not cope with the needs of the nation's increasingly modern army. Importation of goods was made impossible both by strained international relations and by lack of Russian funds. The only solution was to expand

²⁵Marc Raeff (ed.), Peter the Great: Reformer or Revolutionary? (Massachusetts: D. C. Heath and Company, 1963), p. xii. In his Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand, Voltaire noted rather dryly that western dress and shaven faces soon became the fashion because "bientôt on aime mieux perdre sa barbe que son argent" (Anecdotes, 329).

existing industries and establish new ones with the assistance of foreign craftsmen. It will be recalled that one of the purposes of Peter's voyages abroad was to engage skilled artisans to serve in Russia. Peter continued this educational process by sending a number of young Russians every year to study a trade in the West. He gave priority to the production of munitions, arms, cloth for military uniforms and canvas for sails (Histoire, 594). After 1709, when the needs of the army and the navy were less urgent, Russia began to manufacture silk, glass, crystal, paper and bricks.

Peter was instrumental in establishing heavy industry in Russia. He encouraged mining and promoted explorations of Russia's natural resources. Voltaire observed that "les mines de fer furent exploitées mieux que jamais; on découvrit quelques mines d'or et d'argent, et un conseil des mines fut établi pour constater si les exploitations donneraient plus de profit qu'elles ne coûteraient de dépense" (Histoire, 595). The mines were evidently profitable; the number of foundries increased from seventeen in 1695 to fifty-two in 1725, thirteen of which were located in the Ural mountains, one of the richest and most important regions for the production of iron in Russia.

Industrial enterprises were initially owned and operated by the State. Even though some of these state

monopolies were later turned over to private entrepreneurs, they remained under strict state supervision and were obligated to the government for subsidies and tax exemptions. Peter's decree of January 1721 gave manufacturers the right to own serfs. This allowed factories to acquire compulsory labour from the servile population. At the time of Peter's death Russia had over two-hundred industrial enterprises, but, as was the case with many of the Petrine reforms, this progress was heavily paid for by the lower classes.

According to Voltaire, "le czar Pierre, en changeant les moeurs, les lois, la milice, la face de son pays, voulut aussi être grand par le commerce, qui fait à la fois la richesse d'un Etat et les avantages du monde entier.²⁶ Il entreprit de rendre la Russie le centre du négoce de l'Asie et de l'Europe" (Charles XII, 75). Before 1714 all foreign trade passed through the White Sea and the port of Archangel, but after the foundation of Saint-Petersburg Peter decreed that all foreign trade should pass through his new capital. He accomplished this in his usual arbitrary fashion: a combination of laws and economic inducements forced merchants to recognize the newly built

²⁶This statement is very reminiscent of Fontenelle's remark in his Eloge sur le czar Pierre Ier (p. 174) that "toutes les richesses, et même celles de l'esprit, dépendent du commerce".

Baltic port. Peter ordered a number of wealthy merchants to settle permanently in Saint-Petersburg (Histoire, 594); tariffs were lower for cargoes loaded there; and exportation of certain items such as hide, hemp, caviar, tar and potash were restricted to the new port (Florinsky, 394). Voltaire, aware of these inducements, was pleased to report that "ce commerce s'est accru de jour en jour et a valu plus d'une fois cinq millions . . . à la couronne. C'était beaucoup plus que l'intérêt des fonds que cet établissement avait coûté" (Histoire, 600). Under Peter's direction, Russia had established lasting commercial ties with Europe and had quadrupled her foreign trade. But in his discussion of Peter's industrial and commercial establishments Voltaire failed to take into consideration the human factor involved. The foundation of cities, the construction of canals and the operation of industries, which he so highly praised in the name of progress, were accomplished by the exploitation of servile labour. For example, during the construction of Saint-Petersburg alone, tens of thousands of peasants conscripted as labour, perished in the swamps at the mouth of the Neva river as a result of abominable working conditions. Apart from admitting in his account of the foundation of Saint-Petersburg in L'Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand that Peter lost

a great number of men due to disease, Voltaire gave no other indication of the conditions in which the peasants worked (Histoire, 483). This failure to present all the facts cannot, in this instance, be attributed to a lack of information. In Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand, published more than ten years earlier, Voltaire was very explicit as to the true price of Russia paid for Saint-Petersburg: "Des ouvriers furent forcés de venir sur ce bord de la mer Baltique, des frontières d'Astracan, des bords de la mer Noire et de la mer Caspienne. Il périt plus de cent mille hommes dans les travaux qu'il fallut faire, et dans les fatigues et la disette qu'on essuya . . ." (Anecdotes, 329, 330). Voltaire's failure to report on the more disagreeable aspects of Peter's reform can often be attributed to a genuine lack of information provided by Shuvalov, his Russian correspondent. However when it can be proven from information stated in his other books that Voltaire was fully aware of the subject he was discussing, and yet persisted in presenting an incomplete picture, he seriously compromises the reader's credibility in the historical accuracy of his work.

Although Voltaire has been known to vary his presentation of some of Peter's reforms, there was one area of the Tsar's work which received Voltaire's consistent approval in all three histories dealing with Peter the Great: reform of the Church. During the reign of Peter

the Great, a process of secularization effectively changed Russia from a church-oriented society to one dominated by the State and anticlericalism. Like Voltaire, Peter was "secular and rationalist by taste" (Sumner, 126); Voltaire was bound to praise a man with religious views similar to his own, all the more because Peter was in a position to change existing conditions and did so; "Les superstitions même furent abolies; la dignité de patriarche fut éteinte: le czar se déclara le chef de la religion; et cette dernière entreprise, qui aurait coûté le trône et la vie à un prince moins absolu, réussit presque sans contradiction et lui assura le succès de toutes les autres nouveautés" (Charles XII, 71-72).

Peter's western sympathies and his policy to reduce the Church to a state department provoked a great deal of resentment from clerical leaders. In 1700, when Patriarch Adrian died, Peter appointed no successor. Instead he created a secular department called the Bureau of Monasteries to control church lands and re-direct church income to the state treasury. In 1721, when Peter was ready to make some of his reforms more permanent, and also when the population had become used to not having a patriarch, he issued the "Spiritual Regulation" which abolished the patriarchate and replaced it with the Holy Governing Synod. The Holy Synod was based on the same formation as the colleges and as such was considered a government department,

subject to government scrutiny and approval. The duties of the synod "included the administration of the immense estates of the patriarchate and its dependent monasteries . . . and jurisdiction in all ecclesiastical and religious matters" (Sumner, 130).

In addition to the institutional reform of the church, Peter attempted a programme of education to combat the ignorance and superstition of the clergy, and the idleness of the monks. Peter's dislike of monasteries manifested itself in a number of restrictive edicts: monasteries with less than thirty members were dissolved; vacancies created by the death of monks were filled by former soldiers; and discipline was strictly enforced (Histoire, 605). Finally, Peter's campaign to educate young Russians in the western style and his establishment of secular schools undermined the Church's monopoly on the nation's cultural life.

Both Peter and Voltaire believed that superstition, "qui dans toute la terre, est un fléau si funeste et si cher aux peuples" (Histoire, 463) was largely initiated and fostered by the clergy. Voltaire pointed out in his Dictionnaire philosophique (1764), written during the same period as the Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand, that history was full of evidence that the

temporal power of the church had been harmful to the world²⁷ and that it had shown itself to be the major obstacle to the emancipation of man. Although Voltaire and Peter allowed the church to retain some measure of distinction, they both agreed that it must be restrained by secular authority (Histoire, 602). But what impressed Voltaire most was Peter's tolerance of other religions. The programme of reform that Peter had conceived for Russia involved borrowing ideas and men from the West, which in turn, "involved a large measure of toleration of other Christian religions . . . Peter, with his widespread and continuous recruiting of foreigners, had no hesitation in extending such toleration on the grounds of state policy" (Sumner, 127). Voltaire observed that Peter allowed everyone the liberty to worship God according to his own conscience as long as he did not neglect his duty to the State (Histoire, 425). In his description of Saint-Petersburg, Voltaire remarked that among the thirty-five churches, "il y en a cinq pour les étrangers, soit catholiques romains, soit réformés, soit luthériens: ce sont cinq temples élevés à la tolérance" (Histoire, 398). It was

²⁷Voltaire, Dictionnaire philosophique (Paris: Editions Garnier Frères, 1967), p. 355.

more than clear to Voltaire that Peter's ecclesiastical measures were conceived with the best interests of the State in mind (Histoire, 605).

Although Voltaire's Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand was quite successful, its shortcomings were obvious to his contemporaries. It was considered far inferior to Histoire de Charles XII and was severely criticized by the other philosophes. Diderot found it left no permanent impression; Grimm found it full of inaccuracies; D'Alembert was disgusted with Voltaire's work (Lortholary, 50-51); and Müller, a German academician, said in a review of the book that: "Il semble que M. Voltaire n'ait écrit son histoire que pour nier les faits les plus connus".²⁸ Even Russia was disappointed: according to Lortholary, "la déception fut vive à Petersbourg. La cour de Russie avait rêvé d'un monument grandiose. Elle jugea l'ouvrage étriqué et tout à fait indigne du Charles XII, dont il était comme la réplique et qu'il aurait dû éclipser" (Lortholary, 51).

Modern historians tend to agree with Voltaire's eighteenth-century critics. J. H. Brumfitt, in his introduction to selections of Voltaire's histories, accuses

²⁸Von Mohrenschildt, p. 224.

Voltaire of "a certain addiction to hero-worship"²⁹ which led him to overemphasize Peter's personal achievements and social reform. René Pomeau, in his introduction to Voltaire's Oeuvres Historiques, is of the opinion that the exaggeration and the errors present in Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand are a result of a lack of direct, first-hand knowledge of Russia. As it was, Voltaire was forced to rely on memoirs and manuscripts forwarded to him by the Russian government -- information which was often insufficient or incorrect.³⁰ But this does not completely excuse Voltaire's less than critical portrayal of Peter the Great in Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand. We have indicated that even when Voltaire did possess the information, he sometimes deliberately chose to misrepresent the facts to suit his view of history as well as to flatter his patron. Voltaire's presentation of Peter's reforms in Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand cannot be accepted as a true representation of the situation in Petrine Russia. He listed at some length both the indisputable improvements Peter brought to his nation, such as the establishment of hospitals and schools (Histoire, 481), and the more innocuous innovations such as the introduction

²⁹Voltaire, (edited by J. H. Brumfitt), The Age of Louis XIV and Other Selected Writings (New York: Washington Square Press, 1963), p. xxv.

³⁰Complaints about the adequacy of the documenta-

of uniformity into the system of weights and measures (Histoire, 594), but he makes absolutely no mention of the more controversial reforms such as the poll-tax which resulted in such a crushing fiscal burden for the lower classes. Although Voltaire tended to compromise his integrity as an historian in Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand his admiration of Peter the Great does not obscure his critical sense in Histoire de Charles XII and particularly in Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand. Although Peter the Great had proven that "progress could be legislated for reluctant peoples and that the forces of religion and tradition could be confronted and defeated",³¹ we can only agree with a remark made by Voltaire in Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand, which unlike the majority of Voltaire's remarks in Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand, closely approaches historical accuracy; it is that:

Si la Moscovie a été civilisée, il faut avouer que cette politesse lui a coûté cher (Anecdotes, 334).

tation being sent to him can be seen in Voltaire's correspondence: Best., 9370, 7443, 7270, 7049, 6645.

³¹L. J. Oliva, Peter the Great, p. 122.

CONCLUSION

Historical opinion has long been divided in its attempt to evaluate Peter's work within the context of Russian history and to assess his role in the shaping of early modern Europe. This disparity of opinion arises from the fact that each generation tends to assign a different order of priority to Peter's achievements, so that an analysis of Peter's reign is very often a reflection of the values of the particular historical period examining him.

The eighteenth century witnessed the emergence of "Muscovy", an uncivilized nation with an Oriental religion and culture, and an incomprehensible language, into "Russia", a civilized European power with a large measure of influence in the West. This impressive development took place in the incredibly short span of approximately thirty years. It is no wonder that Peter was considered the hero of Russian history, the first great "enlightened despot", a ruler whose genius replaced the superstitions and backwardness of an entire nation with reason, order and a civilization which approached contemporary Western standards. Certainly Peter's leadership and character were central to the emergence of Russia, but it is now clear that many of his reforms were based on

and shaped by traditions of long standing. The consideration that Muscovy was progressively evolving before the accession of Peter was often ignored by those who, committed to a particular view of society, wished to foster the myth of Peter as an instrument of social and political change.

In as far as his portrayal of Peter the Great is an affirmation of eighteenth-century values, Voltaire is guilty of fostering this myth. Voltaire "revealed himself as an eighteenth-century moralist, condemning the barbarity of the past, proclaiming the superiority of the modern world and affirming the reality, though not the necessity, of material and moral progress".¹ He believed in tolerance, and reason and he had a desire for greater social equality and political liberty. In his admiration of Peter the Great, Voltaire attributed similar qualities to him. It was Voltaire's preoccupation with the values of his own day, together with his glorification of the Russian tsar which were largely responsible for the accusations that, as a historian, he was exaggerating Peter's achievements. But this exaggeration was as much the result of Voltaire's conception of history as it was an affirmation of the prevailing intellectual attitude.

¹Voltaire (edited by J. H. Brumfitt), The Age of Louis XIV and Other Selected Writings, p. xvii.

It has been shown that Voltaire's ideas of history and progress owed much to Fontenelle.² In fact their opinions on historical issues are so similar that "many pages of Voltaire seem merely to fill in the gaps which Fontenelle's brevity had left or the prejudices of the time imposed".³ Both Fontenelle and Voltaire started by rejecting the fabulous elements of earlier history. History should have a rational foundation and should "give an account of the advance of culture and knowledge, and . . . understand the natural psychological and social factors and any other determinants which help to complete the tableau".⁴ If history is to be an instrument of edification it should emphasize the progress of ideas rather than repeat trivial details about the history of dynasties and military encounters. In a letter to Thieriot in 1735, Voltaire wrote: "Une écluse du canal qui joint les deux mers, un tableau de Poussin, une belle tragédie, une vérité découverte, sont des choses mille fois plus précieuses que toutes les annales de cour, que toutes les relations de campagne" (Best. 864). In their effort to stress the morally in-

²H. L. Edsall, "The Idea of History and Progress in Fontenelle and Voltaire", Yale Romanic Studies, XVIII (1941), 163-184.

³Ibid., p. 174.

⁴Ibid., p. 178.

structive aspect of history, Fontenelle and Voltaire proposed an examination of past errors "in order to guide the conduct of the present and to shape the future more wisely".⁵ In his Eloge du czar Pierre I^{er}, Fontenelle remarked: "L'histoire doit avouer les fautes des grands hommes; ils en ont eux-mêmes donné l'exemple".⁶ Voltaire qualified this opinion in his preface to Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand by insisting that only those mistakes which had a direct influence on public affairs should be recorded. Voltaire believed that an historian who deliberately exposed unnecessary details concerning the private life of a ruler was no more than "un faiseur de libelles, qui [vend] des médisances, et non pas un historien" (Histoire, 387). As an historian, he said: "Votre devoir est de démêler ce petit ressort caché qui a produit de grands événements; hors de là, vous devez vous taire" (Histoire, 387).

Voltaire's portrayal of Peter the Great relies heavily on Fontenelle's eulogy of the Tsar; both men believed Peter to be the founder of the Russian nation, a great legislator and creative genius, and to have all the traits of an enlightened sovereign. In this respect

⁵Ibid., p. 177.

⁶Fontenelle, "Eloge du czar Pierre I^{er}", Oeuvres (Paris: Jean-François Bastien et Jean Serviète, 1792), VII, 179.

Voltaire confirmed the Petrine myth and added to it by refusing to include in his history any information which would detract from the glory of Peter's reign.

Voltaire's portrayal of Peter the Great in his Histoire sur l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand was criticized by his contemporaries; it was generally felt that Voltaire's virtually uncritical adulation of Peter had distorted his presentation of the social and political development of Russia. Not only was it found inadequate as a history, but it was unacceptable as a popular work. It was considered inferior to the Histoire de Charles XII because Voltaire had failed to give a convincing portrait of his protagonist. His use of epithets such as "législateur", "créateur", "réformateur", "géomètre" are not sufficient to create a living image of Peter. In a letter to Voltaire, in 1759, d'Alembert criticized this aspect of the Histoire de l'Empire de Russie:

Il me semble que ne peindre en lui que le souverain c'est ne le peindre que de profil. J'avoue que vous aviez des raisons pour cacher une côté de son visage; et je sens que vous n'avez pas été tout à fait à votre aise; mais les lecteurs français qui ne connaissent la czarine que par l'argent qu'ils lui donnent, ne s'accrochent pas des ménagements que vous avez pour son père, et donnent au diable les souvenirs qui ne permettent pas de dire la vérité. Ce contraste de rusticité et de génie, de férocité et de grandeur, qui faisait le caractère du Czar, on s'attend à le trouver dans son histoire, et vous n'en avez donné que la moitié (Best., 7842).

Voltaire's failure to provide an accurate portrayal of Peter the Great can be partly attributed to a lack of reliable first-hand source material; he depended upon Shuvalov for a great deal of his information and it is natural that Shuvalov should refrain from sending Voltaire information on historical incidents which might show Russia in an unfavorable light. From the information Voltaire received from sources other than the Russian court, he was careful to present only the historical aspects of Peter's reign which were sure to meet with the approval of his patron, the Empress Elizabeth. It is our opinion that Voltaire's histories dealing with Peter the Great would be read more profitably in conjunction with his correspondence in order to obtain a more candid point of view, for it is in his correspondence that Voltaire often allows himself greater freedom of expression.

Although we cannot defend Voltaire's portrayal of the Russian tsar as an historically accurate one, we can, nevertheless, appreciate the literary merit of his work. The Histoire de Charles XII, unparalleled by even the most adventurous fiction, and his Anecdotes sur le czar Pierre le Grand, which according to Pomeau closely resembles Voltaire's contes philosophiques,⁷ make highly entertaining reading. His Histoire sur l'Empire de Russie sous

⁷Voltaire, Oeuvres Historiques, edited by R. Pomeau (Paris: La Bibliothèque Pléiade, 1954), p. 17.

Pierre le Grand, designed to be instructive rather than amusing, is interesting and informative (Histoire, 394).

Voltaire's Histoire de l'Empire de Russie sous Pierre le Grand was also important for the role it played as propaganda for Russia.⁸ It was one of the first extensive histories of Russia to be written. Furthermore, it had the distinction of being the first history of Russia to be written with the aid of original documents.⁹ Voltaire's admiration of Peter's achievements led him to introduce and to foster a cultural interest in Russia among his contemporaries, so that in the course of the eighteenth century, not only had France's attitude toward Russia changed "from complete indifference and hostility at the beginning of the century to an interested and friendly curiosity towards its end",¹⁰ but Voltaire's work on Peter the Great helped to establish and secure the Russian tsar's reputation as "le grand homme qui apprit de Charles XII à le vaincre, qui sortit deux fois de ses états pour les mieux gouverner, qui travailla de ses mains à presque tous les arts nécessaires, pour en donner l'exemple à son peuple, et qui fut le fondateur et le père de son empire" (Histoire, 626).

⁸Von Mohrenschildt, p. 224.

⁹Ibid., p. 220.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 235.

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