

## chapter 3

# Early Czarist Russia, 1380–1613



In 1380, the nation we know today as Russia was a small collection of principalities—Muscovy, Novgorod, and others—paying tribute to the Tatars. By 1600, it had become an empire under Russian rule and had expanded its borders far beyond its original size. It was to grow much larger over the next century, eventually encompassing one-sixth of all the land on earth.

The major goals of the early Russian princes and czars were fourfold. First, they wanted to break away from the stranglehold of Tatar authority. Second, they wanted to consolidate power into the hands of one absolute monarch, with a capital city as a central power base. Third, they wanted the central government to consolidate and control all the elements of society, from the boyars (hereditary nobles) through the peasants. Last, they wanted to expand the empire to both the west and the east for strategic and trade purposes.

Although present-day Russia has one foot in Asia, this was not the case in its early history. Historically and culturally, it is an Eastern European nation with its roots in the western portion of the country, in the area bordering Poland and Scandinavia. Russians are a Slavic people, like most Eastern Europeans.

Russian is written in the Cyrillic alphabet, not the Roman one used throughout the West. Therefore, the student may find variations, in both primary and secondary sources, in the English transliterations of Russian proper names and other Russian words. For example, both *czar* and *tsar* are acceptable Western spellings of the Russian emperor's title. In addition, Russian names are some-

times anglicized; for example, Pyotr becomes Peter and Yekaterina becomes Catherine.

## CHAPTER 3 OBJECTIVES

- Identify the early Russian principalities on a map.
- Trace the progress of Russian expansion under the early princes and czars.
- Compare and contrast government in Russia with government at the same period in Western Europe.
- Describe the major turning points in Russian history between 1380 and 1613.

### Chapter 3 Time Line

- 1380 Moscow defeats Tatars in Battle of Kulikovo; Muscovite expansion begins
- 1453 Fall of Constantinople to Ottoman Turks
- 1469 Ivan III marries Zoe, niece of emperor of Byzantium
- 1480 End of Tatar authority in Russia
- 1547 Ivan IV is crowned Czar of All the Russias
- 1598–1613 Time of Troubles
- 1613 Mikhail Romanov becomes new czar; dynasty will continue to 1917

## The Grand Principality of Muscovy

The principality of Muscovy, with the city of Moscow at its center, became the core of the Russian empire through a combination of geographical and political factors.

### Geography

Muscovy had no natural borders to define it, nor any geographical features such as mountain ranges to protect it from invasion. This explains its conquering

mentality: Moscow could maintain its position of power only by remaining constantly on the attack. Successful attacks gave the rulers of Muscovy control over major rivers, which were essential for transportation and trade. Conquering more territory also enriched the royal treasury because it meant a larger population paying tax to the crown. In addition, Moscow was unifying Russia by consolidating power into the hands of one prince.

## Politics

Moscow's ruling family, the Danilovitch, was abler and more shrewd than ruling families of the other principalities. As part of their policy of achieving a greater position of power in Russia, they arranged several important dynastic marriages to create alliances between Muscovy and the other principalities. Family connections, like territorial annexation, helped to unify the various states into one empire.

The Orthodox Catholic faith also served as a unifying force in the creation of the Russian empire. As Muscovy expanded far beyond its borders into sparsely inhabited territory, a shared form of worship helped to establish a sense of community and belonging. The Orthodox Church supported political unity among the principalities of Russia, because a strong central rule meant greater control over the people. Orthodox leaders saw political control as a useful supplement to religious control. By the 1400s, the metropolitan (head of the Orthodox Church in Russia, analogous to the archbishop of Canterbury in England) had accepted Moscow as the center of the empire.

## Russian Society and Government

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The Tatars, from the Asian lands we now refer to as Mongolia, invaded and conquered most of Russia under Genghis Khan in the 1200s. Under Tatar rule, the Russian princes had to pay annual tributes to the khan, but were more or less left to the details of governing on their own. Once the Tatars were overthrown and Moscow became the center of Russia, the Russian emperor was an absolute monarch—far more of an autocrat than any Western European ruler at this period of history. The emperor had advisers, usually drawn from the boyars (hereditary nobles) and the upper clergy, but these men had no power or privileges other than what the emperor chose to grant them. Nor did the Russian government have any form of popular representation. The emperor truly was the state.

The Russian climate and the geography were major obstacles to the formation of a prosperous mercantile middle class such as existed in Italy and other European nations in the early modern period. The countryside was bleak and barren and the weather was often bitterly cold; these factors combined to make travel difficult. Travel meant trade, and without frequent travel, trade did not become an important part of the local economy. Nor did Russia enter into trade or cultural exchange with the rest of Europe until somewhat later in its history.

With travel so difficult, and with the population as widely scattered as it was, a typical Russian estate provided for all its own needs. This contrasted with the economic system in Western Europe, where people either bartered or sold their surplus crops or livestock to obtain necessities and luxuries they could not produce themselves.

## The End of Tatar Rule

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Prince Dmitri, known to history as Dmitri of the Don, led the Russian army against the Tatars in the Battle of Kulikovo (1380). The Russian victory was a major blow against Mongol authority in Russia. The khan retained much of his power, but he agreed to recognize Moscow as the central Russian authority and to allow the princes of Moscow to appoint their own successors.

During the mid-1400s, the Khanate lost strength as the Russians gained it; by about 1430, the Great Khanate had broken into four smaller ones. On the Russian side, there was infighting among rival claimants to the throne of Moscow. By 1450 Vasili II emerged as the victor, declaring that only his own direct heirs would rule after him. This was a major step in the process toward unified central rule of Russia.

Vasili II and his successors carried out a policy of expanding the army by offering land to anyone willing to serve the state in the military. These land grants were made for life, and most of them could be passed on to the landowner's heirs. With such a powerful incentive, many men joined the ranks of the army; they included hereditary princes, boyars, and wealthy non-noble families. (In Russia, the title "prince" does not necessarily refer to the ruler of a province or a member of the royal family; it is a title of the higher nobility similar to the English titles "duke" and "earl.") Peasants and other commoners were required to serve their community in proportion to the local population.

## Ivan III

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Ivan III, Grand Prince or Grand Duke of Moscow, married Zoe (sometimes called Sophia) Palaeologos, niece of the Byzantine emperor, in 1469. Zoe's cultural and family background was to have a major influence on the style of the Russian court; with her arrival, it gained a great deal of ceremony and pomp. Ivan and Zoe made the Byzantine double-headed eagle the official emblem of the Russian state. By adopting this symbol, Ivan declared himself the last defender of the Orthodox faith, in the wake of the fall of Constantinople to the Turks and the failure to unite Orthodox and Roman Catholicism at the Council of Trent (see Chapter 2).

The real beginning of the history of Russia as a nation-state dates to 1480, when Ivan withheld the annual monetary tribute to the Tatars. This led to a confrontation of the Mongol and Russian forces on opposite sides of the Oka River. A stalemate resulted, as neither side seemed willing to begin the attack. In the end, the Tatars withdrew, ending the long period of Mongol authority in Russia.

With the Tatars gone, Ivan could assert his own authority as the supreme ruler of Russia, starting the tradition of autocracy that would continue until the Revolution of 1917. In 1493, for instance, Ivan forced the kingdom of Lithuania to grant him the title "Lord of All Rus." He also began using the title czar, a Russian form of *Caesar*. This had originally been a family name with no secondary meaning, but because the Caesar family ruled Rome for so long, it eventually became synonymous with *emperor*. Symbolically, the use of the imperial title reinforced Ivan's claim that he was descended from the Caesars and that after the fall of Constantinople, the New Rome, Moscow was "the Third Rome," the center of the world. Officially, however, he remained Grand Prince of Moscow.

Partly due to Zoe's cosmopolitan influence, Russia experienced a certain degree of cultural exchange with the West during Ivan's reign. Ivan established diplomatic relations with Western nations, and an exchange of embassies took place. Russians were curious about Westerners but also contemptuous of them because they were not Orthodox Christians. Europeans no doubt felt similar emotions toward the Russians, whose society seemed to them both more exotic and more primitive than their own. Ivan hired several Italian architects and artists, notably Petrus Antonius Solarius, to rebuild the Kremlin—the heart

of Moscow—with four strikingly beautiful cathedrals and the czar’s mansion ranged around a large open plaza, all surrounded by strong, fortified walls.

Under Ivan, Russia expanded into an empire more than three times the size of the original Grand Principality of Muscovy. Ivan III took control of Novgorod and its territories, which included vast tracts of land to the northeast and northwest of Muscovy. Vasili III, who became emperor on Ivan III’s death in 1505, added the Baltic province of Pskov and the province of Riazan on the Oka River. Access to these bodies of water was important for trade, since it was much easier to transport quantities of goods by water than over land.

Ruling a larger empire brought with it both advantages and disadvantages. A substantial rise in population meant a larger army and greater revenue from tributes and taxes, but a larger population was more difficult to control and monitor. A larger bureaucracy became necessary in order to take care of the routine of governing at the local level. Because most of the empire was geographically far from Moscow, a great deal of everyday authority remained in the hands of local officials, which of course invited corruption on a large scale since there was no oversight. Ancient Rome had also faced the challenge of ruling a large and far-flung empire; this attempt was successful because the Roman bureaucracy was highly efficient, with clear lines of authority and a chain of command. Such was not the case in Russia. The harsh climate made travel slow and difficult, the postal service was unreliable, and local officials were generally free to carry out their responsibilities (or not) as they saw fit, without any fear of inspection or reprimand by superiors.

## Ivan IV

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Born in 1530, Ivan IV succeeded to the imperial throne at age three. He became known in Russia as Ivan Grozny, which has traditionally been translated into English as “Ivan the Terrible.” However, this is a misleading translation; *grozny* means “terrifying” rather than “terrible.” The czar is more accurately called “Ivan the Formidable” or “Ivan the Awe-Inspiring.”

Because the new emperor was only a toddler, the boyars seized control of the administration. However, they could not agree on any chain of command or choose a leader among themselves; for a decade, Russia somehow functioned with total chaos in the capital city. Ivan proved his formidable qualities as soon as he turned thirteen; he asserted his authority in a manner that impressed everyone and convinced his subjects of his strength and determina-



tion. Four years later, he became the first Russian ruler to have himself crowned Czar of All the Russias. (Ivan III had used the title “czar” only in his private correspondence.)

Ivan’s early experience of the boyars taught him that they were unreliable; he believed, with justification, that they were likely to quarrel among themselves, conspire against him, and overthrow him if they could. This distrust of the boyars convinced Ivan that he must rule as an absolute autocrat. Rather than allowing the boyars to play any role in government policy, Ivan chose advisers he felt were personally loyal to him as the head of the state. Partly to counteract the boyars’ resentment and partly to protect his own place on the throne, Ivan also passed the first laws restricting mobility of the peasant class. Similar actions taken by his successors would eventually lead to their becoming serfs—the literal property of their noble landlords, with few rights of their own.

The policy of territorial expansion begun under Ivan III continued under Ivan the Terrible. Over a nearly forty-year reign, the czar conquered the last remaining Tatars and extended Russia’s eastern border far beyond the Volga River, taking over a swath of territory stretching from the Caspian Sea in the south to the Arctic Ocean in the north. With the Tatars finally crushed, the way was open for expansion to the Pacific Ocean.

Under Ivan, the large Russian army began improving in quality. His predecessors had enlarged the army but had not trained it. Under Ivan’s rule, military commanders created specialized divisions such as musketeers and artillery.

## The Fall of Ivan IV

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After a promising beginning, Russia’s strong czar collapsed during the second half of his reign. His behavior grew more and more eccentric and his decisions more strange. In 1581, he struck and killed his son and heir Ivan in a fit of rage in front of several witnesses. Historians believe that Ivan IV suffered from paranoia, severe mental illness, and possibly also a spinal disability that meant constant physical pain.

Everyone close to the throne could see that Ivan the Formidable was no longer capable of ruling, but there was no peaceful means of deposing him. Russia was an absolute monarchy with no legislative or representative assembly, no constitution, no balance of powers, and no apparatus in the government for replacing an unstable or incompetent czar.

In 1564, Ivan mapped out an area covering about half the czardom and decreed that he would rule this area as his personal absolute kingdom. He created a bureaucracy for his new realm, confiscated land and property at will, and dismissed and executed any authority figures he saw as a threat. Ivan also formed the Oprichnina, an organization of secret police whose members were called *oprichniki*. The *oprichniki* were officially civil servants; in fact, they were murderous thugs, responsible to no one but Ivan, with total authority to crush anything they saw as opposition to the czar's authority. The *oprichniki* would operate until 1572. Creating a climate of fear and secrecy, they proved ruinous to the stability of Russian society, and Ivan was finally persuaded to disband them.

## Time of Troubles

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When Ivan IV died in 1584, he was succeeded by his son Feodor I. Feodor was mentally simple and childlike, incapable of governing; he was glad to hand his responsibilities over to his able brother-in-law Boris Godunov, who ruled in fact although not in name.

Feodor died in 1598. Hereditary rule had been the law in Russia since 1450, but since Feodor was the last of his family, a successor would have to be chosen by other authority figures. A council of six hundred boyars, clergy, and military officers elected Boris Godunov. His election began an era known in Russian history as the Time of Troubles. Although Boris was an intelligent and capable ruler, he had many enemies and was not popular among his subjects. For one thing, he had been an *oprichnik* and his wife was the daughter of the leader of this feared and hated gang; for another, many people suspected him of having murdered Feodor's younger brother Dmitri, who had been discovered stabbed to death in 1591 in a mystery that historians have yet to solve. In addition, the boyars opposed Boris's plans to reorganize the administration and make it more efficient. They preferred to cling to the privileges and personal advantages they enjoyed in an inefficient system.

The Time of Troubles was a period of chaos on many levels. First, there was social unrest within the Russian population. Second, there was a struggle for power among a variety of candidates for the throne. Third, fighting broke out among the armies of Sweden, Poland, and Russia as part of the struggle over who would rule the empire.



## Social Unrest

In 1597, Boris issued a ukase, or royal edict, restricting the liberty peasants to move freely throughout the empire. In 1601, however, crop failure resulted in famine that caused thousands of peasants to defy the ukase, since remaining on barren land was tantamount to a death sentence. Many peasants roamed the countryside looking for food; others moved into towns and cities looking for work that would pay wages. By 1603, there was widespread social unrest; the czar had to muster the army to put down rebellion among the peasants and other members of the poorer classes.

## The Struggle for Power

After the death of Feodor, Russia reverted to the days before Vasili II, when power was taken by violence and conquest rather than inheritance. Boris Godunov was a duly elected regent, but despite his intelligence and undoubted administrative ability, he was unable to unify and control the diverse elements within his realm. The situation was ripe for the appearance of a strong leader, but although several men tried to grab power, none could hold on to it.

In 1601, the first claimant appeared, declaring that he was Dmitri, Feodor I's younger brother. According to his story, the body identified in 1591 as Dmitri's had been someone else's; he, the real Dmitri, had been smuggled out of Russia and grown up in safety. The claim was false; historians believe the False Dmitri to have been a Russian nobleman. Whoever he really was, the False Dmitri won the support of the Polish army by promising to turn over some territory to King Zygmunt III on his accession to the Russian throne. Despite a triumphal march into Moscow two months after Godunov's death in 1605, with thousands of Poles and Cossacks in his train, the False Dmitri could not maintain power, and the boyars, who had never believed his claim of royal birth, murdered him in 1606. The boyar Vasili Shiuskii then assumed power, with the support of his fellow nobles, but although he did succeed in putting down a major peasant uprising, he was eventually forced out.

## The Invasions from the West

In 1607, a second False Dmitri appeared, again from Poland. Poland invaded Russia with the new claimant and soon established a rival Russian government in the Upper Volga region. The early success of this group forced Shiuskii to summon Swedish mercenaries to help him put it down. However, Shiuskii soon

found himself trying to fight both the Poles and the Swedes, both of whom saw strategic advantages to be gained by opposing rather than supporting him. Poland and Russia began discussing the possibility of a Polish czar in exchange for an end to the fighting, but there were loud outcries of anger in the Orthodox Church against this plan, since the Poles were not Orthodox. In the end, a national uprising led to the election of a new Russian czar, the sixteen-year-old boyar Mikhail Romanov, in 1613. His direct heirs would rule Russia until the Revolution of 1917.

## QUIZ

- \_\_\_\_\_ was a key factor in preventing the rise of a prosperous mercantile class in Russia.
  - Orthodoxy
  - Geography
  - Politics
  - Absolutism
- Boris Godunov contrasted with his predecessor czars because**
  - he was chosen by election.
  - he was a capable and strong leader.
  - he drove the Tatars out of Russia.
  - he tried to establish control over the boyars.
- Many Russian nobles joined the military in the 1400s because**
  - they believed it was their duty.
  - they were eager to show their loyalty to the throne.
  - they were required by law to serve.
  - they were given hereditary titles to land.
- Which of the following describes one result of contact with Western Europe under the early czars?**
  - The Russian military was greatly expanded.
  - The Moscow Kremlin was rebuilt with striking works of architecture.
  - Russian citizens began to have a greater voice in their government.
  - The Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches were reunited under one pope.

5. Which best describes the Russian government under the early czars?
- A. a constitutional monarchy
  - B. an oligarchy of aristocrats and clergy
  - C. an absolute monarchy
  - D. a parliamentary democracy
6. Despite his mental instability, Ivan IV continued to rule because
- A. he remained stronger than any of the rival claimants to the throne.
  - B. the Orthodox Church remained loyal to him.
  - C. he murdered his son and heir.
  - D. the system of government contained no procedure to remove a monarch from office.
7. One major cause of Boris Godunov's unpopularity was
- A. his having served in the *oprichniki*.
  - B. his status as Czar Feodor's brother-in-law.
  - C. his weakness and indecisiveness in matters of policy.
  - D. his refusal to consult the boyars in affairs of state.
8. During the Time of Troubles, Poland hoped to
- A. take over the Russian empire.
  - B. gain territory from Russia.
  - C. establish formal diplomatic and trade relations with Russia.
  - D. convert the Russians to Roman Catholicism.
9. Which czar's decision marked the real beginning of Russia's status as a nation-state?
- A. Vasili II's decree that only his direct heirs could inherit the throne
  - B. Ivan III's refusal to pay the annual tribute to the Tatars
  - C. Ivan IV's creation of the Oprichnina
  - D. Feodor I's decision to turn over most of his powers to Boris Godunov
10. What caused Boris Godunov to revoke the decree that prohibited peasants from moving?
- A. He did not want them to continue dying of starvation during the famine.
  - B. He needed to recruit them for military service against Poland.
  - C. He wanted to appease the boyars.
  - D. He wanted to gain popularity among the clergy.