Peter The Great: Father Of Modern Russia Essay, Research Paper

English/History21 March 1998Peter the Great: Father of Modern Russia Throughout history, there have been many great leaders and political figures who changed their world greatly. Of these many great people, the name of tsar Peter the First of Russia, more commonly referred to as “Peter the Great”, should be mentioned with the likes of Churchill, Gandhi, and Washington. He was almost solely responsible for turning Russia into a respectable economic power. During the reign of Peter the Great, from 1689 until his death in 1725, the way in which Russians perceived themselves changed drastically. Once embarrassed of themselves and their country, the citizens of Russia felt a new sense of honor and patriotism towards their homeland. To accomplish such a great task, he needed to reform major aspects of the country. One of the aspects which were changed was the entire administrative system. Once run by an incredibly inefficient system, where people were completely out of touch with their leaders, Peter made a much more democratic system in which there were many different levels of government, from the local government to the senate. Educational reforms were another major aspect of Russian civilization in which Peter changed. The people were uneducated, and in turn were unhappy, Peter made the idea of educating the public popular by building many schools and universities around the country. The Russian Orthodox Church was also reformed during Peter’s reign. He made the church completely part of the state, therefore turning enthusiasm for the church into enthusiasm for the state as well. The Russian economy also benefited from Peter’s rule. The rapid economic growth which occurred in Russia during his time was incredible, with the exportation of such goods as iron, and coal reaching new highs. The citizens of Russia took notice to all this sudden change, realizing their country was thriving, and were very proud of it. “He wrought out of Russia a real metamorphosis, a transformation.”, these were the words of Piotr Shafirov the vice-chancellor of Russia during Peter’s reign (Anisimov 3). Changing such a vast country is no small task, and the transformation had many steps to it. However, the time and effort Peter spent on administrative reform work was almost unparalleled. The government was a mess, the people distraught, and Peter knew what it took to improve it. His reform work domestically started with calling for men to shave their beards to look more like European men, the people responded by doing so. He gradually worked his way toward completely reforming the government. Peter’s largest administrative projects were reforming the senate, creating colleges, changing local governments, and changing laws which affected the status of women. The country’s government was an absolute mess. The vast area of Russia had been governed at the center by a mere two-thousand men. The cumbrous, inefficient machinery of government, like early medieval western administration, was mostly unspecialised (Marshall 42). It is through these administrative and governmental reforms that we realize that “Peter’s awareness of his absolute power was matched by determination to exercise this power for the good of all” (Florinsky 401). The creation of the senate was Peter’s first serious attempt at administrative reform. Originally set up as a temporary measure in February of 1711, the senate was created as a post for nine high-ranking officials to attend to the business of the country in the absence of the tsar (usually at war). This newfound form of government was much more efficient than the Muscovite Duma, which only acted in the presence of the leader (Kirchner 88). The senate eventually became a permanent fixture in Russian politics, and took on the role of overseeing the provinces and supervising tax collecting. The senate itself consisted of men from various parts of Russia. Regulations regarding the actual meetings were strict. They met between three and five times a week. There was a fine of 50 roubles for non-attendance, and further fines for idle talking during them (Sumner 125). This new approach towards the running of a country tells us Peter was genuinely concerned with the fate of his lands, and tells us he cared for his people. On one day in 1721, the following items appeared on the agenda: a school for civil servants, the governorship of Kazan, the Table of Ranks, canals, and the roads to Moscow, supplies for the armed forces, and marking of trees (Wren 278). This overloaded schedule was not for the faint of heart. Senators were meant to be people in the prime of their life and capable of making vigorous decisions (Florinsky 352). These people were not merely appointed to these posts as a reward for past s to the state. The Russian senate was very effective in condemning criminals, even if you were a member of the senate itself. The senate was effective at policy making, in preparing legislation, and carrying out judicial functions. It was exactly what Russia needed to start on its path to respectability. The senate lasted for another two centuries as a supreme law court and formulator of policy, but its own inefficiency in the beginning led Peter to experiment with a system of administrative colleges. These colleges were not the same as the institutions of higher learning we think of today. Colleges were places where people studied and worked for the central departments of government. They involved, besides the organization of certain new departments, the absorption of almost all the old departments in new bodies, which were to function with carefully devised regulations (Sumner 124). Originally, there were nine of these institutions in Russia during which Peter created; foreign affairs, war, and admiralty; three dealing with finance; two dealing with economic affairs; and justice, which was also the ministry of the interior (Pavlenko 4). The colleges introduced a much more practical and rational division of labor throughout the country. The entire concept of colleges derived from Western Europe, where they were used extensively in almost every country. Peter sent countless people to Europe to survey these institutions, and recruited many people from places like Sweden, England, and Holland, via lucrative contracts. This fact alone showed he cared for his homeland greatly. Oversight of each college was the responsibility of the senate, and they proved to be very helpful in motivating the people (Seton-Watson 11). They were undoubtedly a great improvement on the old confused and partially broken-down departmental system (Olivas 27). These changes in central government were accompanied by change in the offices of local governments. The old Muscovite system under the voevody was unable to cope with the additional strains put on it during times of war (Sumner 128). Peter knew this and embarked on a series of well-judged reforms, taking in to fact the human factor (Marshall 47). He started with dividing Russia into eight large governorships, their responsibilities included revenue collection and recruitment, with many people volunteering for military service. Through a very complicated administrative system along Western lines, eight (later twelve) districts were created, each with a governor and a judicial and financial officer (Kirchner 91). These districts were created within the governorships, almost completely mirroring Western ways. It is here where the Ukraine is fully incorporated into the Russian provincial system, where it remained until 1991. This newfound feeling of organization in Russia bode well with it’s citizens, the people were excited. With all this improvement in the way the country was run, it is no surprise that other aspects in the country, apart from the administrative changes, improved as well. Of these other aspects, the improvement in the treatment of women in Russia during Peter’s reign was very significant. Special attention was paid to a change in the status of women. On his trips to Europe, Peter had witnessed the freedom and activities of women abroad; and despite his own shameful relationships with women and his promiscuity, he contributed to a thorough improvement (Kirchner 90). The terem, a Russian law which prohibited women from participating in normal everyday activities, was abolished (Sumner 170). Women were now able to attend court functions and be a part of the community. They were now able to go to receptions and balls, thus setting an example for social life in all spheres (Kirchner 91). Peter obviously recognized what would be good for his country, and, unselfishly, put the values of what he thought he country should be before his own. All this governmental and administrative reform work was very important and proved to be very beneficial in the long run. However, this was not everything in helping Russia completely reform, it took many other things, including the work Peter did to reform the educational system. Until Peter’s reign there was less than little education except in the old church schools, where instruction was purely at an elementary level and usually confined to religious topics (Massie 770). An uneducated population is an unhappy population, and the sudden effort put in to change the schools resulted in new interest in learning. Peter achieved this by establishing academies of learning for the people, improving and building schools, working with people to create academies of sciences, and by educating people to improve their etiquette. There had been experiments with higher education in Russia in the past, but they were not successful. Some twenty years before Peter showed interest in reforming the education system, Sylvester Medvedev founded a small Academy in a Russian monastery, where twenty boys studied Latin, Greek, grammar and rhetoric. Though the experiment was short-lived, it showed the way forward by combining secular knowledge and clerical education in tandem as two branches of a single ‘wisdom-science’ (Florinsky 352). In that system, the tsar was to reward good students of any class, with status (Seton-Watson 3). Peter was intrigued with this system and incorporated it into Russian life. He was convinced that in order to be powerful, Russia needed rapid intellectual development (Kirchner 92). With little inclination to the arts or philosophy himself, he realized that Russia desperately needed to expand the study of subjects with immediate practical benefits, such as technology, shipbuilding, engineering, mathematics, and foreign languages (Olivas 34). The first few academies founded during Peter’s reign achieved moderate success. The most successful being a Typography School , by 1686 it had two-hundred and thirty-three students (Florinsky 354). After the arrival of two Greek scholars, another successful school was formed, the Epiphany School. There were a few more academies, but Peter was not impressed. Returning from a trip to the West in 1699, Peter was appalled to discover the Moscow Academy’s dilapidated state ‘with it’s illiterate priests’ and ‘it’s 150 pupils left to their own devices’ (Marshall 82). This led to the hiring of more scholars from the West, which led to better institutions. Peter made sure that in addition to acquiring knowledge of the gospels, the students learned how to wage war, how to build, and how to cure the sick. Peter worked on reviving the Moscow Academy, and it was the finest institute in the country until the founding of Moscow University (Abbot 56). Besides the academies established, Peter helped the small communities and people without a lot of money by founding many local schools. By 1727, there were 46 of these schools, most in the Ukraine (Marshall 84). The best taught all the liberal arts, the remainder only grammar and rhetoric, but in true Petrine fashion they all had a practical function as providers of ‘useful’ state education (Kirchner 93). To direct these schools, Peter again went west to find people with experience in this area. In 1701 he founded the Moscow School of mathematical sciences and navigation, for navigators, architects, and engineers. To start up the program he went to Scotland to hire the finest personal. Early progress was dogged by language difficulties, but once textbooks were made available in Russian, the school made rapid progress (Marshall 85). It’s graduates, instead of being farmers, and laborers, were sailors, engineers, and architects. The schools opened many new doors not thought possible to people who were not of high social stature. The schools were open to all, with places for those from poorer homes. Children of the nobility and gentry worked alongside those of peasants. Peter then experimented with variations of his public schools by introducing a ‘free but compulsory’ elementary education for children of landowners and members of the civil service (Sumner 160). He also started the Moscow Artillery College, Moscow Medical College, and the Moscow Engineering College, all of which were very successful under his rule. Peter also started the Gluck Language Gymnasium, teaching politics, philosophy, literature, rhetoric, and European languages to students. Even though

some of Peter’s ambitions for the education system of his country were failures, most of them enjoyed great success and some are even functioning today. Besides importing teachers from the West, Peter sent many students abroad to train as volunteers in many areas of interest. From military service, to academic studies, many of Russia’s finest citizens spent time away from their country learning about other people’s ways. Peter had sent 60 young nobles to study in Holland and Italy, many sailors and shipbuilders to Dutch and English shipyards, and others studying languages abroad in places like Persia, Berlin, and France (Pavlenko 8). Peter would interview them on their return, and in the end there were over one-thousand people who studied abroad (Marshall 88). The system was beneficial, and it broadened the horizons of future diplomats, administrators, and officers (Sumner165). He used these people and the information they gave him to form the Russian Academy of Science. Feeling that his efforts to improve education were only modestly successful, Peter worked diligently for his academy to succeed. With a lot of Western influence the Russian Academy of Sciences was created. Once established, the Academy, which still stands today, soon acquired a European reputation for both teaching and research, thus fulfilling Peter’s desire that Russians should no longer be regarded as ‘barbarians who hold all learning in contempt’ (Marshall 89). The writing of recent Russian history was encouraged, in order to enhance national pride, while textbook production was increased to help spread technology (Sumner 162). Exploration was encouraged, since it had obvious relevance for defense, trade, and the development of the empire (Kirchner 93). The period was almost a Russian Renaissance, with all of the learning and intellectuality occurring. Peter aimed to create ‘a new type of Russian man, enterprising, public-spirited, open to new ideas, and free from inherited prejudices (Seton-Watson 9). Even after Peter’s reign ended, Russian intellectual and educational life was remarkably different from what it had been at the time of his accession. In addition to gaining knowledge and facts, Russians were taught to appear and behave like Europeans through Peter’s educational reform plan. For the improvement of manners, special institutions were founded, and various enactments were put into effect (Kirchner 92). The long dresses peasants wore during the harshness of Russian winters were forbidden because Peter wanted them to act more European. The beards of men, except of clergy and peasant, were ordered to be shaved as a sanitary measure (Kirchner 93). Peter was trying to turn Russia into a mainstream traditional European country in every way imaginable, disregarding rules and traditional ways. However, in the end, Peter realized such a task was unfair to the people, and beards were allowed again, allowing a special tax was paid (Kirchner 92). Along with the changes made in the administrative system, and on the educational front, the changes Peter made in religion and the church were instrumental in transforming the nation of Russia. Peter’s religious changes were as radical as any of his other reforms. The effectively decapitated the church and made it a department of state, in a western sense, he ‘established’ it (Florinsky 414). Peter changed the Russian church forever, and the people responded. Peter’s drastic reforms were positive. Enabling the church to raise its cultural standards and to widen and invigorate its missionary activities (Sumner 138). He reformed the church in many ways, but none were more important than the ways he reformed the clergy, created the holy synod, and controlled the church’s wealth. Though sensitive to the deeply-engrained spiritual aspirations of the Russian people, he was determined to sweep away anything that obstructed his authority (Seton-Watson15). In order to comprehend how drastically Peter changed the Church, one must know what it was like before Petrine times. The church was very important to the average person in Russia during this time. Always deeply spiritual, Russian Orthodoxy in the late seventeenth century had become obsessed with petty dogmatism (Marshall 54). There were attempts at reform, but to no avail. Pre-Petrine Muscovy had been a free association of two independent bodies, church and state, with a delicate balance struck between patriarch and tsar (Sumner 146). The tsar, a father figure, was never more than a patriarch’s equal, although he was responsible for the well-being of the Church (Massie 364). Naturally, it was a strenuous situation between church and state in Russia. However, by introducing Western concepts, Peter distorted the traditional relationship between Russian church and state. He wanted the church to be more than a department of the state, helping in the development of Russian secular power (Kirchner 90). Certainly the church itself was not without fault. The quality of the clergy was poor, their intellectual and moral standards exceptionally low (Marshall 58). Peter recognized this problem and acted accordingly. The married secular priests were almost a hereditary caste and monastic vocation had become a form of draft-dodging. Peter saw the direction in which the church was heading, and he made a few initial changes. Among the changes, one was that no one under fifty years old could take monastic vows. He would liked to have gone further and turn all the convents and monasteries into hospitals and schools (Kirchner 91). The first major change that took place within the church was the change in the control of its profits. By letting patriarchal power lapse, Peter gained administrative control of the church and its proceeds. The church had excess money that it was not spending, Peter felt that this was wrong and he felt the church could spare some money for the good of the state. The church was no longer tax exempt, and received no breaks. In 1706 Peter used excess funds provided by the church to establish a surgical hospital and medical school in Moscow. This hospital, administered by a Dutch physician, treated over two-thousand patients and trained over forty doctors in its first two years (Florinsky 310). To keep with the medical theme, the monasteries in Russia were instructed to care for the sick and injured, being almost as efficient as hospitals themselves, they improved everyday life significantly. By 1710, he had restricted monks to an income of ten roubles per month, dividing the people who were dedicated to the profession from those who were in it for the lucrative salary. By controlling the finances of the church , Peter the Great insured the public of having dedicated priests, and of having better medical facilities. This all led to better lives for Russian people. The church finance reform helped Peter’s causes greatly, but it was his creation of the holy synod which affected his country and his country’s history the most. It enabled him to use the church directly as an arm of government. His intentions were revealed in a manifesto in January of 1721, entitled “Spiritual Regulation”. It has been hailed as his ‘greatest literary achievement and the most enduring monument to his genius (Olivas 30). The church and clergy were now completely identified with the state. In 1721, the patriarch was entirely abolished in favor of a council, the Holy Synod (Kirchner 90). Peter intended the synod to take the place of the patriarch and existing church councils. This setup was similar to councils set up in western Europe, but it was a first for orthodoxy (Klyvchevsky 108). The synod had a president, two vice presidents, and eight other members, all drawn from the clergy. The tsar would nominate all the members, the church none, and all had to take an oath that the tsar was “Final Judge of this College” (Marshall 61). This combination of the church and the state proved to work out in Russia, for there would be no more confusion and quarrels between them. The Synod was an enlightened group of academics and monks, and churchmen of European stature. Peter the Great was solely responsible for this drastic improvement in the church. In order to change such a vast region so drastically, Peter also had to reform other major parts of the system. Another major aspect of Russia in that time period that needed changing was the economy. The sudden and rapid economic growth which occurred during Peter’s reign was nothing short of astounding. The economy is the backbone of any community, and Russia was no different. When the country was regarded as primitive and underdeveloped, and the people were less than patriotic, the economy was horrible. As Peter reformed the economy the citizen’s feelings toward the country grew positive. Of all the aspects of this economic boom that contributed to this change in heart, none were more important than the growth in the Iron Industry, the backbone of the Russian economy. With all this sudden growth in Russia, it was inevitable that the economy would grow. The iron industry, perhaps, benefited the most. The flagship of industrial growth was at all times the burgeoning new metal industry in the Urals, where great quantities of both iron and copper had been discovered (Wren 266). At the beginning of Peter’s reign there were only seventeen ironworks of any size in the country. Existing sources of raw material were insufficient, especially with the army’s need for more metal (Pushkaryov 7). Peter’s discovery of iron in the Ural mountains had a seismic effect, even though it was over a thousand miles away from major population centers. The location was at an advantageous because there was ample water power from the mountains, an immense supply of charcoal from the forests, and cheap labor (Marshall 37). From then on, the industry expanded for many years, helping Russia’s economy immensely. The number of ironworks in the area went from seventeen to fifty-two in a matter of years. The rise of the metal industry had its social impact on the entrepreneur class, some of whom rapidly rose from rags to riches (Marshall 37). Under government initiative, more and more industries were appearing, each pumping much needed life into the ever improving Russian economy. It was now when Europe finally took notice of Russia. Russian iron of high quality was already emerging on the all important London market by 1716. By the middle of that century, Russia was outproducing Britain (Sumner 154). Later, Russia overtook Sweden as the leading producing of iron in the world, and was at that time the largest exporter to England (Kirchner 89). Peter’s aim, rooted in his own personality, was not merely to copy the West, but to induce in Russia a new spirit of work, enterprise and efficiency, to enable its thinly spread population to tap the country’s vast natural resources (Marshall 33).The legacy of Peter the Great still lives on today, with millions of tourist each year visiting his capital city of St. Petersburg. Peter died on February 8, 1725 at the age of fifty-two. Decades of heavy drinking, and impulsive energy contributed to his death. Peter brought fundamental change in the nature of Russian monarchy (Anismov 296). Economic activity developed soundly during Peter’s reign. The iron industry, as well as shipbuilding, and the arms industry grew rapidly. All of this, including building the entire city of St. Petersburg was established without the help of foreign loans (Marshall 91). His efforts to improve education were successful as well. Russians could look at their country, and be proud that they lived in such a successful place, which could not be said about those citizens who had lived before them. There is little doubt that Peter the Great was instrumental in reforming major domestic issues in Russia, but his most important gain in his entire reign was that of the self-esteem of his people.