
THE RUSSIA NEEDS THE WEST FOR SOME TIME, AFTER WHICH IT SHALL
TURN ITS BACK TO IT: VLADIMIR PUTIN FULFILLING PETER THE GREAT'S
PROPHECY

Akin Ademuyiwa

University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract

There is no doubt that the all-time powerful Russian Tsar, Peter the Great was the architect of the Russian Empire by his exploits in opening up the once landlocked empire to be closer to Europe through his conquests, such as Asov campaign and many others, his westernization policy also ensured that Russians imbibed some western culture. In spite of the fact that virtually all his teachers, shipbuilders and others were westerners, he was not unmindful of Russia's distinct culture and ways of life, hence his famous exhortation that "Russia needs the west for some time, after which it shall turn its back to it" This paper attempts to link the prediction of Peter the Great with the present Russia involvement in the Crimea and its subsequent annexation, the ongoing Ukrainian skirmishes, and its attendant economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the western powers. Data will be gathered from archival materials, dedicated internet sources and periodicals. The paper concludes that Russia increasingly would work more closely with Asian nations, starve off the excruciating effects of the economic sanctions thus fulfilling the aged long prediction of Peter the Great.

Key words: Peter the Great, the Crimea, Culture, Ukraine, annexation

Introduction

From the Ashes of Kievan-Rus Emerged the Russian Empire

Several scholars have argued that the Russian Empire emerged from the ashes of Kievan-Rus, A medieval European state; Kievan-Rus was founded in 882AD by Prince Oleg. It was made up of a number of co-operating principalities, with its capital in Kiev. Spread across territory from the Baltic Sea in the North to the Black Sea in the South, it prospered because it controlled all of the major Eastern European trade routes. Kievan-Rus can be traced back to the arrival of Rurik, a Norse Varangian Chieftain, and his brothers Sineus and Truvor. Together, they established themselves as leaders of Novgorod, Beloozero and Izborsk. On the death of his brothers, Rurik took over as leader of all three regions. Kievan-Rus' power and influence waned during the 12th and 13th centuries and, against a backdrop of internal disputes, it was overrun by the Mongol invasion of Rus in the early 13th century. The Russians, who were of Slavic descent and a major part of Kievan-Rus, fled to the Northern forest later to be known as Moscow

where they continued their resistance against the Mongols. It was in the Northern forest that the Russian empire emerged under the Romanov dynasty which ruled the empire from 1613 to 1917. Peter I also known as Peter the Great happened to be the greatest of all the Russian empire rulers. Our intention in this paper is to examine the role played by Peter the Great and his predecessor, Catherine II in shaping the Russian empire with a view to determine if his famous exhortation that “Russia needs the west for some time, after which it shall turn its back to it” has been fulfilled.

Peter the Great and His Exploits

Peter the Great or Peter Alexeyevich (30 May 1672 – 8 February 1725) ruled the Tsardom of Russia and later the Russian empire from 7 May 1682 until his death, jointly ruling before 1696 with his elder half-brother, Ivan V. Through a number of successful wars he expanded the Tsardom into a much larger empire that became a major European power. He led a cultural revolution that replaced some of the traditionalist and medieval social and political systems with ones that were modern, scientific, westernized, and based on The Enlightenment (Hosking, Geoffrey (1997:67). Peter's reforms made a lasting impact on Russia and many institutions of Russian government trace their origins to his reign.

From an early age, Peter's education (commissioned by his father, Tsar Alexis I) was put in the hands of several tutors, most notably Nikita Zotov, Patrick Gordon, and Paul Menesius. On 29 January 1676, Tsar Alexis died, leaving the sovereignty to Peter's elder half-brother, the weak and sickly Feodor III. Throughout this period, the government was largely run by Artamon Matveev, an enlightened friend of Alexis, the political head of the Naryshkin family and one of Peter's greatest childhood benefactors. (Kolchin, Peter, 1990:11)

This position changed when Feodor died in 1682. As Feodor did not leave any children, a dispute arose between the Miloslavsky family (Maria Miloslavskaya was the first wife of Alexis I) and Naryshkin family (Natalya Naryshkina was the second wife) over who should inherit the throne. Peter's other half-brother, Ivan V, was next in line for the throne, but he was chronically ill and of infirm mind. Consequently, the Boyar Duma (a council of Russian nobles) chose the 10-year-old Peter to become Tsar with his mother as regent. (29)

This arrangement was brought before the people of Moscow, as ancient tradition demanded, and was ratified. Sophia Alekseyevna, one of Alexis' daughters from his first marriage, led a rebellion of the Streltsy (Russia's elite military corps) in April–May 1682. In the subsequent conflict some of Peter's relatives and friends were murdered, including Matveev, and Peter witnessed some of these acts of political violence.

Peter knew that Russia could not face the Ottoman Empire alone. In 1697 he traveled incognito to Europe on an 18-month journey with a large Russian delegation—the so-called "Grand Embassy". Since he was far taller than almost anyone else, his fake name allowed him to escape social and diplomatic events, but did not fool anyone of importance. One goal was to seek the aid of the European monarchs. Peter's hopes were dashed; France was a traditional ally of the Ottoman Sultan, and Austria was eager to maintain peace in the east while conducting its own wars in the west. Peter, furthermore, had chosen the most inopportune moment; the Europeans at the time were more

concerned about who would succeed the childless Spanish King Charles II than about fighting the Ottoman Sultan. (Bushkovitch, Paul, 2003:42)

The "Grand Embassy", although failing to complete the mission of creating an anti-Ottoman alliance, continued. While visiting the Netherlands, Peter learned much about life in Western Europe. He studied shipbuilding in Zaandam (the house he lived in is now a museum, the Czar Peter House) and Amsterdam, where he visited, among others, the upper-class de Wilde family.

Jacob de Wilde, a collector-general with the Admiralty of Amsterdam, had a well-known collection of art and coins, and de Wilde's daughter Maria de Wilde made an engraving of the meeting between Peter and her father, providing visual evidence of "the beginning of the West European classical tradition in Russia". According to Roger Tavernier, Peter the Great later acquired de Wilde's collection.

Thanks to the mediation of Nicolaas Witsen, mayor of Amsterdam and expert on Russia, the Tsar was given the opportunity to gain practical experience in the largest shipyard in the world, belonging to the Dutch East India Company, for a period of four months. The Tsar helped with the construction of an East Indiaman especially laid down for him: *Peter and Paul*.

During his stay the Tsar engaged many skilled workers such as builders of locks, fortresses, shipwrights, and seamen—including Cornelis Cruys, a vice-admiral who became, under Franz Lefort, the Tsar's advisor in maritime affairs. Peter later put his knowledge of shipbuilding to use in helping build Russia's navy. (Rodger, NAM, 2005:32)

Peter paid a visit to Frederik Ruysch, who taught him how to draw teeth and catch butterflies. Ludolf Bakhuysen, a painter of seascapes and Jan van der Heyden the inventor of the fire hose, received Peter, who was keen to learn and pass on his knowledge to his countrymen. On 16 January 1698 Peter organized a farewell party and invited Johan Huydecoper van Maarsseveen, who had to sit between Lefort and the Tsar and drink.

Peter's Reforms

Peter implemented sweeping reforms aimed at modernizing Russia. Heavily influenced by his advisors from Western Europe, Peter reorganized the Russian army along modern lines and dreamed of making Russia a maritime power. He faced much opposition to these policies at home, but brutally suppressed any and all rebellions against his authority: Streltsy, Bashkirs, Astrakhan, and the greatest civil uprising of his reign, the Bulavin Rebellion.

Peter implemented social modernization in an absolute manner by introducing French and western dress to his court and requiring courtiers, state officials, and the military to shave their beards and adopt modern clothing styles. One means of achieving this end was the introduction of taxes for long beards and robes in September 1698.

To improve his nation's position on the seas, Peter sought to gain more maritime outlets. His only outlet at the time was the White Sea at Arkhangelsk. The Baltic Sea was at the time controlled by Sweden in the north, while the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea were controlled by the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Empire respectively in the south.

Peter attempted to acquire control of the Black Sea; to do so he would have to expel the Tatars from the surrounding areas. As part of an agreement with Poland which

ceded Kiev to Russia, Peter was forced to wage war against the Crimean Khan and against the Khan's overlord, the Ottoman Sultan. Peter's primary objective became the capture of the Ottoman fortress of Azov, near the Don River. In the summer of 1695 Peter organized the Azov campaigns to take the fortress, but his attempts ended in failure. Peter returned to Moscow in November 1695 and began building a large navy. He launched about thirty ships against the Ottomans in 1696, capturing Azov in July of that year. On 12 September 1698, Peter officially founded the first Russian Navy base, Taganrog. He continued his far reaching reforms in all facets of imperial Russia's life including moving the capital of the Russian empire to St. Petersburg, a city he personally built, from Moscow. This he did ironically to move closer to Europe (a continent he intended to later dump) because before his ascension to power, Russia was a land locked country without outlet to the sea.

Peter's health plummeted in 1723; he began having problems with his urinary tract and bladder. In the summer of 1724 a team of doctors performed surgery releasing upwards of four pounds of blocked urine. Peter remained bedridden until late autumn. In the first week of October, restless and certain he was cured, Peter began a lengthy inspection tour of various projects. According to legend, in November, at Lakhta along the Finnish Gulf to inspect some ironworks, Peter saw a group of soldiers drowning near shore and, wading out into near-waist deep water, came to their rescue.

This icy water rescue is said to have exacerbated Peter's bladder problems and caused his death. The story, however, has been viewed with skepticism by some historians, pointing out that the German chronicler Jacob von Stählin is the only source for the story, and it seems unlikely that no one else would have documented such an act of heroism. This, plus the interval of time between these actions and Peter's death seems to preclude any direct link.

In early January 1725, Peter was struck once again with uremia. Legend has it that before lapsing into unconsciousness Peter asked for a paper and pen and scrawled an unfinished note that read: "*Leave all to ...*" and then, exhausted by the effort, asked for his daughter Anna to be summoned.

Peter died between four and five in the morning 8 February 1725. An autopsy revealed his bladder to be infected with gangrene. He was fifty-two years, seven months old when he died, having reigned forty-two years. (Anisimov, Evgenii V. (2015:9) has this to say about him:

be grace of God, the most excellent and great sovereign prince Pyotr Alekseevich the ruler all the Russians: of Moscow, of Kiev, of Vladimir, of Novgorod, Tsar of Kazan, Tsar of Astrakhan and Tsar of Siberia, sovereign of Pskov, great prince of Smolensk, Tversk, Yugorsk, Permsky, Vyatsky, Bulgarsky and others, sovereign and great prince of Novgorod Nizovsky lands, Chernigovsky, of Ryazan, of Rostov, Yaroslavl, Belozersky, Udorsky, Kondiisky and the sovereign of all the northern lands, and the sovereign of the Iverian lands, of the Kartlian and Georgian Kings, of the Kabardin lands, of the Circassian and Mountain princes and many other states and lands western and eastern here and there and the successor and sovereign and ruler.

Catherine the Great and the Crimea Campaign

Although, Peter the Great and his prophesy is the primary focus of this paper, we shall touch briefly on the conqueror of the Crimea which has generated so much debate and also occupies conspicuous space in today's Europe and its relationship with the Russian Federation. While Peter the Great had succeeded only in gaining a toehold in the south on the edge of the Black Sea in the Azov campaigns, Catherine II, one of the successors of Peter the Great, completed the conquest of the south. Catherine made Russia the dominant power in south-eastern Europe after her first Russo-Turkish War against the Ottoman Empire (1768–74), which saw some of the heaviest defeats in Turkish history, including the Battle of Chesma (5–7 July 1770) and the Battle of Kagul (21 July 1770). (Rounding, Virginia, 2006:78)

The Russian victories allowed Catherine's government to obtain access to the Black Sea and to incorporate present-day southern Ukraine, where the Russians founded the new cities of Odessa, Nikolayev, Yekaterinoslav (literally: "the Glory of Catherine"; the future Dnepropetrovsk), and Kherson. The Treaty of KüçükKaynarca, signed 10 July 1774, gave the Russians territories at Azov, Kerch, Yenikale, Kinburn, and the small strip of Black Sea coast between the rivers Dnieper and Bug. The treaty also removed restrictions on Russian naval or commercial traffic in the Azov Sea, granted to Russia the position of protector of Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman Empire, and made the Crimea a protectorate of Russia.

Catherine annexed the Crimea in 1783, nine years after the Crimean Khanate had gained nominal independence—which had been guaranteed by Russia—from the Ottoman Empire as a result of her first war against the Turks. The palace of the Crimean khans passed into the hands of the Russians. In 1786 Catherine conducted a triumphal procession in the Crimea, which helped provoke the next Russo–Turkish War.

The Ottomans restarted hostilities in the second Russo-Turkish War (1787–92). This war, catastrophic for the Ottomans, ended with the Treaty of Jassy (1792), which legitimized the Russian claim to the Crimea and granted the Yedisian region to Russia. (Massie, Robert K. 2011)

Catherine longed for recognition as an enlightened sovereign. She pioneered for Russia the role that Britain later played through most of the nineteenth and early twentieth century as an international mediator in disputes that could, or did, lead to war. She acted as mediator in the War of the Bavarian Succession (1778–79) between the German states of Prussia and Austria. In 1780 she established a League of Armed Neutrality, designed to defend neutral shipping from the British Royal Navy during the American Revolution.

Vladimir Putin, the Crimea and the West

As earlier observed in this article, the issue of the Crimea could be seen as an age old one involving the Ottoman Turks and the Russian Empire, it is also noted that the Crimea became a protectorate of Russia through war. In the hey days of the Soviet Union, the leadership of the country then ceded the Crimea, a Russian territory to Ukraine for administrative convenience in the 1950s. Things were to continue in this fashion until the Soviet Union collapsed in 1992, thus paving way for the independence of the ex-Soviet republics. It should be noted that the Crimea was and is still of strategic importance to the Russian

Federation in that the Russian Naval base is in Sevastopol, in the Crimea, a part of Ukraine. This fact is further corroborated by Schmemmann, Serge (1993) that:

The Russian military took up residence in Crimea more than 200 years ago, when Catherine the Great built a naval base at Sevastopol. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russia and Ukraine tussled repeatedly over dividing up the Black Sea Fleet based there. Today, Russia rents its Sevastopol base from Ukraine.

Attempt by Ukraine to move closer to the West and its institutions such as The European Union EU), The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) among others brought Ukraine in direct confrontation with the Russian Federation who felt increasingly isolated in its own territory. Overtures were made to the Ukrainian people to stay within the ambience of the Russian Federation by offering billions of Dollars in aid to Ukraine, but was rebuffed by the people and the pro-Russian government was removed from office. This action on the part of Ukrainian leaders engendered series of events, which culminated in the independence of the Crimea, and its subsequent annexation by the Russian Federation. The reverberating effect of this also led to the separatist move by ethnic Russians in Eastern Ukraine. Schmemmann, Serge (1993:67) asserts that:

The European Union has strongly condemned Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea and does not recognize it. In the absence of de-escalatory steps by the Russian Federation, on 17 March 2014 the EU imposed the first travel bans and asset freezes against persons involved in actions against Ukraine's territorial integrity.

Several efforts made by the West failed to persuade Russia to have a rethink of its annexation of the Crimea. A direct corollary of Russia's intransigence brought in its wake series of sanctions against Russia by the European Union and the United States of America. Some of the sanctions according to E. Bacon and M. Wyman, (2006) as part of the EU's non-recognition policy of the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol, the EU has imposed substantial restrictions on economic exchanges with the territory. These include:

- A ban on imports of goods originating in Crimea or Sevastopol unless they have Ukrainian certificates;
- A prohibition to invest in Crimea. Europeans and EU-based companies can no longer buy real estate or entities in Crimea, finance Crimean companies or supply related services. In addition, they may not invest in infrastructure projects in six sectors;
- A ban on providing tourism services in Crimea or Sevastopol. European cruise ships may not call at ports in the Crimean peninsula, except in case of emergency. This applies to all ships owned or controlled by a European or flying the flag of an EU Member State.

- Goods and technology for the transport, telecommunications and energy sectors or the exploration of oil, gas and mineral resources may not be exported to Crimean companies or for use in Crimea;
- Technical assistance, brokering, construction or engineering services related to infrastructure in the same sectors must not be provided.

The European Union is focusing on de-escalating the crisis in Ukraine and on assisting Ukraine in ensuring a stable, prosperous and democratic future for all its citizens. The EU has been unwavering in its support for the country's territorial integrity and sovereignty. It sees the full implementation of the Minsk agreements as the basis for a sustainable political solution to the conflict in the country's east. Since spring 2014, the EU has been stepping up its support to economic and political reforms in Ukraine. The EU remains ready to reverse its decisions and reengage with Russia when it starts contributing actively and without ambiguities to finding a solution to the Ukrainian crisis.

Conclusion

We have discovered through this paper that whatever opinion or prejudices held by scholars against the Russian Federation, there is a general consensus that Russia is a unique country in Europe with its distinct culture, tradition and brand of nationalism. Its all-time greatest Tsar, Peter the Great, though taught and raised by western people, he never forgot the fact that his empire and later Russian Federation evolved distinctively from the rest of Europe. This assertion has been closely followed by all the rulers of Russia till date. The issue of the defence of mother land is also paramount in the minds of its rulers as corroborated by F. J. Fleron, Jr (1996) "The greater legacy, though, was the persistent Russian desire to defend its long and open borders – something which remains at the forefront of Russian leaders' minds, even today".

It has also been discovered that the intended sanctions imposed by the West and European Union as a punitive measure to force Russia to backtrack on the annexation of the Crimea and withdrawal of its troops from Eastern Ukraine has pushed Russia to do business with its traditional allies in Asia (China and others) thus fulfilling the aged long prediction of its Tsar, Peter the Great. It should be noted however that Russia occupies such a strategic position in Europe to be ignored because of its vast mineral deposits. Most of Eastern and Central European countries rely heavily on Russian gas and any attempt to ignore this could spell doom for these countries during winter.

Bibliography

- Anisimov, Evgenii V. (2015) *The Reforms of Peter the Great: Progress Through Violence in Russia* (Routledge)
- Bushkovitch, Paul (2003). *Peter the Great*. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Consolidated version of Council regulation (EU) No 692/2014 concerning restrictive measures in response to the illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol
- E. Bacon with M. Wyman, *Contemporary Russia*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke and New York, 2006.
- F. J. Fleron, Jr., "Post-Soviet Political Culture in Russia: An Assessment of Recent Empirical Investigations", *Europe-Asia Studies*, 48, 1996, 2, pp. 225-260.
- Hosking, Geoffrey (1997). *Russia: People and Empire, 1552–1917*. Harvard University Press.
- Information note to EU businesses operating and/or investing in Crimea/Sevastopol
- Kolchin, Peter (1990) [First published 1987]. *Unfree Labor: American Slavery and Russian Serfdom*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. .
- Massie, Robert K. (2011). *Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman*. New York: Random House.
- Rodger, NAM (2005). *Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649–1815*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Rounding, Virginia (2006). *Catherine the Great*. London: Hutchinson.
- Schmemmann, Serge (10 July 1993), "Russian Parliament Votes a Claim to Russian Port of Sevastopol", *The New York Times*.