SIXTH PERIOD.

RUSSIA'S PROGRESS AS A POWER; ITS INFLUENCE IN EUROPE

(From 1689 to 1801.)

PETER THE GREAT

If a happy outcome from the first inclinations could solely imprint on men destined to reign that character of goodness and those ideas of justice which are a gift from heaven, Peter I could scarcely less be a despot than most of his predecessors. Delivered with all the ardor of an impetuous temperament, he had for tutors and guides, foreign adventurers whom the desire to make a fortune had thrown into Russia; but a disproportionate ambition, sustained by a rare activity of mind, in pushing this monarch to enterprises of which the prosperity and the glory of his nation were the noble pretext, sowed some useful traits and spread a certain grandeur over a life which was however not exempt of crimes. He thus prepared for himself the suffrage of a school of philosophy, generous in its views, no doubt, but which, in the light of the past, advocated too blindly the countries and the princes who marched with gigantic strides towards the future.

In matters of reform, the choice of means must be considered first, and rather than success, because it brings glory or shame to the reformer. Now, Peter was not one of those high intelligences whose powerful words create chains of gold, the emblem of persuasive force; he was that ferocious Procrustes who pitilessly cut men to the measure of his iron bed. Peter struggled furiously against puerile obstacles, and for wanting to get ahead of time by substituting for the slow but certain effects of the imitative instinct, the ax and torture, he only obtained, instead of the true advantages of civilization, than a lying prosperity.

Of all the foreigners who were at Moscow and whose contacts the monarch sought, Lefort and Gordon were almost the only ones who recommended themselves otherwise than by virtue of vices; yet the former is treated only as a true knight of industry by writers whose indulgence is great. These two men were the only ones whose favor survived this early period, when it was necessary only to please the passions of the Czar.

In the chateau of Preobrazhenskoye, where the jealous surveillance of Sophia had kept him for a long time, about fifty young people surrounded Pierre; they were sons of boyars or officers of his household. They were called his entertainers. Later, they were disguised as soldiers, and immediately dressed in the German style; foreign officers became their instructors. Peter, wishing to set an example of discipline, began with the lowest rank of the militia, by playing drums in this company. The troop increased little by little, and, from the year 1690, the young Czar had formed two regiments intended for his guard: one was called Preobrazhensky, and the other Semenovsky, from the name of two beautiful villages in the vicinity of the capital city. These two regiments formed a body of five thousand men.
Lefort inspired Peter with the desire to learn about navigation. It was more difficult; for the latter had an extraordinary horror of the liquid element and quivered at the sight of a river or a lake. He triumphed, however, over this pusillanimity, the result of a danger he had run in his childhood, and he resolved to have a navy. A Dutch builder, named Karsten Brandt, called to Russia under Czar Alexis, then forgotten, languished in Moscow, earning his living by any trade other than that for which he had come. He was found, and he built a sloop, two frigates and several yachts. Pierre, without title in his army, was less humble in his navy: he declared himself admiral. After having practiced maneuvering on Lake Ladoga, he undertook the voyage from Archangel, to see the on the open ocean high seas ships and traveled the White Sea on a vessel purposely built by Brandt. Neither ship nor Russian monarch had yet confronted these parts. Peter then built a large number of vessels on the Voronezh, and this fleet, the first that Russia had, was destined to continue the war which, on his accession to the throne, he had found begun against the Turks.

Two years later, Russian vessels floated on the Black Sea.

Peter resolved to leave his States for a few years, in order to learn how to govern them better; a resolution which doubtless has few examples in history; but, following him in this political pilgrimage, it is impossible not to recognize that he often appeared there out of the wheels of true greatness, and that he missed his object, if that object was indeed to educate himself, rather than to manifest to Europe his pretensions to celebrity. Confounded in the crowd of his people, in the simplest costume, he seemed to want to escape the admiration which all his efforts tended to arouse. He visited Denmark, Brandenburg, Holland, Vienna, Venice and Rome; Spain and France were the only countries excluded from his itinerary. The former was not entitled to this favor through his ignorance, and the latter, because the haughtiness of Louis XIV, which had shocked so many potentials, was ill suited to the simplicity with which the Czar counted on making his peregrinations. He left Moscow after having suppressed a plot which had taken its source in the discontent excited by so many novelties. The regency was composed of the principal boyars.

At Königsberg, already unfaithful to his plan of conduct, Peter struggled in magnificence and ostentation with the elector, an imprudent prince, whose prodigality and depredations were ruining a poor country, and whom only a severe economy could restore. The traveling czar and the prince his guest indulged for several days in all the excesses of the table; it was in one of these royal bacchanalia that Pierre, drunk and furious, rushed upon his friend Lefort to pierce him with his sword. He repented, it is said, of this outburst, and his very detractors attribute to him these remarkable words: "I want to reform my nation, and I cannot reform myself!"

Peter arrived in Amsterdam (1697): this is the moment that popular admiration has most boasted about. Registered, in the shipyards of Saardam, among the number of master carpenters, dressed in their habit, living with them their laborious life, and drinking more than them, he learned construction, "and completed, with his hands, a vessel of sixty guns, which he alone had begun," said Voltaire; which may at least be doubted.

The apprentice builder was at the same time a student in surgery. He wished to have conferences with the celebrated Ruysch, and brought back from his anatomical exercises the talent, unworthy
of a monarch, of knowing how to extirpate a tooth. Be that as it may, on his return to his States, more than one courtier was forced to sacrifice a few molars, to give the czar the opportunity to show his dexterity.

But of all his aims, the most important thing was to recruit, by whatever means possible, trained workers of all kinds; unfortunately most of those who, seduced by flattering promises, consented to be transplanted into Russia were only too much punished for their credulity.

Peter finally left Amsterdam, after having seen the famous ship he had built depart for Archangel, and loaded with men of all nations, and went to England (1698). He had already seen at Utrecht and at The Hague King William, who had sent a superb ship to meet him. In Holland, we have seen the czar engineer, builder and operator; we will see him watchmaker and astronomer; he will pass from the benches of Oxford University to the London Observatory, where he will learn the art of calculating the obscuration of the sun by a planet and the time of the appearance of a tailed comet. Let us not forget to remark here that, lacking money in England, he sold to English merchants, for fifteen thousand pounds sterling, the right to produce tobacco in his States. This unwise bargain caused the Russian nation all of a sudden two evils at once: that of preparing for the annual outflow of several millions, and that of adding to the miseries of its peoples, by making them dependent on a new need.

The arrival of the Czar in Vienna was signaled by fetes, in which this Prince pretended to figure as an elegant dancer; but while he carried from court to court a puerile vanity, which in his person degraded the sovereign and the nation, a storm too easy to foresee was forming in the bosom of his States. This throne, which he had left before being firmly seated on it, threatened to crumble, or at least to receive a new master. The old boyars and religious leaders, in whose souls the arrival of this crowd of foreigners had excited a jealous mistrust; the people, revolted by the violation of their customs and the contempt for their opinions, indignant besides to see their prince insulting the ancient austerity of national mores by donning a foreign costume, and finally becoming a buffoon in the salons of Vienna, declared him deposed from the throne. Sophia's partisans had fanned the fire of revolt quietly, and Peter would perhaps have ceased to be king, if more skilful leaders had led the people and the streltsy.

Suddenly informed of this state of affairs, the Czar returned with haste to Moscow. He arrives, appears at the windows of the palace, and fear freezes all hearts. But if the crime had been great, so was the punishment.

First, those who passed for being the leaders of the conspiracy were executed with all their people (1698). Neither age, nor sex, nor condition had any reason to protest against this terrible decree. The ax and the wheel were put to work; immense pits were dug for the burial, not of the dead, but of victims who were still alive. Several days were employed in attempting to obtain, by dreadful tortures, revelations. Exasperated at not being able to extract the confessions which his fury demanded, and at seeing the heroic courage of these unfortunates triumph over most known tortures, Peter ordered the judges to descend from their seats to become executioners; he wanted to confound everything in a general massacre; he demanded that any hand that remained faithful should arm himself with the ax as a pledge of his devotion; and he himself, defiling the holy majesty of the diadem, struck and knocked off the heads of his unfortunate subjects. “On the day
of the first execution," says a contemporary author, eyewitness (Printz, grand marshal of the court of Prussia and ambassador in Russia), "five heads felled by the noblest hand of the empire."

However, a venerable patriarch, surrounded by religious pomp and bearing the touching image of the Virgin Mary with the Child Jesus in her arms, came to ask, in the name of the God of mercy, that these executions cease and that the rest of the condemned were spared. Drunk and dripping with blood, the Czar pushed him away and replied, "Priest, withdraw. I know what I must do: the blood of a rebellious people is always pleasing to God."

Lefort succeeded better than the patriarch, by instilling fear in this soul inaccessible to pity. He gave the Czar to understand that these men, who knew how to die with such heroic constancy, might finally realize that it was better to defend their lives than to allow themselves to be slaughtered like sheep. Peter feared a reaction and banished in perpetuity those who had not yet been immolated; but from that moment the Streltsy militia ceased to exist. "This great change," says Voltaire in his History of Peter the Great, "took place without the slightest resistance, because it had been prepared." We have just seen, in fact, how it had been prepared. The remnants of the corps of the streltsy were dispersed, with their families, in Siberia, in Astrakhan and in the country of Azov.

The people value their costume, for them it is an opinion, and when Peter cut off the heads of those who did not want to cut their beards, he was both cruel and absurd. When, in the same way, he wanted to replace by the skimpy coat of the Germans the ancient national dress, appropriate to the climate and combining convenience with simplicity, he found an obstinate resistance, which it was still necessary to overcome by means of torture.

Other reforms had a more useful object, and were carried out with more moderation and discernment: such were the abolition of the ridiculous ceremonies which were practiced at marriages, and the suppression of the degrading formulas which were of use in the petitions addressed either to the emperor, or to the great personages who represented his authority.

The printing press was freed from certain regulatory obstacles. Special schools were established for the teaching of dead and living languages: efforts were made to translate good books; finally the nationals, hitherto imprisoned within the limits of their fatherland, were able to go and ask foreign peoples for instructions and examples. Today the Russians have become a traveling and dissipating nation, and carry their sumptuous idleness all over Europe, although the faculty of traveling outside their country is not so easily granted to them by the sovereign as one might to believe.

After having tried his hand at the role of legislator and reformer in this way, Peter I longed to play the conqueror. The Peace of Karlowitz having limited his ambition on the side of Turkey, he sought subjects for aggrandizement in the north of his States. Charles XII then began his adventurous career, on the same throne of Sweden which had been illustrated by the more solid talents and the more heroic exploits of Gustavus Adolphus. Now, Peter wanted war at least as much as his neighbor.
Charles XII, after defeating the King of Denmark and signing the Peace of Travendal, went to Narva, with less than eighteen thousand men, to seek the Russians, thirty-two thousand in number. At the beginning of the action, Polish generals, dissatisfied, betrayed; and, leaving the entrenchments, surrendered to the Swedes. The Russian army resisted little and capitulated. The results of this day were disastrous and humiliating for Peter, who lost all his artillery, his generals and his officers; not a single one of his soldiers withdrew with his arms, notwithstanding the terms of the capitulation. The Swedes therefore abused a victory which, so to speak, had not been disputed.

Peter, it must be confessed, was not overwhelmed by this misfortune. He blamed it on the inadequacy of his forces, or at least the inexperience of his officers, and promptly reorganized a new army. The bells of Moscow were melted down to rebuild the artillery; by prodigious activity, and multiplying himself, the Czar traversed his arsenals, and negotiating to revive the expiring zeal of his allies; but these abandoned him. The King of Poland, Augustus, himself needed help against the Palatines, who regretted having allowed him to be elected king, and who, having followed the party of the Prince of Conti, called Charles XII to Poland.

However, the Russians dared to reappear before the Swedes, thanks to the audacity of Prince Sheremetev, and attacked their enemies at Dorpat (Tartu). The victory remained to them, after a combat of four hours; they killed three thousand men of the Swedes and seized their baggage. It should be noted that the Russians had been familiar with the first shock of the Swedish battalions, and that they had known how to rally. This small success began the new military destinies of Russia; for it decided the question whether the Russians could fight as well as the Swedes, justly called the scourge of Germany. From that moment, Charles XII, listening only to his blind temerity and his pride, and never knowing how to profit from a reverse or a victory, made enough mistakes to force fortune to side with his rival.

Sheremetev, who had beaten the Swedes at Dorpat, laid siege to Marienburg. It was in this town that a young girl was taken, an obscure orphan, brought up by the charity of a Protestant pastor, and recently become the wife of a Swedish soldier. This woman, destined to ascend the throne of the czars, was only the famous Catherine, the first of her name.

It was also at the same time (1708) that the foundations of Saint-Petersburg were laid. Peter I has been greatly praised for having erected a powerful and splendid metropolis in a place where before only lakes and a few miserable fishing huts were to be seen. Perhaps there is great merit in thus triumphing over obstacles and giving the lie to nature; but when we think of the terrible consumption of men and money which this enterprise occasioned, when we read that scarcity alone carried off a hundred thousand of these individuals, we are much less inclined to admire the constancy of Peter the Great. All these victories over men and over the elements were solemnized by a triumphal entry into Moscow. These sorts of fetes pleased the Czar very much, although he affected to play only a secondary part in them.

A greater and above all more useful monument of his reign, a real triumph obtained for the benefit of his empire and his peoples, was the execution of the canal which joined the Baltic Sea to the Caspian Sea, by uniting the river of Tver with that from Msta; but the honor of this idea does not belong to Peter: it was an obscure merchant, named Serdyukov, who offered it to him.
Let us hasten to the end of the first act of this war of the North, where Peter, instructed by his setbacks, passed so rapidly, from a secondary rank in politics, to the military supremacy of the North.

Master of all Ingria, he had entrusted the command to Menshikov, that famous favorite, a pastry boy who had become a prince, and who, like all the courtiers, was shamelessly devoted to the will of the sovereign who had carried out this metamorphosis in his favor.

After repelling the Swedes who were threatening his nascent city, Peter had gone to look for them in Courland, hoping to penetrate as far as Riga; but arrested by General Lewenhaupt and completely defeated by the latter at Gemauertshof, he was so in two more encounters with the Lithuanians of the party of that unfortunate King Augustus whom he still supported, in spite of Poland. The palatines, the ecclesiastical primates, the bishops, were assembling at this very moment to elect another king in his place. Augustus had just become odious to this republic, whose liberties he was to later oppress.

At Tycoksim, Peter joined Augustus, consoled him with his misfortunes, and promised to avenge him. They went to Lithuania together. Peter, on departing, left him an army, and returned to Moscow to triumph according to his custom, "after a very difficult campaign," said Voltaire.

But Charles XII was advancing on Grodno. General Schulenburg, at the head of twelve thousand Saxons and six thousand Russians, Augustus' last hope, was defeated at Fraustadt by Rehnskiöld. The rout was complete. It was then that Peter marched Menshikov to meet the victors, and hurried to prepare the defense of his states as well as the preservation of its conquests in Ingria.

Meanwhile, Augustus was signing the unworthy treaty which took away his crown; and, to fill his shame, he delivered Patkul, who had so valiantly defended him; he even wrote, by order of Charles XII, a letter of congratulations to the new King Stanislaus.

There was then talk of electing a new king for Poland: but Peter, Charles XII and the diet could not agree. It had put Prince Rákóczi in the ranks, formerly a formidable competitor of Emperor Leopold. Peter proposed Sieniawski, the famous general of the republic; it did not take long for three kings of Poland to be seen at once. An ambassador from France spoke of peace to Charles XII, hoping to turn his arms against Joseph. The obstinate warrior repulsed these insults; whatever the fate of Poland, he now wanted to deal with peace only in Moscow. What a subject of reflection that this fatal obstinacy of Charles XII, whose example must have been reproduced, nowadays, for the ruin of a fortune far otherwise admirable and providential than that of the Swedish monarch!

Charles XII therefore marched on Lithuania, and was at the moment of catching the Tsar in Grodno. He built a bridge over the Berezina, and a few days later crossed the torrent of the Vabich, at the sight of the Russians; he attacked them, defeated them, and soon crossed the Borysthenes at Mohilev; and, on the faith of Mazepa, who promised to make Ukraine revolt in his favor, he plunged into the deserts of this province. The Russians followed him from Smolensk; they joined General Lewenhaupt, who brought them sixteen thousand men from
Livonia, and defeated the Swedes, but did not defeat them. This stubborn struggle lasted three days; but the Swedes, exhausted by a swift march, in almost impassable lands, yielded to the excess of fatigue, rather than to the exertion of their enemies. Charles gathered the wreckage of these troops, and still found himself at the head of about thirty thousand men, still obstinate in his plan to subjugate Ukraine and then march on Moscow. He was able to obtain, through Mazepa, who had promised everything, food, ammunition, weapons, and soldiers, only the relief of a few thousand Zaporizhian Cossacks, a disastrous relief, since this circumstance led him to Poltava.

Charles was attacking this city; but Peter marched there with all his forces and took measures to ensure their retreat in case of an event, deserving this time at least, by prudent conduct, the qualification of great captain, the object of his wishes. It was under the walls of Poltava and on the banks of the Vorskla, which bathes them, that fortune was to decide the fate of these two rivals to whom the fates of half of Europe were linked.

Charles, although wounded, not wishing to depart from his custom of offering battle to the enemy, rushed out of his entrenchments: the impetuosity of his soldiers found in the Russians a resistance worthy of it. This action was very lively and did not last more than two hours. The Swedes, attacked in their turn by the Russians, suddenly arrayed in battle order with remarkable precision, gave way everywhere. Then Charles XII, forced to flee, and followed by about fourteen thousand men, beat a retreat towards the Borysthenes.

Such was that famous day of Poltava, which only increased the power of Russia in the North.

Peter honored his prisoners by inviting the principal among them to his table; he drank to their health, and called them his masters; but soon after, he had them all taken to Siberia, wishing thus to avenge, it is said, the outrage that Charles XII had done him by refusing the private cartel, and in closed field, which he had sent to him before the siege of Narva.

Taking advantage of his victory, the Czar returned to Poland, replaced the crown on the too humiliated brow of Augustus, and concluded with him a treaty against Sweden, in concert with Denmark and the King of Prussia; from there Peter marched towards Riga, blockaded that place, and hastened to prepare a triumphal feast at St. Petersburg. He deployed there the sumptuous apparatus of the remains of the vanquished, and they themselves appeared there, as well as the stretcher on which Charles XII had been carried during the action.

From Petersburg, Peter returned to Moscow to celebrate his marriage with this young Livonian taken in Marienburg eight years previously, and whose charms, but still more the spirit, had henceforth acquired an irresistible influence over him. A singular woman, who, deprived by the misfortune and the abjection of the first years of her youth, of the particular virtues of her sex, knew how to find others, in her new fortune, which were worthy of being enlightened by the great day from the throne!

The vizier Baltacı Mehmet had already crossed the Danube, at the head of a hundred thousand men; the Czar, on his side, crossed the Borysthenes and hastened to join Marshal Sheremetev. Catherine, wishing to justify the brilliant favor she had just received, shared, with warlike
constancy, the fatigues of her husband. She marched, on horseback and beside him, at the head of the troops, as if she had already known the genius of her nation and the spirit of its soldiers.

The general rendezvous was at Iaşi, on the banks of the Pruth; the lack of provisions, other obstacles, the sad fruits of these arid climates, soon rendered the march of the army as hazardous as it was painful. However diligent the Czar might be, he did not arrive early enough to prevent the vizier from crossing the Pruth, which was the essential point.

The Turkish army was four times larger than that of Peter: this is a fact which is not disputed; but this army offered still more disproportion in the skill and happiness of its movements. After boldly crossing the Pruth, and forcing the Russian infantry to fall back, the Vizier suddenly cut off all communications from his enemy’s army corps and shut them up in the marshes bordering the river, depriving his adversary of all hope of retreat, and thus held it under the fire of its batteries which were soon to crush it.

Peter, above all, had to beat a retreat to avoid the immediate danger; but he was pursued, and in vain changed places, everywhere the same disadvantages, the same dangers. If the Czar did not fight, he would soon have to give in to scarcity, for hunger was already besieging his camp.

Filled with anxiety, trembling at the approach of the fatal moment which was to annihilate him, fleeing all eyes, Peter hid in the depths of his tent the excess of his despair. The army expected from its commander one of those generous resolutions usually inspired in great souls by extreme situations; he did not know how to take it. The mask had fallen: the hero of a moment had disappeared, to leave in his place only the weakest man.

He was obliged to cede all his conquests on the Black Sea, and thereby to renounce his favorite project of aggrandizement to the south of his States, and of communication with the rich countries of India. It will be seen that this project, reproduced by his successors, seems to enter naturally into the policy of the sovereigns of Russia, and accords better with their true interests than the pretension of being the moderators of the destinies of the West.

It was on his return from this disastrous campaign that Peter solemnly had Catherine recognized. She had as yet only a dubious claim to respect for the nation: her admirable conduct on the banks of the Pruth merited more certain respect for her. At the same time, he married Alexis, his son, but under sinister auspices, with the Princess of Wolfenbüttel. It was after the consummation of this marriage that the Czar undertook his last European excursion. He went first to Holland, and then to France, with the project of making the latter power share his political views.

We will not enter into the details of this prince's trip to Paris; it will suffice to say that he was the object of a fairly lively curiosity there, and that, from the Academy to the least public establishments, he saw himself followed by the care and the search for a flattery always ingenious and spiritual, but who doubtless, in his thoughts of pride, did not become a title of esteem for our nation. When he arrived at the Gobelins, his portrait was being painted there; when he entered the Louvre, a swing of the pendulum caused a gold medal bearing his effigy with a pompous epigraph to fall at his feet... But the order of the facts obliges us to pass on to the account of the death of Alexis.
This epoch in the life of Peter the Great is the fatal reef in which all his panegyrists have shattered. Here the truth appears under terrible features; and, in front of it, the writer who refuses to paint it must keep at least a modest silence.

Peter reproached his son with an incapacity and a lack of emulation which rendered him unworthy of being his heir, and incapable of continuing the great work of the regeneration of Russia. He reproached him, moreover, for having abandoned his young and virtuous wife, the Princess of Brunswick-Wolfenbüttel, to live with a peasant girl; but these grievances, well founded as they were, seemed much more a pretext than the cause of the inhuman judgment which struck the Czarevitch. What deeply irritated Peter I was that his son stubbornly affected the habits he wanted to proscribe, and espoused all the prejudices, all the aversions of the part of the nation that his father's reforms upset and frightened the most. The priests with whom this young prince got drunk daily, the nobles and those who had presided over his education, flattered him with the hope of soon ascending the throne, because the health of the Czar was declining; and once emperor, Alexis was to upset the paternal inheritance, and retreat, with the national aristocracy, towards the past times of Russia; but he very easily gave up these projects when he was convinced that for him it was about being the head. He declared himself incompetent, unworthy of the crown, and promised everything they wanted. He even asked to become a monk: it was the only punishment that had to be imposed on him. Finally, he took advantage of the absence of his father, when the latter had undertaken the second journey of which we have just spoken, to flee to Vienna, where he put himself under the protection of the Emperor Charles VI. From Vienna he went to Naples, and it was there that the Czar's envoys joined him, charged with persuading him and bringing him back. As soon as his escape had been known, his death sentence had been irrevocably pronounced in the implacable heart of his father. Thus, all the means, all the protests which were employed to persuade the son to this fatal return, were only an execrable pretense. Peter, in writing to him, promised absolute forgiveness. "Come back," he told him, "and I will love you more than ever; you will always be my darling son." There is between this language of a tender father and the intrigues which prepared the condemnation of Alexis a frightful opposition. A long instruction, which was only a long agony, solemnized this royal parricide. The unfortunate prince was forced to accuse himself; he signed all the confessions that they wanted to extract from him; and if anything can lessen the pity that such a destiny deserves, it is the abnegation of all dignity with which Alexis named himself and signed himself: guilty slave, inept servant and unworthy son, asking for his pardon from his most merciful father.

Such was neither the attitude nor the resignation of this Don Carlos to whom Alexis* has been compared. But we can assimilate on this occasion Philip II and Peter I: both, in killing their sons, claimed to have done a legitimate, necessary and almost holy act. No one ever really knew how Don Carlos perished; it was also unknown what was the end of Alexis. The most common opinion makes him die of shock after reading his sentence. Some believe that he was beheaded in his prison by a German general; this is the opinion of Eischhorn. It was said, finally, that Catherine had sent him poison. What is certain is that the judgment of the high court which judged him did not specify either the type of death or the place of execution. This high court, made up of ministers, senators and senior military and civilian officials, concluded by submitting its deliberation to the revision of the very lenient monarch: these were the terms of the play. Peter was therefore the only judge and the only assassin of his son. Accomplices or friends of the
Czarevitch were also punished with death. Peter's fury only subsided when he no longer saw anyone who, near or far, had maintained any relationship with his son.

*When, after having said to his father, Philip II: "Let your Majesty take care that it is your own blood that you are about to shed," Philip gave him this atrocious reply: "When I have bad blood, I reach out my arm to the surgeon to open my vein," don Carlos replied with the pride of a hero: "Sire, I wanted to fulfill the wish of a person whom I must please until last moment; without that I would never have asked you for mercy and I would have died with more glory than you were able to live."

He showed himself to be very severe with a few great men who, shortly afterwards, were convicted of criminal embezzlement; but peculation only attacked public prosperity, and the predators got off with fines and a few beatings, which the Czar administered to them himself. He used to chastise with his hand the greatest lords of the court.

Peter I continued the war against Sweden, made raids on the coasts of this kingdom, and finally reduced the queen, who had just succeeded Charles XII, to ask for the renewal of the negotiations for peace, she obtained it, this peace, by the mediation of the regent of France, Philippe d'Orléans. It is to be remarked that the Czar would not consent to an armistice until it was on the point of signing, which may give an idea of the generosity of his proceedings when he was at his strongest. The Treaty of Neustadt assured him the possession of all the provinces conquered to the north of his States, and completed his wishes. He displayed his joy by feasts of a magnificence which surpassed that of his first triumphs, and received from the assembled senate and synod the titles of great and father of the country, which would have made his glory, if he had not done so had himself requested. Most of the European powers recognized him under the title of emperor, through the agency of their envoys; only the pope, using vain reprisals, refused to imitate them.

After so much happiness and triumphs, deep sorrows awaited Peter at the domestic hearth. He acquired the bitter conviction that this woman whom he had drawn from obscurity to make sit on the throne, was unfaithful to him. We know that he had the young Moens de la Croix (Willem Mons), an accomplice of the Empress, beheaded and that he took her herself, in a sleigh, to the place of execution, to show her, planted on a stake, the head of her lover. She did not sigh, not complain; however, the Czar did not need her to confess her crime, for that, in the absence of words, her grief betrayed her: he knew everything, he was convinced; and, had it not been for Prince Repnin, who urged him to deal with this affair in the European fashion, Catherine would have suffered the same torture as Moens. It should be noted that the latter had not been tried for adultery with the Empress; but they had pretext, for his downfall, on one of those causes which are always abundant in the courts: Moens de la Croix and Madame Balk, his sister, were accused of having allowed themselves to be won over by presents, and as they had in Moens that all hope of saving his life was lost, the young man confessed himself guilty of corruption.

Catherine was avenged, or perhaps she took revenge: she was accused of having poisoned her husband; but this crime, if it existed, remained a mystery. Several historians have defended it, maintaining that Peter the Great died of no other poison than that which was the fruit of his debauchery, and against which the pharmacopoeia of that time had, even in enlightened countries, only helpless rescuers; however that may be, it is certain that the Czar died in terrible pain and in the anguish of death. despair, after having submitted to outrageous searches the
women of his court whose disastrous favors he expiated. In the ordinary laws of nature, such a
vigorous temperament and such rare organization seemed to promise him a longer career.

Peter I died in 1725, with that dignity of resignation, the only way a great man should arrive at
the tomb. If, as some wise men have claimed, it is necessary to wait for this last act to pronounce
on the character of a man, it is permissible to place Peter the Great above even the elite men.

This prince had received no real instruction in his youth; and, whatever Voltaire may say, nature
had not endowed him with a philosophical genius, that is to say, a genius which sees things such
as they are. If Peter had had the eye of a superior mind, he would have understood that the
manners peculiar to a very advanced civilization could not be transplanted by coup d'état into a
still savage country; he would have seen that nature proceeds in a slow and progressive manner
in the formation of societies, more than in anything else, and that in this genus nothing lasts
except what is shaped slowly.

Peter I annihilated his nobility; and at the same time, as he had a mania for favoritism in the
highest degree, and as his palace, changed into a tavern, was incessantly filled with ignoble
jesters, it soon happened that a peat, emerging from the mire, entered the quarry honorary or
lucrative employments, flooded the senate and became the scourge of the people. In his time, a
government sometimes became the reward of a juggler who had known how to make the czar
laugh amid his bacchanalian fumes.

The financial organization of its states was entirely Turkish. He had divided his empire into
governments which he gave on a firm basis, leaving the governors the option of having
themselves represented by viceroys, advisers or officers. He had demanded that all the nobility of
his empire reside with him, in the capital; and, under his reign, there was such a lord who had not
visited his domains for twenty years. The result of this singular tyranny was the withering away
of all the property of the noble families; in fact, the State suffered from it, and the lack of culture
often brought on dearth. He also endeavored to morally kill and debase the nobility. All the
young gentlemen, torn from their families in childhood, were enlisted as soldiers or sailors.
Confounded in the various military corps with men of the lowest extraction, they forgot their
birth and lost those lofty feelings which constitute true nobility and without which names and
titles are only words. Finally, the civil and military organization, its wars, like its great
establishments, are the subject of reproaches which do not seem less justified. Everywhere
confusion, contradiction and embarrassment; everywhere the arbitrariness of a single man
replacing the law or the usage that took its place. Above all, Russia needed men; his wars killed
more than a million. Peter wanted to build a city in a swamp, and it was an immense human
sacrifice. The place was so badly chosen, that even today it takes ukases from the emperor to
force his subjects to form establishments there, and that nature from time to time regains its
rights on this perilous soil, and takes revenge of those who have, so to speak, done violence to it,
by raising the waters of the Neva.

It will be understood that the trial of Alexis was forgiven Peter the Great less than anything else;
moreover, he was reproached with having changed the order of succession to the throne
customary in Russia at all times, and with having made it an additional privilege for the
sovereign. Ultimately, the reign of this prince was a kind of paroxysm a policy which ceased at
his death and left the empire really weaker than it had received from its ancestors. This supposedly great impulse, and these vast thoughts of the future so ambitious, were not the edges of his grave. As for the progress made by the Russian nation in new ideas and in new manners, it would have made them without him, without ostentation and without pomp.