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**STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP ASSESSMENT  
OF PETER THE GREAT**

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## ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Samuel A. Whitson, LTC, U.S. Army  
TITLE: Strategic Leadership Assessment of Peter the Great  
FORMAT: Strategy Research Project  
DATE: 13 March 1998 PAGES: 48 CLASSIFICATION: Unclassified

Peter the Great's rule over Russia was secured by birth to nobility, but unlike other tsars, his extraordinary reign was characterized by what is known today as strategic leadership. Peter's remarkable, but unconventional performance as Russia's ruler provides ample opportunity for comparison of 21st century leadership concepts to a 16th century leader. This paper evaluates Peter's strategic level performance in regard to the roles of strategic leader, practitioner and theorist. Additionally, his actions and conduct during significant aspects of his reign, such as the Great Northern War and building of St. Petersburg, are assessed using the strategic leader competencies as outlined in U.S. Army Field Manual 22-103, Strategic Leadership.



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## INTRODUCTION

In October 1696, a large triumphal Russian army marched through Moscow upon their return from capturing the major Turkish fortress at Azov on the Don River. Their successful return was the culmination of a massive joint two-year campaign that required total national mobilization for victory. Far behind the mounted senior military leaders, companies of musicians, guards and cavalrymen, a group of officers were walking the entire nine-mile route. With them, dressed as a simple galley captain, twenty-four year-old Peter I, ruler of Russia and architect of the strategic victory, walked with his fellow boat captains.<sup>1</sup>

Biographer Robert K. Massie called Peter the Great of Russia "A TITAN OF HISTORY, a maker of the modern world."<sup>2</sup> Another historian notes that he "can lay claim to substantial leadership."<sup>3</sup> While Peter's rule over Russia was secured by birth to nobility, unlike other tsars, his extraordinary reign was characterized by what is known today as strategic leadership.

In his study, Strategic Art: The New Discipline for 21st Century Leaders, Major General Richard Chilcoat notes that "strategic leadership is effective practice of the strategic art." Peter's remarkable, but unconventional performance as Russia's ruler provides ample opportunity for comparison of 21st century leadership concepts to a 16th century leader. This is particularly relevant when Chilcoat writes that strategic art

"entails the orchestration of all the instruments of national power to yield specific, well-defined end-states."<sup>4</sup>

Was Peter a "master of the strategic art" as defined in Chilcoat's text? Was his contribution to Russia's reform and expansion best explained and limited to the role(s) of strategic leader, practitioner and/or theorist? This paper will evaluate Peter's strategic level performance in regard to these roles and skills common to all three.

Additionally, his actions and conduct during significant aspects of his reign, such as the Great Northern War and building the Russian Navy, will be assessed using the strategic leader competencies as outlined in U.S. Army Field Manual 22-103, Strategic Leadership.<sup>5</sup> These competencies, conceptual, technical and interpersonal skills, apply to strategic leaders today, but when properly employed nearly 300 years ago, allowed Peter to lead and change a nation.

## **STRATEGIC LEADER ROLES, SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE AND ATTRIBUTES**

### **Strategic Leader, Practitioner and Theorist**

Chilcoat's text, Strategic Art: The New Discipline for 21st Century Leaders, defines in detail the roles performed by the complete strategist. While Peter operated in the strategic environment of the 1700's, these contemporary strategic roles provide a relevant measure of his strategic performance.

A strategic leader must be able to coordinate ends, ways and means to accomplish national interest while inspiring others to think and act in concert. Successful strategic leaders of the 20th century include Marshall and Eisenhower. They were uniquely capable of providing vision and focus through their influential command and peer leadership skills.<sup>6</sup>

While a strategic leader must coordinate ends, ways and means, a *practitioner* must apply them through force to achieve national interests. Ridgway, Patton and Rommel are examples of successful strategic practitioners. They fully understood each level of war and the full dimensions of military power while successfully executing strategic plans developed from joint guidance.<sup>7</sup>

Strategic *theorists*, such as Clausewitz, Sun Tzu and Mahan, influenced others through indirect leadership in the form of theories and studies based on the study of warfare. Theorists are creative leaders that formulate ends, ways and means through application of strategic concepts based on all elements of national power. Strategic leaders and practitioners are students of the strategic art, with theorists serving as both their teacher and mentor.<sup>8</sup>

### **Strategic Thinking Skills**

Whether a strategic leader, practitioner or theorist, all three share common thinking skills. *Holistic thinking* allows the strategist to blend all elements of national power, economic, diplomatic and military, while understanding the strengths and weaknesses of each. *Conceptual thinking* involves the ability to visualize the long-term and short-term implications of a particular strategy. Finally, *normative thinking* provides the strategist a means to distinguish between attainable or preferable results using his ethical framework and foundation.<sup>9</sup>

### **Strategic Leader Competencies**

According to draft Field Manual 22-103, Strategic Leadership, strategic leaders must have *conceptual, technical and interpersonal* competencies. These are the learned or acquired "skills, [knowledge], attributes and capacities" that allow a leader to perform and accomplish tasks at the strategic level. Key requirements include an ability for creative and integrated thinking in an uncertain environment. Success depends on the ability to deal with the complex, understand the organization's operating systems, and build consensus and systems to achieve strategic goals.<sup>10</sup>

*Conceptual* competency is the ability to think clearly of the consequences of actions in terms of effects over time. Peter's

conceptual thinking skills were constantly challenged by the complex world of the late 1600's. He was also challenged to identify second and third order effects and acceptable costs of the limited solutions to the myriad of national and diplomatic problems. Key components of conceptual competency are frame of reference development, problem management and an ability to envision the future.<sup>11</sup>

*Technical* competency is the ability to establish conditions that maximize the effectiveness of the organization and formulate effective national objectives and strategic interests. It also involves an understanding of the complex nature of joint and combined operations. Technical competency components include system understanding, joint and combined relationships and political and social competence.<sup>12</sup>

Peter's *interpersonal* competencies, with the components of consensus building, negotiation skills and effective communications, were routinely tested during his coalition warfare efforts. The vast scope of his reforms required orders and policies be communicated accurately to ensure compliance. Peter's negotiation and consensus building skills, while not always honorable, were key to building alliances against the Turks and Swedes.<sup>13</sup>

## **STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP ASSESSMENT OF PETER THE GREAT**

The complete strategist performs the role of leader, theorist and practitioner, but only the master of the strategic art "can completely integrate and combine" all three.<sup>14</sup> Because of the complex nature of organizations and competing demands of the environment, competence in all three roles is normally beyond the capability of even the most capable strategist or leader. The classic example of a master of the strategic art is Winston Churchill.<sup>15</sup> To determine if Peter's strategic leadership is equal to Churchill's, an assessment of the roles and shared skills of the complete strategist will be applied to historical opinion, fact and anecdotal evidence from Peter's life and rule.

### **Early Development**

According to his tutor, Peter's childhood interests went beyond the basics of learning how to read and write. He developed an early fascination with Russian history. This early frame of reference development was supplemented when his mother directed the Ordinance Office to publish for him books on weapons, battles, and foreign cities for exclusive use.

His tutor also found that Peter was not a scholar, but was open and eager to learn, which is a key component of conceptual thinking. While his early education was not remarkable, it was in keeping with that provided to the nobility of the time. What was significant about his education was that Peter personally

chose what he wanted to learn, making him essentially a "self-taught man."<sup>16</sup>

Peter's education never provided the structured, or sequential learning of higher disciplines. His early move to the military environment at Preobrazyhenskoe took him away from the tutors in Moscow that could have provided instruction in theology and philosophy. Little or no effort was devoted to teach Peter the written word or foreign languages. His entire early focus was on learning the military craft rather than what the Greeks considered "the art of governing men." Peter properly envisioned the future with regard to military reform, but he failed to acquire the skills or knowledge that provided enlightenment in governing his people. Only in later years would Peter reflect and recognize his lack of a formal and disciplined education.<sup>17</sup>

Foreigners in Moscow were required to reside in a special enclave known as the "German Colony." Peter developed an early fascination with the foreign business owners and military officers living in the colony. It was also here that Peter established close and lasting relationships with two key mentors, General Patrick Gordon of Scotland and Francis Lefort, a Swiss adventurer. Gordon's loyalty and war experience had a tremendous influence on Peter. He became Peter's principle military advisor and friend. Lefort's friendship provided Peter a positive Western influence, particularly with an insight to its customs and culture. While having Peter's total trust and

confidence, Lefort never used his position to enrich himself. Both relationships, remarkable breaks from a culture suspicious of foreigners, demonstrated that Peter was comfortable with the complex and open to new experiences.<sup>18</sup>

The defining agenda of young Peter's life was his fascination with war. His interest was reflected in the elaborate "toy regiment" he established at Preobrazyhenskoe. It was supplied by the government arsenal and staffed with the children of nobility. By the time he was eleven-years-old, Peter had the toy cannons replaced with real ones and permanent barracks constructed. Peter and his young soldiers were also provided the appropriate military pay, discipline and training.

Peter's conceptual and technical competencies were enhanced with his self-imposed role and responsibilities in the regiment. He was determined to learn all he could of the life of a soldier by starting his service as drummer boy, the lowest grade possible. Peter participated in the same routine as the other young soldiers by living in the barracks, standing watch and digging entrenchments. He only promoted himself when he merited an advancement, a policy he would later impose on others from the noble class.<sup>19</sup>

The toy regiment conducted its last maneuver in 1694 with an large force-on-force operation. Nearly 30,000 infantry, artillery and support soldiers were divided into two opposing armies, with Peter serving as artilleryman. He directed an

elaborate siege operation using the latest Western techniques of mining and fortification. When the initial attack succeeded in taking the fortress too quickly, Peter ordered a restart. Another three weeks were needed to properly complete the siege to Peter's satisfaction.<sup>20</sup>

This maneuver culminated the development of Peter's system understanding and problem management skills, such as making adjustments, modifying initial approaches to a problem and understanding how complex systems operate. The toy regiment set the stage for significant developments in Peter's rule and Russia's history. Peter formed lasting relations with his fellow soldiers in the regiment, many who would later serve him in high positions of trust and responsibility. The regiment's maneuvers also established a close bond and trust between Peter and his foreign advisors.<sup>21</sup>

Most importantly, the regiment provided Peter the ability to envision a future for Russia built on the strength of an army. However, it is also suggested that Peter's toy regiment maneuvers were not part of a master plan or grand strategy. The campaign to take Azov was not regarded by de Jonge as a logical extension of the practice siege operations of 1694 because of Peter's reputation to react in an ad hoc manner to situations.<sup>22</sup>

### Azov Campaign of 1695-1696

The key events that shaped Peter's future role in Europe were the capture of Azov from the Turks in 1696 and the victory at Poltava in 1709. Both events gave Peter the experience and practical application that formal schooling could never provide. Victory at Azov also gave him the credentials he would need to conduct strategic level negotiations with the imperial leaders of the West for future coalition warfare against Sweden.<sup>23</sup>

The Azov campaign offers conflicting examples of Peter's success and failure as a strategic leader. For instance, Peter split his main force of 31,000 soldiers during the first advance to Azov in 1695. Sensitive to jealousy between his foreign subordinates, Lefort and Gordon, Peter did not designate a supreme commander. Each was to operate independently, while overall policy would be made in council, with Peter, serving as bombardier, in attendance. A larger force of 128,000 soldiers under Russian command would attack west to cover the main effort.<sup>24</sup>

By June 1696, Peter's main body had arrived at Azov. The Turk defenses effectively blocked any Russian movement around the fortress by way of the Don River. Watch towers and an iron chain supplemented the fortifications. With control of the Don, the Turks were able to maintain a resupply route between Azov and the Black Sea.<sup>25</sup>

Peter's shortcomings as a strategic practitioner, holistic thinker and his ability with technical and interpersonal competencies were soon apparent. The Russian supply system immediately failed to provide for the 30,000 soldiers around Azov. A lack of engineers, key to siege operations, were also in short supply and the main force was too small to completely surround the Turkish fortress. Finally, drafted Russian soldiers and the imperial guards, known as the "streltsy," resented serving under foreign officers and often refused to obey orders.<sup>26</sup>

During the siege, Peter was more comfortable with the tactical level of war. He displayed exceptional courage while serving as a bombardier, but contributed little to solve the confusion of long and often useless councils of war with his senior commanders. Divided command, little understanding of siege tactics, poor intelligence and limited reconnaissance contributed to a lack of progress and low morale.<sup>27</sup> Peter called off the siege in October, and started his retreat to Moscow. The seven week return march was also a disaster, with many troops lost to hunger and harassment from Tatar cavalry.<sup>28</sup>

If the initial campaign against Azov demonstrated Peter's strategic shortcomings, his conceptual competencies, particularly frame of reference development and problem management, allowed him the ability to emerge as a strategic leader and practitioner during the next attempt. He didn't let the disappointment of

defeat discourage him from trying again. Peter learned from his mistakes and applied a systematic system of lessons learned for his next campaign.<sup>29</sup>

Reflective thinking and problem management skills provided Peter the ability to recognize the weaknesses of his army and related national level support systems. He managed the problem of the next campaign as a total system rather than implementing piecemeal changes. Improvements in the military's technical skills, such as gunners and engineers, and an improved command structure were required. However, Peter recognized the most critical need was a fleet for combined operations in his next campaign.<sup>30</sup>

For the next campaign, Peter doubled the size of the attacking force to 60,000, but reduced the overall mobilization requirement by eliminating the covering force. To achieve consensus, he appointed a Russian as overall commander, and to enhance his system understanding, he served as a galley captain in his new fleet.<sup>31</sup> However, Peter only had five months to construct a fleet during the severe winter in a nation with no significant ship building expertise, tradition, materials or yards.<sup>32</sup>

Peter's superior strategic leader skills were reflected in the national level effort to build his fleet. A shipyard was established 500 miles from Azov on the Upper Don River. It was located to protect it from Tatar raids and to ensure easy access

to ample timber. Nearly 28,000 unskilled workers were provided to construct the yard and the ships. Carpenters and shipbuilders were acquired from across Russia and Europe. A Dutch galley was even disassembled and sent from Archangel to Moscow as a model. Portions of ships were prefabricated and shipped over land from Moscow to the yard on the Upper Don.<sup>33</sup>

Confusion and lack of direction initially hampered construction. However, Peter personally took timely and proactive measures to focus the effort. After five months, he had a fleet of twenty-nine galleys and over 100 barges. Peter even designated a 4000 man marine landing force to supplement his new navy.<sup>34</sup>

The rapid return of the Russian force to Azov in the Spring of 1696 caught the Turks unprepared. They had made little or no improvements in their defenses since Peter's last attempt.<sup>35</sup> However, improvements in the Russian force since the last campaign set the stage for rapid success. Peter's larger force completely surrounded the fortress while the new fleet effectively cut the Turks from resupply by water. After an offer of generous terms, the Turks accepted surrender and were allowed to leave with their families, weapons and possessions.<sup>36</sup>

The victory at Azov did not end Peter's ambitious plans for Russia. He immediately recognized the strategic shortcomings in most elements of Russian national power. Immediate improvements were directed at expanding and improving the Russian fleet.

Young Russians were sent abroad for training in navigation, ship building and naval warfare.<sup>37</sup> The considerable effort to adopt Western methods and standards of warfare reflected Peter's strategic conceptual skills of opening his nation to new experiences while accepting risk of internal dissent.<sup>38</sup> His actions were particularly significant considering that a tsar's success in the past was measured by his ability at limiting Western influence in his country.<sup>39</sup>

While Peter's success was a significant event for Europe, some historians consider it a hollow victory. First, the fortress only allowed Russian access to the Sea of Azov. The Turks remained in control of the Black Sea and the surrounding lands. Additionally, the new fleet, while large, was of poor quality and in a short time, most of the ships were unserviceable.<sup>40</sup> However, these issues should be considered in terms of Peter's conceptual thinking skills. Azov was a short-term objective in a long-term goal for Russian expansion to the south. Peter also recognized the shortcomings of his new fleet, and initiated a systematic program for improvement.<sup>41</sup> Breaking again with tradition, Peter's conceptual skills lead him to the West for solutions.

## Great Embassy of 1697-1698

Too weak to expand his conquest alone against the Turks, Peter recognized the need for a coalition. To gain support, he conducted a two-year diplomatic visit, or Great Embassy, to Western Europe from 1697-1698. Not only was coalition warfare new for Russia, Peter was also the first tsar ever to travel to another country.<sup>42</sup>

Recognizing and correcting organizational weakness while making significant but risky breaks with tradition, demonstrated Peter's ability to integrate and combine all three roles of the complete strategist. Additionally, his strategic leader competencies of negotiation, consensus building and political and social competence were challenged throughout his visit. While Massie noted the Great Embassy was a turning point in Russia's history, Peter considered it the final course of his education that started in Moscow's German colony. He stated at the start of his journey, "I am a pupil and need to be taught."<sup>43</sup>

Peter wanted to acquire Western technical skills, particularly naval and artillery, and expand his knowledge of government operations.<sup>44</sup> However, his principle goal was to form a coalition of capable nations in his war against the Turks. Stops included the capitals of allies, such as Venice and Warsaw, and potential strong naval allies in London and Amsterdam.<sup>45</sup>

Despite his exceptional negotiation and consensus building skills, Western politics worked against Peter's efforts to build

a coalition. Holland was still in debt from its recent war while England was preparing for war with France. Peter's failure to anticipate the influence of Louis XIV over Europe demonstrated a weakness in his ability to perform as a strategic theorist. However, with no coalition, his holistic thinking skills allowed him to initiate immediate peace talks with the Turks to consolidate his recent gains.<sup>46</sup>

During his visit to Holland, Peter noted the tremendous wealth of the small nation. Despite its enormous size and abundant wealth of natural resources, Russia could not even feed its own people. Peter concluded that the key to Holland's success was the result of a strong mercantile system, a developed merchant fleet and a national tradition of religious tolerance.<sup>47</sup>

While his observations, conclusions and eventual reforms to mirror Holland's success demonstrated Peter's remarkable strategic leader skills, Peter also exhibited the limits of his normative thinking skills. He was not impressed with the Dutch's regard for the fine arts. Additionally, he failed to accept the notion of individual rights and its contribution to a progressive and prosperous society.<sup>48</sup> He noted after his visit to England's parliament, "English liberty has no place here [in Russia]... You need to know the nation and how it must be governed..."<sup>49</sup>

## Great Northern War of 1700-1721

Peter's entry into the Great Northern War with Sweden was based on history, a need to expand commerce and Peter's new found interest in the sea.<sup>50</sup> Russia's objectives were to gain possession on the Baltic coast, end Swedish control of Russian lakes and rivers and create a Baltic fleet to challenge the Swedes.<sup>51</sup> The greatest immediate challenge to Peter's strategic leader skills was not entirely military, but sensitive diplomatic negotiation requirements.

After the Great Embassy, Peter found two diplomatic missions awaiting his return to Moscow. A Swedish mission wanted to reaffirm the existing peace treaty with Russia. At the same time, a Polish mission was in Moscow seeking Peter's support for war against Sweden. Peter preferred war against Sweden, but needed peace with the Turks before he could commit to the Poles. Through a combination of expert, secret and often dishonest negotiation skills, Peter positioned Russia to protect its interest in either scenario.<sup>52</sup>

While his negotiation skills worked to his advantage in setting the stage for war, Peter's conceptual thinking skills were generally flawed when he made several serious miscalculations. First, he overestimated the commitment of his new allies to the war. Next, he underestimated the ability of Sweden to wage war. Additional mistakes included an incorrect assessment of his military power, and the ability to make a rapid

shift from a successful theater of war in the south. Peter was reflective twenty-four years later when he noted, "Russia entered her war blindly, with no thought of her own weakness or the enemy's strength."<sup>53</sup>

With a secret commitment to wage war against a Western military power, Peter immediately shifted the nation's resources and priorities from the south to the north.<sup>54</sup> While this demonstrated strategic leader qualities, such as the ability to focus and prioritize, Peter is charged with possessing a "cavalier" approach to his new war. He provided the military only four months for war preparation.<sup>55</sup>

Peter was at a disadvantage when competing against Charles XII on a normative and moral level. Charles stated, "I have resolved never to begin an unjust war, but also never to end a just war without overcoming my enemy."<sup>56</sup> Peter was by some accounts entering into a limited war, while Charles was committed to total war aimed at the destruction of Peter. While Peter correctly feared Sweden's military might, he failed to properly appreciate the character of its leader.

Within months of the war's start, Charles easily defeated both of Peter's allies in a series of brilliant military operations. Next, at Narva in November 1700, less than 9000 Swedes easily defeated nearly 40,000 Russians and captured all their artillery.<sup>57</sup> Like his first defeat at Azov, Narva exposed Peter's strategic failings. However, it also demonstrated his

best strategic leader competencies to learn from the past, identify solutions, and employ all elements of national power to achieve victory. He reflected years later, "That we lived through this disaster, or rather this good fortune, focused us to be industrious, energetic, and experienced."<sup>58</sup>

Peter's reputation as a strategic practitioner suffered at Narva because of his battlefield performance. One historian noted that, "he knew much of fighting but little of strategy, and of military intelligence work he had not even a glimmer."<sup>59</sup> Also, on the eve of battle, Peter departed his command in the middle of the night and left no instructions for the remaining military commander. While he claimed he was needed elsewhere to coordinate other matters, it was noted as a repeat of his "occasional capacity for panic."<sup>60</sup>

Peter's flight at Narva reinforced Charles' low respect for him. However, Frederick of Prussia considered Peter's position away from the battlefield in keeping with the changing nature of eighteenth-century warfare.<sup>61</sup> Massie also dismissed criticism of Peter's performance because he was locating himself where he could do the most good.<sup>62</sup> By contrast, Charles' desire to lead from the front caused his death fourteen years later.

Peter employed his strategic leader communication and consensus building competencies relentlessly after Narva to ensure his policies were implemented. In the nine years between Narva and his victory at Poltava, he never stayed in one location

more than three months. He devoted himself to inspecting the army, navy and government operations.<sup>63</sup> On the eve of battle at Poltava, in a fashion unfamiliar to European nobility, Peter personally addressed his troops by calling on them to fight for Russia, not for him.<sup>64</sup>

Charles' eventual defeat at Poltava was sealed earlier at the battle of Holowczyn in August 1708. Charles described it as a "merry scrimmage" when he defeated a large Russian force. While it was a tactical victory for Charles, it was a strategic victory for Peter.

Peter was also pleased with the performance of his army at Holowczyn. With only two-to-one superiority over the Swedes (it was five-to-one at Narva), he successfully held off Charles' attack for twelve hours and then completed a combined delaying action to prevent destruction of his army. The great significance of the battle was that it falsely reinforced Charles' belief that he could easily defeat the Russians regardless of the odds. Despite advice for caution from his commanders, Charles pressed on to meet the Russians at Poltava in 1709.<sup>65</sup>

Peter excelled in his role as a strategic practitioner at Poltava. Prior to the battle, the Russian forces avoided direct contact while devastating the countryside in Charles' path. Peter also developed the tactical plan to disrupt Charles' attack by skillfully employing his engineers to canalize the Swedish

infantry into small groups. Finally, Peter displayed none of the panic of the earlier fight at Narva. He was engaged throughout the battle, suffering several near-misses while leading soldiers at the front.<sup>66</sup>

Most importantly, Peter's interpersonal competencies were reflected in the conduct of his councils of war. He built consensus between infantry and cavalry leaders despite years of earlier mistrust. He was also responsive to advice and made strategy, not tactics, a routine matter of discussion. Finally, he combined his military effort with a combination of diplomatic activity to ensure Charles was isolated from support while maintaining Russia's participation in coalition warfare.<sup>67</sup>

Peter immediately recognized the significance of his victory at Poltava. Until then, Western powers held his army and nation in low regard. He sent detailed descriptions of his victory to every European capital to impress his allies and influence the nonaligned leaders. New offers of alliances soon came in from France, Prussia, Denmark, Holland and Poland.<sup>68</sup> While the war would continue for another twelve years, Sweden would never again dominate northern Europe. Peter also regarded the victory as the "true foundation stone of St. Petersburg."<sup>69</sup>

However, with victory, Peter failed to realize the strategic consequences of his new found influence. The Western powers were soon fearful of Russia's new role in Europe and the power of its army. Many also feared an early end to the conflict and a shift

in Russian intentions. Peter noted, "My allies are too many gods for me; what I want they do not permit; what they advise, I cannot put into practice."<sup>70</sup> He was learning a painful and costly lesson of European politics.

In 1716, nineteen years after his first visit, Peter returned to Western Europe to form a new coalition to end the war with Sweden. With Prussia, England and Denmark on his side, Peter now had the naval power to invade Sweden. Peter employed his diplomatic and strategic practitioner skills to form an invasion force for employment on the southern Swedish coast. He had the combined support of the British navy, the Dutch merchant fleet, a supporting attack from the east, and 30,000 Russian troops in Copenhagen for embarkation directly to Sweden.<sup>71</sup>

With the force days from departing for invasion, Peter called off the operation without consulting his coalition partners. Peter's decision demonstrated a flaw in his interpersonal skills. Peter blamed the allies for delaying the invasion while his allies were suspicious of Peter's actual intentions for the 30,000 Russian soldiers in Denmark. The actual reason may have been Peter's assessment that the entire operation was too risky for his army.<sup>72</sup>

In a strategic leader and holistic thinking sense, Peter's early devotion of building a navy to defeat the Swedes was highly successful. He directed the construction of shallow draft galleys that could operate along the coastal areas inaccessible

to the more powerful ocean-going Swedish fleet.<sup>73</sup> His victory over the Swedish fleet at Hango, while actually a minor affair, was considered by Peter as the equivalent of Poltava.<sup>74</sup> It set the stage for Sweden's final defeat. By 1719, Peter's Cossack cavalry was raiding near the Swedish capital of Stockholm.<sup>75</sup>

### **Building a Navy**

With the experience from building his southern fleet, Peter elected early in the Great Northern War to construct a Baltic fleet capable of defeating the Swedes. The vulnerability of St. Petersburg also prompted Peter to act quickly. By 1705, Peter possessed a fleet capable of challenging the Swedes. However, Peter, applying the strategic leader skill of sensing and compensating for his weaknesses, refused to offer his untested ships to battle unless they had a one-third force advantage over the Swedes.<sup>76</sup>

Peter employed all elements of national power over a twenty year period to building a Baltic fleet that eventually outclassed the Swedes in every category, including ship construction and gunnery.<sup>77</sup> By 1725, the Russian navy had over 800 ships and 20,000 sailors operating on the Baltic.<sup>78</sup> Other naval initiatives advocated by Peter included establishment of a naval marine force and development work on a submarine.<sup>79</sup>

As with many of his grand projects, Peter failed to balance practical plans with attainable goals. Despite an increase in

imports and exports, Peter never successfully developed a functional Russian merchant fleet because of the recurring Russian reluctance to enter into maritime commerce.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, his large warship construction project did not balance with a corresponding number of merchant ships. After the Great Northern War, his large fleet had no merchant navy to protect and was still not capable of matching the quality of British or Dutch warships.<sup>81</sup>

### **Building a Professional Army**

Long before Peter's reign, imperial leaders in Moscow recognized the advantages of an army with competent leadership and properly trained soldiers. However, despite this knowledge and a mixed record of military success, Russia continued to rely on an ad hoc assembly of serfs and peasants led by generally incompetent officers from the nobility.<sup>82</sup>

Peter's role as strategic leader was instrumental in developing a Russian army capable of defeating the powerful Swedes. He recognized early the limitations and backwardness of his peasant army, but compensated to make their weakness a strength throughout his wars. Limited objectives, defense in depth with entrenchments and reduced requirements for provisions demonstrated his successful application of system understanding skills to maximize the potential of his army.<sup>83</sup>

While Peter made significant improvements in the Russian army, he never developed it into a "regular army." Fuller contends a regular army is an "institution of systems" rather than an improvised organization responding to a crisis. For instance, Peter's recruiting system was especially repressive, and never produced a disciplined and trained force. Desertion was a significant problem in both defeat and victory, and the army was never supported by a functional logistic system. While Peter made significant progress in building Russian industry, his army suffered from a lack of uniforms, gunpowder and a connecting transportation system.<sup>84</sup>

Facing such problems, Peter's real genius as a strategic leader and practitioner was his ability to wage effective war with such a poorly supplied, undisciplined and untrained army.<sup>85</sup> However, at the end of the Great Northern War, a foreign observer noted the Russian army would be invincible if the officer corps could match the courage and dedication of its soldiers.<sup>86</sup>

### **Building St. Petersburg**

The building of St. Petersburg was "an achievement unique in the history of the world."<sup>87</sup> The entire project was a passion with Peter, and he allowed nothing, not even the Great Northern War, to stand in way of its construction. Historians agree the project was a strategic success for Peter considering the area's climate and the reluctance of the nobility and the general

population to support the project. It was also a test of Peter's normative thinking skills. Nearly 40,000 forced laborers died from his effort to build the new city on the Baltic.<sup>88</sup>

The entire project reflected the scope of Peter's problem management skills and ability to envision the future. All development and growth were carefully controlled by a series of well regulated plans. Peter also directed the construction of a navy yard, a medical school and a military academy. Several other firsts included a city police force and the Russian Academy of Science.<sup>89</sup>

While the project was in keeping with the role of a strategic leader, such as inspiring others to great efforts, its construction was hard to justify with the alternatives available to Peter. The port city of Riga provided a better location and established facilities. Even the fortress at St. Petersburg offered little protection for the city because of poor planning. Nearly 150 years later, a writer noted that "true Russia is far away" from St. Petersburg, and without its imperial court and government buildings, it would be a "third-rate city."<sup>90</sup>

#### **Pruth Campaign of 1711**

Peter's over optimism after Poltava nearly caused his downfall. If any event demonstrated Peter's failure as a strategic practitioner, the Pruth campaign is the principle example. Acting on faulty information, Peter decided to expand

his empire south while still at war with Charles. After a series of tactical blunders, Peter found himself, his wife Catherine and his entire 38,000 man army completely surrounded by 200,000 Turks at the Pruth River. Only negotiations by Peter with the Turkish commander, with each operating without a full understanding of the other's situation, saved Peter from capture.<sup>91</sup>

At the tactical and operational level, Peter demonstrated serious mistakes during the campaign. First, he adopted the offensive tactics of Charles rather than the customary Russian method of cautious advance. Next, he placed too much trust in the support of the Walachia principality, an unreliable ally that quickly changed sides to the Turks. Peter also failed to acquire proper intelligence of Turkish troop strength and capabilities. Finally, Peter did not adjust his plan to compensate for repositioning of the Turkish army.<sup>92</sup>

de Jonge would described Peter as "the architect of...disaster" when his capacity for panic compounded his poor performance. Also exacerbating Peter's problems was the presence of Catherine. Peter was ready to agree to any demand to avoid their capture by the Turks. However, despite the protests of Charles, the Turk commander agreed to let Peter avoid surrender after a series of negotiations. Peter agreed to return the fortress at Azov, destroy his southern fleet and surrender Catherine's jewels. After Pruth, in a demonstration of

reflective thinking, Peter focused most future military operations toward the Baltic.<sup>93</sup>

### Reforms

Contemporary observers note that Peter changed Russia more in 10 years than the previous 100 years "by the strength of his own genius, observation and example." Most of Peter's reform efforts were focused on the strategic level to enhance all elements of Russia's national power. However, many historians consider his reforms were actually measures to finance his war and navy.<sup>94</sup> And while his plans were often implemented without a roadmap or plan, his reforms accomplished Peter's goal of making Russia safe from foreign invasion.<sup>95</sup>

Peter focused many of his strategic level reform efforts toward finance, industry and transportation. He considered money as "the artery of war," and implemented a punishing revenue collection system to finance the Great Northern War. He had mixed success with industrial development. Only the iron and mining industries continued to flourish after his death. However, Peter was successful in developing a basic road network to support his military operations.<sup>96</sup>

Historians also give conflicting assessments and cost of Peter's reforms. From a normative thinking perspective, his reforms were accomplished with great cost. He did not foresee the second or third order effects of his reforms. His efforts

would divide Russia by changing the traditionally shared culture between the upper and lower classes. The upper class was forced to reject the culture of most Russians and adopt Western habits and customs. The ongoing war with Sweden also complicated many nonmilitary projects, which resulted in more human suffering.<sup>97</sup> Waliszewski assessed the real cost of his reforms by reflecting on Peter's strategic theorist role: "[He] made his Russia a nation of officials, of laborers and of soldiers; not, in any sense, a nation of thinkers and of artists."<sup>98</sup>

## SUMMARY

### History's Assessment

The significance of Peter the Great's strategic leadership over his country and people, can be found in his impact on Russian history. His efforts, known as the "Petrine Reforms," divide Russian history into two periods, the pre-Petrine and post-Petrine, or the old and the new.<sup>99</sup>

Historians offer conflicting assessments of Peter's attempt to master the strategic art. He has been considered "... a man of irrefutable vision and genius,"<sup>100</sup> and uniquely skilled at maximizing the growth potential of the "human and material resources" of his country.<sup>101</sup> Peter's exploitation of his new territory at the mouth of the Neva River, the site of St. Petersburg, demonstrated his "superior strategic sense" to capitalize on opportunity.<sup>102</sup> However, others considered his

grand schemes were poorly planned, wasted valuable national resources,<sup>103</sup> and were accomplished only through torture and murder.<sup>104</sup>

Regardless, Peter recognized the role history placed on him at an early age. Drawing on his heritage and history, Peter, through "intellect [and] instinct," successfully resolved the two greatest issues facing his nation: foreign invasion and internal control. Therefore, in a normative thinking sense, his accomplishments are often judged with regard to good or bad by some, and in terms of success or failure by others.<sup>105</sup>

Despite all his achievements, Peter was considered by Oliva to be more of a reformer than a revolutionary leader. He regards Peter's "will [was] far stronger than [his] vision."<sup>106</sup> Another historian notes his plans and endeavors "were rarely original," but he ensured success through his determination and relentless energy.<sup>107</sup> While strategists must understand relationships that are not obvious, one author found Peter "...took reckless gambles that ignored second and third order effects..."<sup>108</sup>

### **Peter as a Strategist**

Peter excelled in the role of a strategic leader during many of his most challenging endeavors. His actions during the Azov campaign, the Great Embassy and the Great Northern War read like a requirement checklist for successful strategic leaders from Chilcoat's text. To ensure successful coalition warfare, he

created symbiotic relationships, identified and compensated for weakness in every element of national power, and routinely focused and prioritized the energies of the military.

As a strategic practitioner, Peter offered numerous contradictory performances that prohibit a clear assessment of his success or failure. Victory at Azov and Poltava was accomplished through his superior communication skills and unique ability to translate his strategic desires into practical plans. He also demonstrated a complete understanding of the operational and tactical levels of war. Peter successfully served in various positions from bombardier, galley captain, regimental infantry commander to combined fleet admiral.<sup>109</sup>

During every campaign, he demonstrated a complete understanding of the importance of each element of national power and their contributions to victory. However, victory at Azov and Poltava were preceded by his recurring disastrous performance as a strategic practitioner. Only his strong frame of reference skills and ability to learn from the past enabled him to overcome initial failure.

Even after Peter's victory at Poltava opened his nation to Western military thought and ideas, Russia never produced a strategic thinker, or strategist.<sup>110</sup> While a strategic theorist must motivate others to think and act, Waliszewski found that Peter "inspired no one...with any desire of instruction, or love of learning."<sup>111</sup> Peter never drafted a document or vision that

would qualify him as a strategic theorist. However, through a forgery of his legacy, he was given credit for being "creative, able to see beyond the present, to sense new opportunities, and then propose means to attain them."<sup>112</sup>

A document threatening Russian occupation of Europe, titled "Testament of Peter the Great," surfaced early in the 1800's. Despite common knowledge that it was a fake, it was used repeatedly by the West to portray Russia's geopolitical intentions. Even Rear Admiral A. T. Mahan made reference to the "the rumored will of Peter the Great" in his attempt at predicting Russian strategic policy.<sup>113</sup>

Peter operated successfully across the entire scope of strategic leader competencies. Perhaps Peter's strongest conceptual skills were learning from the past and being comfortable with abstract concepts. His eventual victories at Azov and Poltava, and his recurring breaks with tradition, reinforce this assessment.

Peter possessed extraordinary holistic and conceptual thinking skills. These skills were highly developed despite Peter's limited formal education and birth in a regulated system of enforced tradition and religious intolerance. While Peter's holistic and conceptual skills allowed him to operate successfully at the strategic level, his greatest fault can be found in his normative thinking ability. Historians are

universal in their criticism of his misplaced value judgments that were often at the heart of his strategic decisions.

His moral faults center on his brutality and forced changes at the expense of Russia's customs and culture.<sup>114</sup> Frederick the Great considered him a "mean-spirited...prince...cruel in peace, feeble in war."<sup>115</sup> Despite his marks of genius and revulsion at the barbaric backwardness of his country, Peter retained a basic disregard for human suffering. de Grunwald noted, "[Peter] was never moved to a feeling of simple respect for human dignity,"<sup>116</sup> while Klyuchevsky wrote "even his good actions were accomplished by disgusting methods."<sup>117</sup>

#### **Peter's Impact on the Future**

While some historians note that Peter's reforms were not lasting, Oliva found Peter's organizations, or systems for conquest, particularly the army and navy, continued to endure. He considered Peter a "military modernizer" that influenced the modern world.<sup>118</sup>

Russian military thought preceding World War I was influenced more by tradition than knowledge of modern industrial war. The defeats and poorly executed campaigns of the 1800s fostered a belief that victory could be achieved in the next war by studying Peter's technique of war. It was believed that his "genius" was the proper application of Western military art to the needs of a new regular army. Later Russian military leaders

believed Peter used only what was useful from the West, and in time, Russia's own or national military thought would out-class the West.<sup>119</sup>

Peter's rule continues to cloud how contemporary Russia is viewed by the West. The "iron curtain" was viewed as convincing evidence of a natural divide between the West and Russia. Additionally, Soviet technological success was often attributed to stolen Western technology. The idea that an "underdeveloped society" could achieve significant breakthroughs in science and technology are reflected in Western perceptions continuing since Peter's Great Embassy.<sup>120</sup>

Western leaders acknowledge Peter's historical influence on contemporary issues. Russia's expansionism and subjugation of its neighbors started with Peter.<sup>121</sup> However, after nearly 250 years, many of his territorial gains were lost with the collapse of communism under another Russian reformer, Mikhail Gorbachev.<sup>122</sup> Still, Western distrust of Russian foreign strategy reflects a continued concern with its aggressive imperial past.<sup>123</sup>

Peter's reforms may have been the genesis of a Russian process that continues today. Russia has historically followed a pattern of reform based on stagnation and military defeat, then a burst of energy followed by a reactionary movement.<sup>124</sup> Only time will determine if Russia will follow a similar pattern as it adjusts and evolves from post-Cold War reality.

## CONCLUSION

At the end of the Great Northern War, Peter took the titles of Father of Russia, Peter the Great, and Emperor of All Russia.<sup>125</sup> However, his new titles were bestowed at a great cost to his nation. Russia only enjoyed peace for one full year (1724) and various short periods totaling thirteen months under Peter's rule.<sup>126</sup> While historians offer conflicting assessments of Peter's achievements and their costs, he ensured Russia a dominant place in European affairs from 1709 until today.<sup>127</sup>

When considering all his achievements and failures, the sheer scope of his vision and reforms, and his impact on Russia, Europe and history, Peter must be regarded as a master of the strategic art. He successfully combined and operated with varied success in all three roles of the complete strategist. However, Peter was a better strategic leader than a strategic practitioner. Finally, his contribution as a theorist was limited only by his early education and the medieval operating environment of Moscow in the late 1600s.

Peter's legacy continues today. To understand contemporary Russia, one must study Peter and his world. With an appreciation of Peter's performance as a master of the strategic art, one may be able to understand and predict the direction of Russia's future path in these turbulent times.

Word Count: 7,421.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Robert K. Massie, Peter the Great: His Life and World (New York: Knopf, 1980), 148.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., cover.

<sup>3</sup>Jay L. Oliva, Russia in the Era of Peter the Great (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), 2.

<sup>4</sup>Richard A. Chilcoat, Strategic Art: The New Discipline for 21st Century Leaders (U.S. Army War College: Strategic Studies Institute, 1995), 1-5.

<sup>5</sup>"Strategic Leadership, Field Manual 22-103 (draft)," in Leading and Managing in the Strategic Arena (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 1996), 96.

<sup>6</sup>Chilcoat, 8.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 8-10.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 10.

<sup>10</sup>Leading and Managing in the Strategic Arena, 96.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 96-97.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 100-101.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 102-104.

<sup>14</sup>Chilcoat, 17-18.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>16</sup>Massie, 28.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 71.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 116.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 67-69.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 132-133.

<sup>21</sup>Oliva, 39.

<sup>22</sup>Alex de Jonge, Fire & Water: A Life of Peter the Great (New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1980), 89.

<sup>23</sup>Oliva, 44.

<sup>24</sup>Massie, 138.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 139.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 139-140.

<sup>27</sup>de Jonge, 90-91.

<sup>28</sup>Massie, 140.

<sup>29</sup>Constatin de Grunwald, Peter the Great, trans. Viola Garvin (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 85.

<sup>30</sup>de Jonge, 93.

<sup>31</sup>Massie, 144.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 142.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 143.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 143-144.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>36</sup>de Jonge, 96-97.

<sup>37</sup>Massie, 149.

<sup>38</sup>Robert H. Hewsen, "Peter I, the Great," in Historic World Leaders, Vol. 3, ed. Anne Commire (Washington, D.C.: Gale Research Inc., 1994), 1073.

<sup>39</sup>Jonathan F. Jackson, A Clash of Visionaries: King Charles XVII of Sweden, Tsar Peter I of Russia and the Great Northern War (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College Library, 1996), 7.

<sup>40</sup>Donald A. Mitchell, A History of Russia and Soviet Sea Power (New York: Macmillan, 1974), 21-22.

<sup>41</sup>Massie, 149.

<sup>42</sup>de Grunwald, 86.

<sup>43</sup>Massie, 156-157.

<sup>44</sup>de Grunwald, 88.

<sup>45</sup>Massie, 155-156.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., 199-200 and 231-232.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., 187.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>de Jonge, 233.

<sup>50</sup>Massie, 292.

<sup>51</sup>Mitchell, 22.

<sup>52</sup>Massie, 297-300.

<sup>53</sup>Oliva, 59.

<sup>54</sup>Massie, 298.

<sup>55</sup>Oliva, 56.

<sup>56</sup>Massie, 318.

<sup>57</sup>William C. Fuller, Jr., Strategy and Power in Russia, 1600-1914 (New York: The Free Press, 1992), 40.

<sup>58</sup>Oliva, 62.

<sup>59</sup>Leonard Cooper, Many Roads to Moscow: Three Historic Invasions (New York: Coward-McCann, 1968), 13.

<sup>60</sup>de Jonge, 150.

<sup>61</sup>Cooper, 26-27.

<sup>62</sup>Massie, 329.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 383.

<sup>64</sup>de Jonge, 171-172.

<sup>65</sup>Cooper, 43-44.

<sup>66</sup>"Peter I the Great, of Russia," The New Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. 25 (1998), 529.

<sup>67</sup>Fuller, 75-79.

<sup>68</sup>Massie, 518-519.

<sup>69</sup>de Jonge, 176.

<sup>70</sup>Oliva, 72-73.

<sup>71</sup>Massie, 629.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 631-632.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 585

<sup>74</sup>de Jonge, 196.

<sup>75</sup>Massie, 734.

<sup>76</sup>Mitchell, 27-28.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 39.

<sup>78</sup>Hewsen, 1074.

- <sup>79</sup>Mitchell, 28 and 41.
- <sup>80</sup>Vasili Klyuchevsky, Peter the Great, trans. Liliana Archibald (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 154.
- <sup>81</sup>de Jonge, 218.
- <sup>82</sup>Oliva, 10.
- <sup>83</sup>Fuller, 80-81.
- <sup>84</sup>Ibid., 50-51.
- <sup>85</sup>Ibid., 54.
- <sup>86</sup>de Jonge, 218.
- <sup>87</sup>de Grunwald, 154-155.
- <sup>88</sup>de Jonge, 182.
- <sup>89</sup>Ibid., 183-184 and 222.
- <sup>90</sup>Eugene Schuyler, Peter the Great, Emperor of Russia, Volume II (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1884), 10.
- <sup>91</sup>Massie, 557-561.
- <sup>92</sup>Ibid., 564.
- <sup>93</sup>de Jonge, 185-187.
- <sup>94</sup>Ibid., 233 and 238.
- <sup>95</sup>Hewsen, 1074.
- <sup>96</sup>Fuller, 58-63.
- <sup>97</sup>Harold Lamb, The City and the Tsar: Peter the Great and the Move to the West, 1648-1762 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), 296 and 304.
- <sup>98</sup>Kazimierz Waliszewski, Peter the Great, Volume II, trans. Lady Mary Loyd (London: Heinemann, 1897), 273.
- <sup>99</sup>Klyuchevsky, 248.
- <sup>100</sup>Jackson, 11.
- <sup>101</sup>Fuller, 35.
- <sup>102</sup>Mitchell, 25.
- <sup>103</sup>Klyuchevsky, 147.
- <sup>104</sup>Fuller, 36.
- <sup>105</sup>Oliva, 2.
- <sup>106</sup>Ibid., 7.
- <sup>107</sup>Mitchell, 17.
- <sup>108</sup>Jackson, 22.
- <sup>109</sup>David Woodward, The Russians at Sea: A History of the Russian Navy (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1966), 26.
- <sup>110</sup>Walter Pintner, "Russian Military Thought: The Western Model and the Shadow of Suvorov," in Makers of Modern Strategy from Maciavelli to the Nuclear Age, ed. Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 354.
- <sup>111</sup>Waliszewski, 265.
- <sup>112</sup>Chilcoat, 11.
- <sup>113</sup>William C. Green, "The Historic Russian Drive for a Warm Water Port: Anatomy of a Geopolitical Myth," Naval War College Review XLVI (Spring 1993): 82-83.
- <sup>114</sup>Waliszewski, 270.
- <sup>115</sup>Ibid., 263-264.
- <sup>116</sup>de Grunwald, 181-182.

<sup>117</sup>Klyuchevsky, 271.

<sup>118</sup>Oliva, 76-77.

<sup>119</sup>Pintner, 366-374.

<sup>120</sup>Oliva, 5.

<sup>121</sup>Henry Kissinger, Diplomacy (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 551.

<sup>122</sup>Ibid., 785.

<sup>123</sup>R. Craig Nation, "Beyond the Cold War: Change and Continuity in U.S.-Russian Relations," in The United States and Russia Into the 21st Century (U.S. Army War College: Strategic Studies Institute, 1997), 12.

<sup>124</sup>S. Frederick Starr, "A Peculiar Pattern," in The Wilson Quarterly XIII (Spring 1989), 138.

<sup>125</sup>Massie, 741.

<sup>126</sup>Klyuchevsky, 58.

<sup>127</sup>Hewsen, 1077.

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