

# The Birth of a Fleet

by  
Ruth P. Collins

*The dream of Peter the Great grew into the Russian navy*

BACK in 1698 a Dutch ship anchored off Greenwich, England, and a young man of striking appearance, known merely as Mr. Timmerman, climbed down and got into a small boat. He was rowed up the Thames to the foot of Norfolk Street, where he hurried into the big quiet house near the river's edge.

Historian Macaulay calls this "The most momentous visit in all the world" for it marked an epoch in history.

Voltaire describes the visitor as one of the most extraordinary men who ever lived.

Mr. Timmerman, in fact, was the Tzar of Russia, young Peter I, later known as Peter the Great. He had come to England to learn how to build a navy.

Peter had been crowned Tzar when only nine years of age. Russia at that time was a vast landlocked area, its only outlet to the sea was Archangel in the far North, frozen fast eight months of the year. It boasted not one ship. The little Tzar in fact never saw one till he was seventeen years old. As a child he had had such a dread of water that he trembled even to cross a bridge. One day, however,

roaming through the sordid outskirts of Moscow with a group of teen-agers—sons of foreign diplomats—in search of adventure, he came across an English sailing-ship stranded on the banks of a river. He was fascinated.

"I must learn how to sail a ship," he said and sent for a visiting Dutchman to teach him. The next few weeks the amazed citizens saw their monarch out on the river in all sorts of weather, climbing the rigging, pulling ropes like an ordinary seaman. Next he said he must learn to build a boat—and he accomplished this too.

When finally he managed to escape his mother's guardianship, he headed first for Archangel, a port which adventurous English merchants had been allowed to open up two centuries before, one which *no Tzar had ever laid eyes upon*. The first sight of the open sea left him speechless. The fluttering sails of the Dutch and English ships in the harbor filled him with strange excitement. From that moment he had only one dream in life—that Russia one day would have the greatest fleet in all the world and would command every sea.

**B**ACK in Moscow his first step toward making his dream come true was to send to Amsterdam for a shipwright, who made him a whole flotilla of miniature ships, a model of every one then afloat. Peter worked alongside his

master, carving, asking questions. He organized his grooms and young foreign friends, and they studied naval strategy, staging mock battles.

He began to boast openly, "One day Russia will rule the seas. I shall extend her borders till we have access to every water on earth." When his companions tired of this play, he disappeared to spend his days in a hut down by the river, building real boats.

"He's down in the mud sawing like a carpenter when he should be sitting on the throne," the church patriarchs complained. "He's mad," his enemies said. "He's still just a child playing," his mother defended him, pretending to laugh. Inwardly she was terrified. Peter's half-brother, Ivan, the rightful heir, was known to be a hopeless imbecile. It needed only a rumor of this sort to oust her spoiled son from the throne which was being held for him only by bloodshed and intrigue.

It was useless to argue with the boy dreaming and sawing down on the river bank, and suddenly Peter disappeared altogether from Russia. He had fled to Amsterdam, put his name down as a laborer, taken lodgings in the dockworkers huts. *He rose at dawn, boiled his own pot, learned how to caulk iron, wield the mallet, twist rope . . .* When his ambassador finally located him he was forced to climb a rigging to talk to him.

But Peter didn't stay long in Holland. The apprenticeship at ship-building called for three years actual manual labor. In England, Peter learned, a man could master the essential technique within three months. He appealed to King William of England. So the momentous visit was arranged. William took for him the big house at the foot of Norfolk Street, which was later to house Scotland Yard. The famous Pepys lived across the road and in his diaries much of the visit was recorded.

THE YOUNG Tzar hated publicity; but he was such a magnetic personality that he drew crowds wherever he went. He was handsome, broad-shouldered, over six feet four, with beautiful brown skin, piercing dark Tartar eyes, and a winning smile. Nor could he shed his royal bearing even in a laborer's clothes. Forgetting his role he got into numerous brawls with the people on the streets. One day a porter with a load on his head, jostled him in the Strand. Peter was up with his fists in a moment and the porter willing put down his load. "No, no, you mustn't," someone whispered, "That's the Tzar of Russia!" "Tzar of Russia!" the cockney shouted, "We're all tzars here."

When Peter was prevailed upon, out of respect to King William, to appear at social functions, he created even more of a stir. Macaulay

describes him and his retinue appearing at a ball in all their oriental splendor, with their wild gestures, barbarous table manners, "dripping pearls and vermin, so filthy no one dared go near them." Peter amazed everyone by the amount of food he ate, the brandy he consumed, brandy which he distilled for himself and carried with him to any function. He kept a buffoon always at his feet, a monkey tied to the back of his chair. "Brilliant as a fox, strong as an ox, but timid as a hare," another historian describes him.

When he went to the theater Peter sat behind a silken curtain to hide from the stares. Finally, disgusted, he complained that he could learn nothing of ships because of the gawking crowds, and the king arranged for another home down near the Deptford dockyards.

It was a beautiful, historic, old house, but the royal tenant shoved aside all its art treasures and turned it into a naval junk-yard. Naval architects, captains, mechanics, common sea-hands were sleeping in every room. A hole was torn in the stone wall in the back garden to give Peter quicker access to the docks behind. Later the owner of the house sent a bill in to King William for £1500 damage done to his house, which had been turned into a pigstye, and to his choice holly hedge which the tzar had ruined.

Now Peter's worried mother

made another attempt to lure her son back to his throne. She appealed to William who sent Bishop Burnet along to talk sense to the unruly youth. Burnet came away complaining that he had gone to see a prince but found only an industrious shipwright, too engrossed in his trade to stop and listen.

PETER, however, was not too engrossed with ships to see a few other things in England. He was amazed by the great church libraries at Lambeth Palace. He saw how paintings by the masters were cherished in museums. He saw how the countryside was cultivated in sharp contrast to his vast domain of waste and morass. He compared the comfortable cottages of the laborers with the wretched hovels of his peasants. He noticed the manners at court, and had a small book printed called *The Honorable Mirror of Youth*—a 17th Century Emily Post guide to good society manners. This he took back to Moscow for his young friends. During the next fifty years five editions of this booklet were printed.

Peter went home to Moscow brimming over with ideas of modernizing his country, giving it a European culture in place of the barbaric, semi-Oriental one which it had always followed. He brought with him many art treasures. To-day Russian museums contain

paintings of Rubens, Titian, Rembrandt, Michelangelo, Raphael and Da Vinci. He brought also a retinue, fifty-five strong, of English merchants, scientists, mechanics, shipwrights, watch and compass makers, rope makers, captains, and pilots.

Voltaire summed it up, "He gave polish to his people but remained always himself a savage . . . a promoter of arts, science, literature yet himself ever without education."

King William staged a great sham battle off Spithead as a farewell party for him and presented him with a royal yacht.

Peter arrived home, flaming with zeal. He wasted no time. He announced that Russia was to have a new modern capital on the Baltic Sea. One day it would be the greatest port in the world.

The city, St. Petersburg, went up in 1703 as by magic. Small wonder, when Peter himself supervised the building, living in a small hut down in the mud banks, ordering, goading, watching. The people, amused, mocking, irritated in turn, became enthusiastic when the great domes of cathedrals and museums began to grow against the gray skies. Soon the whole nation had caught Peter's vision.

Now, with the Baltic port ready, Peter turned his attention to the South where Russia had outlet only into the small Sea of Azov. It, in turn, by a small passage, had an out-

let to the Black Sea. Turkey still held all these strategic spots but some day, Peter promised himself and his people, they would take them. In the meantime they were getting ships and ports ready.

Peter's cleverness was shown best at this point, when he was able to fire the patriarchs of the church—dubious and disapproving up till then—with the idea of a holy war, against the infidel Turk.

"We labor," he told the Patriarch Adrian in writing, "in order to thoroughly master the art of the sea: so that having once learnt it we may conquer the enemies of Christ and free by His Grace the Christians who are oppressed . . . that is all I shall long for till my last breath."

The idea welded all the sparring factions in the country as nothing else had in two centuries. The church soon took it up and conscripted labor from the serfs. They had a slogan, "a ship for each 8000

serfs," and the serfs responded since it was a Holy War.

PETER's first fleet, built on the Don River emptying into the Sea of Azov, consisted of 22 *galleys of green wood, 100 rafts, 1700 barks*. When, however, he trumped up an excuse to start his war against the Turks he was not so successful. He lost most of his new fleet. Next he turned his forces against the North, against Sweden, trying to gain outlet through the Baltic Sea. Again he was whipped.

Reverses, however, but added fuel to the flame consuming him. He went on building ships for the next twenty years, struggling to find outlets to the open seas. He stopped at nothing to gain his end—purges of his own party, intrigue, bloodshed, bribes. His mania for a great fleet increased each year.

When he died, in 1725, at the age of 53, his last words were of his beloved ships.

### *Doings of a Democracy*

- Lexington, Massachusetts, has gone full cycle. This town, where the embattled farmers took on the Redcoats in 1776, has changed the name of "Independence Road" to "King Street."
- Joliet, Illinois, suspended three city water department employees because of spring fever. The one-day suspension was ordered after the employees were discovered picking dandelions when they should have been repairing the city water pump.
- State Rep. Palmer Burch of Colorado declared himself as being stumped when it came to taxing turkeys. "On assessment day, February 1, the turkey isn't even an egg," Rep. Burch stated. "And at the end of the year, when taxes are due, he's hash."

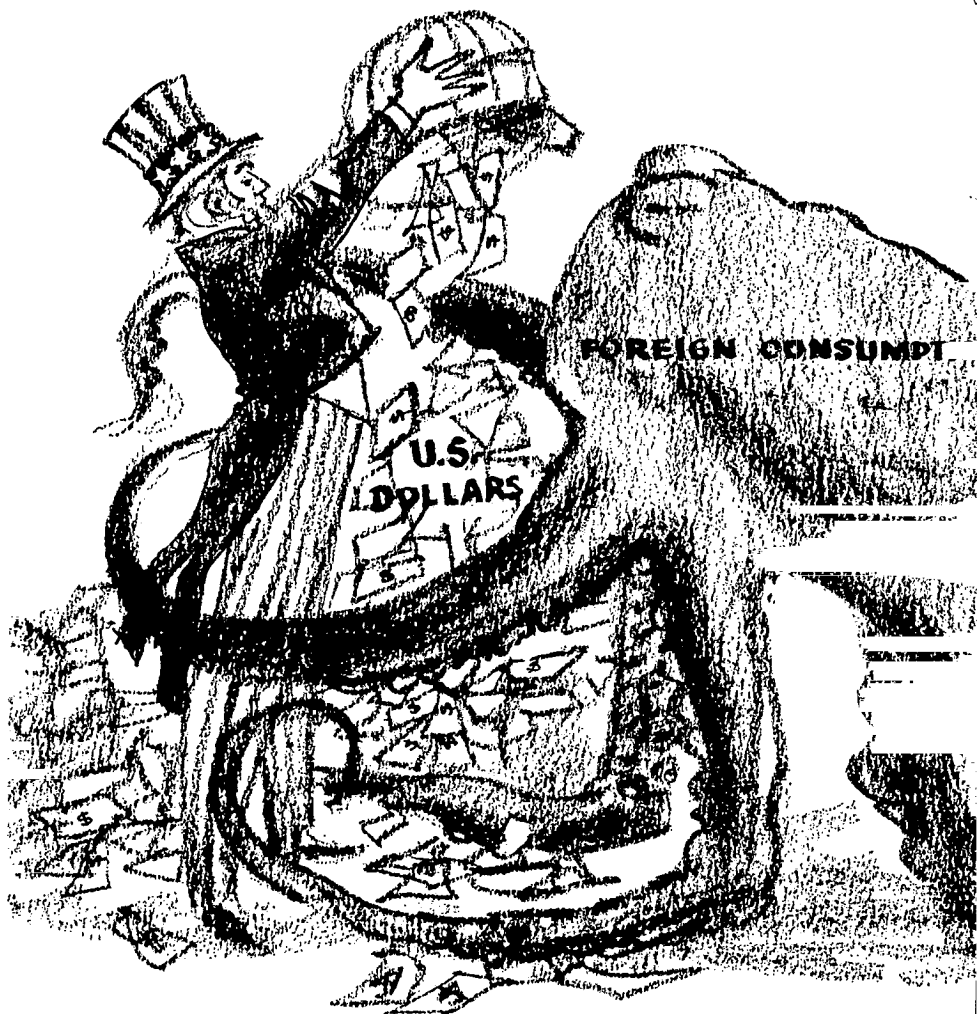
# Do You Know?

- ▶ Total earnings of 15 member banks of the New York Clearing House rose to \$271,000,000 for 1957.
- ▶ In 50 years in the U. S., the number of persons employed by government grew from one worker in every 25 to one in nine.
- ▶ The International Zionists are fanatically committed to the establishment of an imperialistic world empire with Israel as its center.
- ▶ General Serov now heads the Red Russian Security Commission. Like Beria, he is a tough, ruthless murderer.
- ▶ Since World War II, we have spent over 300 billion dollars for national defense and 60 billion dollars in foreign aid. We are now spending about 40 billion dollars a year for national defense. What do we have to show for these enormous expenditures?
- ▶ New York City spends perhaps \$50,000,000 a year on "mainly remedial" programs for its Puerto Rican newcomers.
- ▶ Although the United States outranks any single European nation, or any other nation in the world, as a foreign trader, Western Europe's combined trade constitutes about 50 per cent of the world total, or three times that of the United States.
- ▶ United States Government intervention at Little Rock has cost \$4,237,000 so far, enough to pay for four Jupiter ballistic missiles.
- ▶ Foreign cartel arrangements, in contrast to United States anti-trust restrictions, make it very difficult for American owned businesses to operate abroad.

Let us always remember this—there will never be foreign aid for Americans!— Eugene W. Castle in *Manion Forum*

# Foreign Spree for our Superspenders

by Eugene W. Castle



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