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Peter the Great [edit]

Peter the Great was, first and foremost, eager to do away with Russia's reputation as an Asiatic land and to propel his new empire onto the political stage of Western Europe. One of the many tools he would use to reach this goal was upper class culture; he believed that forcing selected features of western fashion, education, and language onto the nobility would hasten Russia's rise to international prestige. In 1697, he began to send nobles on compulsory trips abroad to England, Holland, and Italy. While the tsar primarily designed these expeditions for naval training, he also encouraged the noblemen to learn about the arts of the west. Furthermore, Peter prioritized sending Russian natives as opposed to foreign expatriates; he was intent on "breeding" a new nobility that conformed to western customs but represented the [Slavic people](#) as a whole. When the travelers returned to Moscow, Peter tested them on their training, insisting on further education for those whose accumulated knowledge was unsatisfactory.^[34] By 1724, he had established – for the purpose of scientific study and discovery – the [Academy of Sciences](#), which he modeled after "the ones in Paris, London, Berlin and other places".^[35]

Peter's westernizing efforts became quite radical after 1698, when he returned from his expedition through Europe, known as the [Grand Embassy](#). Upon arriving, Peter summoned the nobility to his court and personally shaved almost every beard in the room. In 1705 he decreed a beard tax on all ranked men in Moscow, and ordered certain officers to seek out noble beards and shave them on sight. He only allowed the peasants, priests, and [serfs](#) to retain the ingrained and religious Russian tradition of wearing beards, which the [Orthodox](#) populace considered an essential aspect of their duty to convey the image of God. He also reformed the clothing of the nobility, abandoning the long-sleeved, traditional Muscovite robes for European fashion. Beginning in 1699 the tsar decreed strict dress requirements borrowing from German, Hungarian, French, and British styles, fining any noblemen who failed to obey. Peter himself, usually sporting German dress and a trimmed mustache, acted as a prime example. While the nobility universally followed Peter's fashion preferences at court, they greatly resented these styles, which they saw as blasphemous. Away from [St. Petersburg](#), very few noblemen followed Peter's guidelines and enforcement was lax.

Peter also demanded changes in mannerisms and language among nobles. In order to supply Russians with a basic set of "proper" morals and habits, he ordered publication of manuals on Western etiquette. The most popular of these was *The Honourable Mirror of Youth, or A Guide to Social Conduct Gathered from Various Authors*, a compilation of rules of conduct from numerous European sources, initially published in St. Petersburg in 1717. He also encouraged the learning of foreign languages, especially [French](#), which was the foremost political and intellectual language of Europe at the time. For the nobility, these changes felt even more forced than the fashion regulations. As with clothing, there was uniform acceptance of Western mannerisms at court but general disregard for them outside of St. Petersburg. Furthermore, when Westerners visited Peter's court they found the image and personality of the courtiers to appear forced and awkward. [Friedrich Christian Weber](#), a representative of Britain, commented in 1716 that the nobles "wear the German Dress; but it is easy to observe on many, that they have not been long used to it".^[36]

Between the Greats [edit]

While none of the rulers in power from 1725 to 1762 focused as strongly on cultural westernization, Peter sparked a transformation that was now unstoppable. Through their education and travels, some members of the nobility began to understand the extent to which Russia lagged behind Western Europe in the complexity of their political and educational systems, their technology, and their economy. By 1750, the ideas of secular [skepticism](#), [humanism](#), and [freemasonry](#) had reached sects of the elite class, providing some with a new worldview and giving Russia a taste of [the Enlightenment](#) of which they experienced little. While even the most educated of the nobility still supported the autocracy that upheld the [feudal system](#) on which they depended, some considered how to make it more representative and to improve the bureaucracy.^[37]

The period between Peter I and Catherine II represents gradual yet significant developments in western culture among the nobility. [Catherine I](#) in 1726 and [Empress Elizabeth](#) in 1743 further regulated noble dress in a Western direction.^[38] In 1755, also during Elizabeth's reign,^[38] advanced secondary schools and [University of Moscow](#) came into

being with curricula that included foreign languages, philosophy, medicine, and law; the material was chiefly based on imported texts from the west. Most significantly, [Peter III](#) freed the nobility from obligatory civil and military service in 1762, allowing them to pursue personal interests. While some used this liberty as an excuse to lead lavish lives of leisure, a select group became increasingly educated in Western ideas through schooling, reading, and travel. As before, these changes applied to few and represented a gradual shift in noble identity rather than a sudden or universal one.^[39]

Catherine the Great [\[edit \]](#)

When Catherine II ascended the throne, she quickly made her political and philosophical opinions clear in the ["Instruction"](#) of 1767, a lengthy document which she prepared for the nobility, drawing largely from and even plagiarizing ideas from the west, especially those of [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](#). The point she emphasized first and foremost was that Russia was a truly European state, and her reforms of the court and education reflect this belief. While Catherine was primarily preoccupied with impressing westerners (especially the [philosophes](#), with whom she corresponded in writing), in doing so she also made significant efforts to educate the nobility and expose them to western philosophy and art. She designed an imperial court in the style of [Louis XIV](#), entertaining the nobility with performances of western theatre and music. She encouraged understanding of French, German, and English languages so that nobles could read classic, historical, and philosophical literature from the west. For the first time in the history of the Russian court, "intellectual pursuits became fashionable". When foreigners visited the court, Catherine expected the noblemen and their ladies to flaunt not only their western appearance but also their ability to discuss current events in western languages.^[40]

Catherine also made specific reforms in institutional education that pushed the nobility's culture further westward. She based Russian education on that of Austria, importing German textbooks and adopting in 1786 a standardized curriculum to be taught in her newly created public schools.^[41] While many members of the lower classes were allowed into these schools, Catherine hoped that they could become educated enough to rise through the meritocratic [Table of Ranks](#) and eventually become nobles themselves. Catherine also established the Society for the Translation of Foreign Books, "to bring enlightenment to those Russians who could not read either French or German."^[42] It is clear that, like Peter I, Catherine the Great desired to construct a new nobility, a "new race,"^[41] which would both resemble western noblemen and prove knowledgeable in discussions of modern issues. And, according to accounts from foreign visitors, the noblemen did, in fact, resemble those of Western Europe in their dress, topics of discussion, and taste in literature and performance.^[43]