A history of Russia

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A HISTORY OF RUSSIA
A HISTORY of RUSSIA

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TRANSLATED BY

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VOLUME FOUR

LONDON: J. M. DENT & SONS LTD.
NEW YORK: E. P. DUTTON & CO. 1926
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Peter the Great, the fourteenth child of Tsar Alexis, that father of many children, and the first issue of Alexis' second union, was born in the Kremlin on 30 May, 1672. His mother, the Tsaritsa Natalia Kirillovna Narishkin, was come of the household of A. S. Matveiev the "Westerner"; and since Matveiev's establishment was organised strictly on the European model, we may conceive that it was thence that Natalia imbibed the foreign tastes which later she took with her to court. At all events, no sooner did Peter open his eyes than he found his playroom filled with articles of foreign manufacture, and was reminded by his whole environment of what was German. Even at the age of two he is seen diverting himself with German-made musical-boxes, "strikers of cymbals," and "large cymbals"; whilst in his nursery there stood also a sort of copper-stringed harpsichord of Teutonic manufacture. The items afford us a vivid picture of the Alexeian court; they show us, more than anything else could do, how greatly that court leaned towards objets d'art of alien origin. And later, we see Peter's nursery filled with appurtenances of mimic warfare; there dawns upon our vision a whole arsenal of toy weapons, with heavy artillery predominating, but accompanied with horse-drawn field-pieces and wooden arquebuses—all of them clear evidence of the preoccupation that was most engaging his elders' attention at the time.

When four years old Peter lost his father, and the nature of the régime initiated under Theodor, the son of Maria Miloslavski, and the successor of that father, caused new-comers to obtain the ascendancy at Court, to assume public control, and to place Peter's mother and her kinsfolk in a very difficult position. The real cause was the fact that in his time Tsar Alexis had contracted two marriages, and left behind him two separate cliques
of adherents and connections who hated one another with a deadly hatred, and were prepared to stick at nothing to gratify their mutual animosity. Eventually the Miloslavskis won the day, and Matveiev, the Narishkins’ leading spirit, was banished to the remote northern settlement of Pustozersk, and the young Widow-Tsaritsa retired into the background.

By some writers it has been suggested that Peter was brought up according to a system of court education other than that which had obtained with his father and elder brothers: that is to say, that he was brought up with much greater stringency. But an objection to this view is the fact that there are chroniclers of the early eighteenth century who aver that, up to at least the age of ten, Peter acquired his letters precisely as his father and his elder brothers acquired them, and that the only difference was that he displayed much greater proficiency. In particular, we have from a chronicler named Krekshin, a junior contemporary of Peter’s and a man who spent thirty years in industriously (albeit indiscriminately) collecting every possible item, document, tradition and report which bore upon the Reformer’s career, a detailed account of Peter’s induction to learning which, whilst not wholly reliable as a documentary source, at least gives us a graphic word-picture, and is of the greater interest in that the writer cherished for the Reformer a respect amounting almost to reverence. According to Krekshin, Peter’s tutelage at least followed old Russian custom in that Peter entered upon it just before he attained the age of five. The immediate cause was that, in consequence of Tsar Theodor, Peter’s elder half-brother and godfather, having more than once said to the Tsaritsa Natalia, Theodor’s stepmother and fellow-sponsor: “Your Imperial Majesty, it is high time that our godson were instructed,” the Tsaritsa at length consented to the step, and commissioned her mentor to find a pedagogue who should be “peace-loving and kind,” and “skilled in Holy Writ.” The final choice, however, Theodor delegated to a boyarin named Theodor Prokofovitch Sokovnin, a man who savoured of ancient Russian piety throughout, as well as was come of a household which from the first had afforded asylum to Old Believers, and dissented from the Nikonian innovations —so much so that, under Alexis, two of Sokovnin’s sisters, Theodosia Morozov and Avdotia Urussov, had sealed their godliness with martyrdom (the Tsar had punished their stubborn attachment to the Archpriest Abba-kum and the ancient faith by immuring them in a subterranean dungeon at Borovsk), and later Alexis, a brother of the family, yielded his life upon the scaffold for having taken part in an Old Orthodox conspiracy against Peter himself. So, on being asked to nominate a man for the Tsarevitch’s education, Sokovnin nominated Nikita Zотов, a benevolent, easy-going,