

A Description of Peter the Great

(1698)

Bishop Burnet

[Peter the Great, in his anxiety to reform Russia and make it a great power, renewed the active intercourse with western Europe which had been fostered to some extent toward a century and a half earlier by 'Ivan the Terrible. He visited the western regions himself, imported military leaders, artisans, and scientists, and did much to remodel Russian customs. One of the most satisfactory accounts of the tsar's visit to England is given by the sagacious historian, Bishop Burnet.]

I mentioned in the relation of the former year [1698] the tsar's coming out of his own country; on which I will now enlarge. He came this winter over to England and stayed some months among us. I waited often on him, and was ordered both by the king and the archbishop and bishops to attend upon him and to offer him such information of our religion and constitution as he was willing to receive. I had good interpreters, so I had much free discourse with him. He is a man of a very hot temper, soon inflamed and very brutal in his passion. He raises his natural heat by drinking much brandy, which he rectifies himself with great application. He is subject to convulsive motions all over his body, and his head seems to be affected with these. He wants not capacity, and has a larger measure of knowledge than might be expected from his education, which was very indifferent. A want of judgment, with an instability of temper, appear in him too often and too evidently.

He is mechanically turned, and seems designed by nature rather to be a ship carpenter than a great prince. This was his chief study and exercise while he stayed here. He wrought much with his own hands and made all about him work at the models of ships. He told me he designed a great fleet at Azuph[i.e. Azov] and with it to attack the Turkish empire. But he did not seem capable of conducting so great a design, though his conduct in his wars since this has discovered a greater genius in him than appeared at this time.

He was desirous to understand our doctrine, but he did not seem disposed to mend matters in Moscovy. He was, indeed, resolved to encourage learning and to polish his people by sending some of them to travel in other countries and to draw strangers to come and live among them. He seemed apprehensive still [i.e. ever] of his sister's [i.e. the Princess Sophia's] intrigues. There was a mixture both of passion and severity in his temper. He is resolute, but understands little of war, and seemed not at all inquisitive that way.

After I had seen him often, and had conversed much with him, I could not but adore the depth of the providence of God that had raised up such a furious man to so absolute an authority over so great a part of the world. David, considering the great things God had made for the use of man, broke out into the meditation, "What is man, that thou art so mindful of him?" But here there is an occasion for reversing these words, since man seems a very contemptible thing in the sight of God, while such a person as the tsar has such multitudes put, as it were, under his feet, exposed to his restless jealousy and savage temper.

He went from hence to the court of Vienna, where he purposed to have stayed some time, but he was called home sooner than he had intended upon a discovery, or a suspicion, of intrigues managed by his sister. The strangers, to whom he trusted most, were so true to him that those designs were crushed before he came back. But on this occasion he let loose his fury on all whom he suspected. Some hundreds of them were hanged all around Moskow, and it was said that he cut off many heads with his own hand; and so far was he from relenting or showing any sort of tenderness that he seemed delighted with it. How long he is to be the scourge of that nation God only knows.