

Czar Alexis: Between Old and New

by Peter Botticelli

Czar Alexis was a paradox. His life was a constant struggle between the opposing influences of his time. He reigned during an ambiguous period in Russian history, when both the torments of the past and the promises of the future were clouded by uncertainty. Nonetheless, it was a crucial, formative time when Russia had to decide whether it should change by moving closer to Europe or remain isolated, with its traditions intact. As the autocrat, Alexis was forced to decide for his people. That Alexis was able to strengthen the monarchy; that he chose correctly between these competing visions of the future shows how accurately Alexis reflected the character of his times.

Indeed, Alexis represented his subjects exceedingly well. He was devoutly Orthodox, strong-willed, generous, harsh when threatened, and always mindful of the past. At the same time, he longed for a better future in which material wealth and lasting peace would allow Russia to take a leading position among the nations of the world. He was captivated by the unlimited possibilities for economic and cultural development in his huge and varied realm. Like Louis XIV, Alexis believed in the power and grandeur of his nation; he admired the richness of the present rather than the glories of the past or future. For Alexis, the West was a treasure chest of tools and ideas which could be used to blend the size, endurance and narrow faith of the Russian people with the resourcefulness and creativity of Western peoples. Alexis was not the first Russian to pursue this goal, and he was certainly not the last. Actually, the ideal of progress through technological efficiency and enlightened thinking has served as a catalyst for most of Russian history. In the Soviet Union, it has become an article of religious faith. Of course, the influence of Alexis seems meager compared to Peter the Great, Catherine II or N. I. Lenin. Yet, the accomplishments of Alexis seem monumental when viewed within the context of the 17th century. This was a time of great uncertainty and conflict in Russia - too much or too little reform could have been disastrous for the state, as in the Time of Troubles less than half a century before. Alexis could not have suited these conditions more admirably, He was able to sense just when to invoke the mystical power of Orthodoxy and the past, and when to appear as a modern, enlightened ruler.

The remarkable qualities of Alexis were rooted in his unique education. It began early. It was as if his parents knew intuitively what shape Alexis' character would take. He was dressed as an adult almost from the time of his birth. With the help of various devices and toys he was encouraged to walk and eat long before other children. He was introduced to his life-long passion of falconry before he was three years old. Alexis was clearly an energetic and inquisitive child. <1> By the age of five, he was given a tutor named Boris Morozov, whose influence over Alexis would be inestimable.

Morozov was distinctively Western in taste and outlook. Nonetheless, he had little formal education and indeed had little regard for academic study. <2> His role was to stimulate Alexis' mind, to mold him into a sovereign with the vision and determination to elevate

the dynasty to a more secure position. Morozov appealed to the imagination of Alexis by teaching him only entertaining subjects with the help of pictures, objects and stories told by travelers passing through Moscow. He was encouraged to participate in games and physical pursuits like riding, fencing, backgammon and chess. The young prince was also given his own band and a "court" composed of high-born children. Morozov even introduced Western dress and music to Alexis. <3> All of this served its purpose well: it whetted the czar's appetite for adventures and experiences not possible in the dark, forbidding corridors of the Kremlin.

Of course, the czar did receive some formal education, although it was limited to practical subjects needed to conduct the affairs of the state. He was taught history, geography, mathematics and natural sciences, as well as military and foreign affairs. <4> Alexis was also encouraged to read a wide range of books, including classical works by Plato, Aristotle and Pythagoras, among others. He read medical books from the apothecary, along with works on astrology and occult science. <5> In general, Alexis was not well educated in any particular subject, but he received a broad, relatively liberal background which allowed him to assess political issues quickly and accurately. However, he always had difficulty in grasping abstract principles, which permitted him to be swayed more by good rhetoric than by sound arguments. The flexibility and impulsiveness of Alexis' mind -- encouraged by Morozov -- resulted in many dramatic shifts of opinion by the czar over the years. <6> No doubt these qualities made autocratic rule more complicated and unpredictable. On the other hand, Alexis was free to use his imagination and ingenuity to reform and invigorate the languid Russian bureaucracy.

As a statesman, Alexis - like most Russian rulers - was always concerned with consolidating his realm and authority. He faced unique problems in this task. As the first Romanov to succeed by heredity, he had to be especially wary of court rivals and the *Zemsky Sobor* (the boyar assembly), even though the boyars had pledged complete loyalty to the czar at his coronation. Alexis was much too astute to believe that the Time of Troubles had fully quenched the Russians' thirst for intrigue and tumult. Events like the uprisings of 1648 and the campaign of Stenka Razin (one of whose followers was presented as a claimant to the throne) convinced Alexis that he had to play an active role in court politics, unlike his father Michael. <7>

Within a few years after becoming czar, Alexis made it clear to the landed interests of Russia -- represented by the *Zemsky Sobor* of 1648 -- that he considered autocracy to be the best means of bringing justice and holiness to the motherland. What Alexis had in mind was a modern government of laws, crafted by the wise hand of the czar and applied equally to all of his subjects. In other words, while the state might still favor the aristocrats, "justice would be equal for all" below the czar, according to the *Ulozhenie* of 1649. <8>

In order to strengthen the state, Alexis decided to infuse his subjects with a new desire for piety, order and tradition. In 1648, he admonished the people to avoid heresy, rebellion, sorcery, immoral games like bear-baiting, the playing of certain musical instruments and mass-bathing. Severe punishments were decreed for disregarding established morals. <9>

He also took steps to keep foreign influences from undermining the loyalty of the people. In 1652 Alexis forbade all foreigners to live outside the German Suburb. <10> Even Alexis made a clear distinction between foreign ideas that were good and those that were bad for Russia.

It is ironic that Alexis has been portrayed in many histories as a meek, backward, normally phlegmatic autocrat. This image is the opposite of what Alexis intended. He wanted to be seen as a cruel and ruthless master like his professed idol, Ivan the Terrible. <11> Alexis routinely ordered severe punishments for minor offenses while affecting terrific anger. When the steward of Saint Sabbas monastery overstepped his authority by ordering *streltsy* to assault a number of court peasants, the czar wrote a letter which began:

To Bursar Nikita, enemy of God, God-hater, Christ-seller, bringer of disorder to the house of the miracle-worker, single-minded little satan, damned scoffing enemy, wicked, sly evil-doer . . . <12>

Obviously, Alexis was a firm believer in the spiritual as well as temporal authority of the sovereign.

In order to strengthen his authority, Alexis hoped to spark a religious revival through the Nikonian reforms, and through his own devotion to the Church. Alexis was, after all, a remarkably religious individual. As a youth he was deeply influenced by the "zealots of piety" -- a conservative yet dynamic group of Orthodox official with significant access to the court. One figure in particular - Stefan Vniefantev helped imbue Alexis with a puritanical tendency regarding the practice of Orthodoxy. In addition, Patriarch Nikon, as a close personal advisor of Alexis, was able to capture the czar's boundless imagination with his plans to unite Russian practices with those of the rest of the Orthodox world. <13>

Alexis was enchanted with the idea of making Moscow the acknowledged center of the Orthodox world, with himself as a great restorer of Byzantine power and tradition. <14> Thus, Muscovite religious practices were reformed according to Greek models while foreign iconographic styles were banned. <15> Most importantly, the czar, in a move reminiscent of Ivan IV, ordered innumerable relics of saints to be brought to the Kremlin, thereby enhancing the divine authority of the patriarch and the czar. <16> The instinctive devotion of Alexis to the Church was also crucial in winning the admiration of the common people.

The piety of Alexis was rather extraordinary when compared to most other European monarchs at this time. He often spent five to six hours in church at a time, and he routinely prostrated himself 1000 to 1500 times per day. Alexis also observed the severe fasting required at certain times of the year. During Lent, for instance, the czar ate and drank nothing for three days each week, and for the other four days he ate only one meal, which would normally consist of nothing more than cabbage soup, mushrooms and berries. <17> In addition, the czar did not neglect charity. He normally visited prisons

and alms-houses at least 10 times each year and he routinely visited monasteries where he would kiss the heads and hands of the sick. He was also known to hold feasts for beggars in a grand style. <18> Of course, the czar did not allow religion to interfere too much with secular matters; he would often discuss matters with his advisers and even dictate letters during the long church services. <19>

Understandably, Alexis took a keen interest in Russian and Byzantine history. He never tired of pointing out his family's historical connection to the ageless Rurikid dynasty. Ivan the Terrible was frequently described as not only a personal hero of Alexis but also as a forefather and predecessor, making his precedents a valuable source of legitimacy for the actions of Alexis. Naturally, Alexis exaggerated the noble and ancient status of the House of Romanov; he claimed to be a direct descendent of Caesar Augustus. He also chose his idols well: as inspirations he claimed David, Solomon, Alexander the Great and Constantine. <20> Of course, few European monarchs could resist such boasting. Even the Habsburgs claimed to be descendents of Noah.

Alexis certainly believed in the importance of ceremony and symbolism in government. The czar claimed that through ceremony, "We shadow the harmonious movement of God the Creator around the Universe, while the Imperial Power is preserved in proportion and order." <21> Consequently, protocol reached new heights in the Russian court under Alexis. No one could have dealings with the sovereign and not be reminded of the divine right by which the czar wielded absolute authority. <22>

Czar Alexis was altogether a superb politician. He knew when to confront officials personally and when to work through intermediaries. He was known to interrogate suspects and instruct ambassadors himself, to lend extra weight to his orders. More often, the czar acted through a "Private Office" -- a cabinet of exceptionally able and loyal officials who handled important negotiations and who enforced the czar's will within the bureaucracy. <23>

The Private Office was an invaluable tool in the czar's drive for centralized authority. Like the Communist *Politburo*, the Private Office was an exclusive, well-informed and highly efficient body able to dominate the lower orders of government. It enabled the czar to undermine the influence of the boyar *Duma* by excluding it from important government decisions. Alexis understood the potential for havoc lurking in any body of aristocrats; like Ivan IV, he wanted to render them as helpless as possible. Thus, over the course of his reign the aristocratic share of the *Duma* dropped from 70 percent to 25 percent. In place of the boyars, Alexis cultivated the gentry as a base of support, which, incidentally, contributed to the growth of Russian military power under Alexis and his successors. Of course, neither the *Duma* nor the *Zemsky Sobor* exercised much influence over Alexis and the Private Office. <24>

Alexis was no less skillful at court politics than at bureaucratic politics. For instance, he often dispensed with the rigors of protocol when in the presence of important ministers, as a means of winning their personal loyalty. The czar would also maintain a deliberate openness with courtiers in order to probe for signs of discontent. He often visited

courtiers as a plain guest, an effective means of gathering intelligence. <25> In addition, the czar kept his retinue well entertained with the kind of role-reversing and mocking of authority which would later serve Peter so well. <26>

Ultimately, of course, the authority of every czar depended upon the force of arms. Alexis, like Peter, believed that the traditional Russian military, led by the corrupt and disorderly *streltsy*, was hopeless. Alexis undertook a broad program of military reform. He established Western-style regiments of *streltsy* consisting of two-thirds infantry and one-third cavalry. Alexis also recruited large numbers of foreign officers and troops to augment the Russian soldiers, in whom the czar had less confidence. Most importantly, the czar intervened personally in battles to keep rival commanders from wasting his better regiments, and by maintaining a close, tireless watch over virtually every aspect of military administration. <27> Alexis knew as well as the *Politburo* of today that little is accomplished in Russia without the visible presence of authority.

The gentle nature of Alexis did not prevent him from dealing harshly with opponents like the Old Believers. In 1671, the Boyarina Morozova, a devoted follower of Avaakum, was arrested, interrogated and thrown in a Kremlin dungeon. Alexis then sent a letter politely asking her to do the honorable thing and accept the Nikonian reforms. She refused. The czar then compromised; he offered to release her if she agreed not to proselytize and to use the three-fingered cross. At the same time he threatened to confiscate her family's estates if she continued to resist. When Morozova persisted (she even made the two fingered cross in the czar's presence), Alexis began to wonder whether she had a special calling to martyrdom. Thus, when the Patriarch requested her release, the czar refused in order to keep her out of sight. Soon after, she was tortured and then placed in a convent. Rumors of mental illness were circulated about the boyarina. After two years, she was put on an extreme regimen in which most of her clothing and food were taken away. She died in 1675. <28>

Probably the clearest expression of Alexis' political philosophy is contained in his elaborate falconry regulations. To his falconers, the czar wrote:

If, in accordance with our imperial command, you carry out all your duties with joy, you will be rewarded. But if you are careless or neglectful . . . lazy, drunken, bad, ill-behaved, disobedient, foul-mouthed, evil-tongued, slanderous . . . or behave evilly in any way, then you will be clapped in irons . . . <29>

Even as an individual, Alexis was paradoxical. He could appear as harsh and uncompromising as his predecessors, especially when his rank and authority seemed under attack. Yet, while Alexis often threatened the lives and estates of officials and boyars, he seldom carried out his threats. <30> Unlike Ivan IV, Alexis did not feel the need to make gruesome examples of insubordinate noblemen, which, strangely, may have resulted in a negative image of passivity and weakness. Of course, no leniency was shown to the lower classes; torture and repression had long been an important part of Russian life that was greatly reinforced by the Time of Troubles. <31> In general, Alexis was certainly no more tolerant of corruption and laziness than any other ruler of Russia.

At the same time, however, Alexis was genuinely repentant for what he considered his own sinful handling of power. Like Alexander I, he felt guilty about using the harsh methods established by previous rulers, although (like Alexander I) he condoned them all his life. Nonetheless, a well-developed moral conscience emerges from the writings of Alexis:

By the Grace of God I am called the true Christian czar, though because of my own evil, worldly actions I am not worthy to be called a dog ... yet though sinful I regard myself as the slave of that luminary by which I was created. <32>

Just before his death, Alexis said:

I do not know what answer my Creator will give me. I am weighed down by despondency, for I do not know what to say or how to escape eternal torments. <33>

As a ruler, Alexis was exceptionally skillful and dynamic. He was a master of detail. He had the energy and discipline to oversee the smallest aspects of governing as well as the broad policy. Alexis was one of a rare class of monarchs who combine mental acuity -- he had a prodigious memory -- with efficiency and hard work. <34> The czar prepared for Duma meetings by making exhaustive notes on what questions might be asked and what answers should be given. <35> Nothing was left to chance under Alexis; even his dogs and horses received his personal attention.

In addition to his political role, the czar was considered to be the leading merchant of Russia. He invested tens of thousands of rubles in goods like mirrors, needles, pins, jewelry, iron, leather and salt. His profits were enormous, partly due to his rigorous standards for accounting (never a Russian specialty). <36>

Alexis also sponsored many expeditions to the East in search of riches. He hoped to find a northeast or southeast naval passage to the Orient, which would enable Russia to compete with the Dutch and English trading companies. However, neither the Caspian nor the White seas offered much advantage to Russian merchants. Nonetheless, explorers managed to reach the extremities of Siberia with the help of (from the 1660s onwards) astronomical navigation. These expeditions produced better maps, which made travel through Siberia much easier. As a result, by 1667, trade contacts with China were initiated.

By the end of Alexis' reign, the economic picture of Russia was quite different than at the beginning. By 1676, there were roughly three times as many *gosti* (leading merchants) in Moscow than in 1645. The promotion of commerce had resulted in an "all Russian market" stretching from the Ukraine to Archangel, Siberia and the West. <37> This was facilitated by greatly improved communications between Moscow and all the provinces. Under Alexis, regular post service was first introduced to Russia. <38> In addition, Alexis pushed for the expansion of agricultural production, partly by recruiting foreign horticulture experts. <39>

Inevitably, Alexis was drawn to the West by his desire to modernize and strengthen Russia. In 1672, an embassy was sent to northern, western and southern Europe, ostensibly to honor the birth of Peter Alexeevich. The trip was actually intended to gain added recognition for Russia as a member of the European community. Alexis wanted not only increased trade with the West, but also the status of a monarch equal to his counterparts in France, Austria and England. For this reason Alexis began to use the title "Emperor" (in addition to "czar," or "Caesar") in a formal sense; his father Michael had used it informally since 1613. <40> During his reign Alexis had a new throne built, on which was inscribed: "The Most Powerful and Invincible Emperor Alexis of Muscovy." <41> Alexis clearly understood the importance of pomp and grandeur in 17th-century Europe. <42>

The West seemed to have an inexhaustible supply of things wanted by Alexis. From Europe, he ordered practical goods like cannons, optics, a wide range of technical equipment and machines, craftsmen's tools, medicines, and books on siege warfare, shipbuilding and military logistics. He also purchased luxury goods like tapestries, furniture, ornate weapons, music boxes, lace, candlesticks, cutlery and official seals bearing exquisite designs in the Byzantine manner. He also had fine carriages and greenhouses sent to Moscow. Alexis even had pamphlets printed in Europe which described the czar's military prowess in flattering detail. <43> An interesting purchase that unfortunately fell through was a ship, which Alexis proposed to buy from the Duke of Courland for a trade mission to India. <44>

Alexis, like Peter I, seemed altogether driven to give Russia at least the appearance of modern sophistication. Alexis did a considerable amount of building, all of which was on a scale large enough to impress the grandest courts in Europe. His masterpiece was the Kolomenskoe Palace, finished in 1666. It had some traditional features like onion domes, tent-like roofs and wooden walls. Nonetheless, it was much lighter, with many more windows than other Russian palaces. Yet it was in the interior that the ambitions of Alexis came to life. The artwork was timeless and exquisite. Huge frescos of Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great and Darius, among many others, filled long corridors and high ceilings. Icons were largely supplanted by Western paintings. The rooms were cluttered with the finest Western furniture, mirrors and interesting mechanical devices made in Europe. The throne room was done in the grandest Byzantine style, with golden lions -- who roared and rolled their eyes at the touch of a lever -- on either side of Alexis' throne. <45>

Alexis also built the Izmailovo Gardens, which clearly displayed continental, baroque influences. The gardens had windmills, herb and flower gardens, a system of canals, as well as caged animals and ornate pavilions scattered throughout. There was also a zoo containing lions, tigers, porcupines, polar bears and strange creatures from North America called moose. <46>

The cultural and social life of the Russian court also evolved during the reign of Alexis. The contrast between the first and second weddings of Alexis is often discussed. The first, in 1645, was somber, pious and puritanical in tone. It was an intensely traditional

affair, with rigorous religious exercises, no music and little entertainment. It was obviously intended to impress conservative churchmen with the piety and moral virtue of the young sovereign. The second wedding, in 1671, was quite different. It was an exuberant celebration conducted in grand, Western style. It heralded the arrival of European art, music and social customs to the Russian court. This corresponded to the increasingly secular interests of Alexis and his retinue. In these years architecture and iconography were placed under the control of secular agencies. The fall of Nikon led to a gradual decline in the influence of the Church; it took the charisma of a Nikon to keep Alexis' restive mind on spiritual matters, although the czar remained devoted to the Church all his life.

In any event, the year 1672 saw a revolution of sorts in Russian culture. Baroque orchestral music made a triumphal entry to the court, beginning a rich tradition of Western music in Russia. At the same time, the first secular drama was staged at the court. Alexis had ordered the embassy of 1672 to hire trumpeters and "experts capable of staging any sort of comedy." <47> Yet the czar was too anxious to wait for the arrival of professionals, so he permitted J. G. Gregory, a Lutheran pastor from the German Suburb, to stage a comedy. The play was performed in German using amateur actors, including the son of a court physician. The performance was held in large chamber in Preobrazenskoe Palace, with only one spectator -- the czar -- in the audience. His wife Natalya and young Peter watched from an enclosed box, while courtiers looked on from side-stage. The play lasted for 10 hours. Alexis sat through the entire performance, in a state of indescribable joy. <48>

By modernizing the court, Alexis changed the essential character of Russian social life for the upper classes. Wishing to share his newly found delights with Natalya, Alexis undermined the traditional separation between men and women in social situations. Natalya began to appear with Alexis in the same carriage (with glass windows). Moreover, the czarina was permitted to attend celebrations held in her honor and to appear unofficially at diplomatic receptions. <49>

Of course, there were strict limits to the reforms of Alexis. In general, Westernization was confined exclusively to the aristocracy. Class distinctions became even more noticeable than before, especially since monetary wealth was becoming an increasingly important means of improving one's status. Moreover, Alexis understood the huge risks involved in trying to reform Russia. Thus, he forbade anyone below the elite Moscow gentry to indulge in things like Western hats and coats, as well as haircuts -- all of which made Russians look sacrilegious to the conservative lower classes. <50>

Overall, Alexis was a remarkably gifted and courageous sovereign. Having inherited a fragile, untested dynasty, he proceeded to build a solid foundation for the czarist state. More importantly, he pushed Russia toward a modern future of technological, artistic and social development along Western lines. Alexis may have paid solemn homage to the institutions and ideas of the past, but ultimately he proved to be a progressive autocrat. In many ways he was a shadow of the old Kievan princes who ruled an expanding, commercial empire before the onslaught of the Tartars spread darkness over the Russian

landscape. While Alexis did not play as great a role as later rulers in transforming Russia into a modern state, he gave an initial spark of reform which made Russia more amenable to rulers like Peter the Great, Alexander II and Lenin. While the future of Russia may have depended upon these later rulers, Alexis, nevertheless, provided the ground under their feet.

Notes

- 1 Phillip Longworth, *Alexis*, (N.Y.: Franklin Watts, 1984), p. 7.
- 2 V. O. Kliuchevsky, *A History of Russia*, vol. 3, (N.Y.: Russell and Russell, 1960), p. 332-3.
- 3 Kliuchevsky, p. 333.
- 4 Longworth, p. 12-13.
- 5 Longworth, p. 205.
- 6 Kliuchevsky, p. 340.
- 7 Longworth, p. 215.
- 8 Longworth, p. 49.
- 9 A. G. Mazour, *Russia: Tsar and Communism*, (Princeton, N.J.: D Van Nostrand, 1962), p. 54.
- 10 Mazour, p. 98.
- 11 Longworth, p. 233.
- 12 Longworth, p. 71.
- 13 Longworth, p. 31.
- 14 Longworth, p. 57.
- 15 Longworth, p. 245.
- 16 Longworth, p. 246.
- 17 Kliuchevsky, p. 333-34.
- 18 Longworth, p. 131.

- 19 Longworth, p. 234.
- 20 Longworth, p. 230-31.
- 21 Longworth, p. 36.
- 22 Longworth, p. 234.
- 23 Longworth, p. 240.
- 24 Longworth, p. 237-9.
- 25 Kliuchevsky, p.
- 26 Longworth, p. 88-89.
- 27 Longworth, p. 88-89.
- 28 Longworth, p. 217-18.
- 29 Longworth, p. 120.
- 30 Longworth, p. 206.
- 31 Longworth, p. 233.
- 32 Longworth, p. 73.
- 33 Longworth, p. 227.
- 34 Longworth, p. 223.
- 35 Kliuchevsky, p. 334.
- 36 Longworth, p. 206.
- 37 Longworth, p. 242.
- 38 Longworth, p. 293.
- 39 Longworth, p. 61.
- 40 J. H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe*, (N.Y.: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966) p 148.
- 41 Longworth, p. 121.

42 Longworth, p. 223.

43 Longworth, p. 120.

44 Longworth, p. 146.

45 Billington, p. 149.

46 Longworth, p. 203.

47 Longworth, p. 210.

48 Longworth, p. 210.

49 Longworth, p. 224.

50 Longworth, p. 223.

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