Peter I (the “Great”) ruled as czar, or king, of Russia from 1682 to 1725. During his reign, Russian territory was expanded, the military modernized, manufacturing bolstered, and the government strengthened. Despite this prosperity, the czar struggled with the problem of who would rule Russia after him. His son Alexis (also Alexei) was the natural successor, but he was frail and had no desire to rule. This was a great frustration to Peter. The following letters between father and son show their division. (Eventually, Peter put Alexis in prison, and the son died there.)

**READING FOCUS:**
Why do you think Peter wrote such an angry letter to his son? Do you think he was right to do so?

**Peter’s Declaration to Alexi, October 11, 1715**

Declaration to My Son, .

At the time that I am viewing the prosperity which God has heaped on our native country, if I cast an eye upon the posterity that is to succeed me, my heart is much more penetrated with grief on account of what is to happen, than I rejoice at those blessings that are past, seeing that you, my son, reject all means of making yourself capable of well-governing after me. I say your incapacity is voluntary, because you cannot excuse yourself with want of natural parts and strength of body, as if God had not given you a sufficient share of either; and though your constitution is none of the strongest, yet it cannot be said that it is altogether weak.

But you even will not so much as hear warlike exercises mentioned; though it is by them that we broke through that obscurity in which we were involved, and that we made ourselves known to nations, whose esteem we share at present.

I do not exhort you to make war without lawful reasons; I only desire you to apply yourself to learn the art of it; for it is impossible well to govern without knowing the rules and discipline of it, was it for no other end than for the defense of the country.

I could place before your eyes many instances of what I am proposing to you. I will only mention to you the Greeks, with whom we are united by the same profession of faith. What occasioned their decay but that they neglected arms? Idleness and repose weakened them, made them submit to tyrants, and brought them to that slavery to which they are
now so long since reduced. You mistake, if you think it is enough for a prince to have
good generals to act under his orders. Everyone looks upon the head; they study his
inclinations and conform themselves to them: all the world owns this. My brother during
his reign loved magnificence in dress, and great equipages of horses. The nation were not
much inclined that way, but the prince’s delight soon became that of his subjects, for they
are inclined to imitate him in liking a thing as well as disliking it.

If the people so easily break themselves of things which only regard pleasure, will they
not forget in time, or will they not more easily give over the practice of arms, the exercise
of which is the more painful to them, the less they are kept to it?

You have no inclination to learn the war, you do not apply yourself to it, and
consequently you will never learn it: And how then can you command others, and judge
of the reward which those deserve who do their duty, or punish others who fail of it? You
will do nothing, nor judge of anything but by the eyes and help of others, like a young
bird that holds up his bill to be fed.

You say that the weak state of your health will not permit you to undergo the fatigues of
war: This is an excuse which is no better than the rest. I desire no fatigues, but only
inclination, which even sickness itself cannot hinder. Ask those who remember the time
of my brother. He was of a constitution weaker by far than yours. He was not able to
manage a horse of the least mettle, nor could he hardly mount it: Yet he loved horses,
hence it came, that there never was, nor perhaps is there actually now in the nation a finer
stable than his was.

By this you see that good success does not always depend on pains, but on the will.

If you think there are some, whose affairs do not fail of success, though they do not go to
war themselves; it is true: But if they do not go themselves, yet they have an inclination
for it, and understand it.

For instance, the late King of France did not always take the field in person; but it is
known to what degree he loved war, and what glorious exploits he performed in it, which
made his campaigns to be called the theatre and school of the world. His inclinations
were not confined solely to military affairs, he also loved mechanics, manufactures and
other establishments, which rendered his kingdom more flourishing than any other
whatsoever.

After having made to you all those remonstrances, I return to my former subject which
regards you.

I am a man and consequently I must die. To whom shall I leave after me to finish what by
the grace of God I have begun, and to preserve what I have partly recovered? To a man,
who like the slothful servant hides his talent in the earth, that is to say, who neglects
making the best of what God has entrusted to him?
Remember your obstinacy and ill-nature, how often I reproached you with it, and even chastised you for it, and for how many years I almost have not spoke to you; but all this has availed nothing, has effected nothing. It was but losing my time; it was striking the air. You do not make the least endeavors, and all your pleasure seems to consist in staying idle and lazy at home: Things of which you ought to be ashamed (forasmuch as they make you miserable) seem to make up your dearest delight, nor do you foresee the dangerous consequences of it for yourself and for the whole state. St. Paul has left us a great truth when he wrote: If a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?

After having considered all those great inconveniencies and reflected upon them, and seeing I cannot bring you to good by any inducement, I have thought fit to give you in writing this act of my last will, with this resolution however to wait still a little longer before I put it in execution, to see if you will mend. If not, I will have you to know that I will deprive you of the succession, as one may cut off a useless member.

Do not fancy, that, because I have no other child but you, I only write this to terrify you. I will certainly put it in execution, if it please God; for whereas I do not spare my own life for my country and the welfare of my people, why should I spare you who do not render yourself worthy of either? I would rather choose to transmit them to a worthy stranger than to my own unworthy son.

Peter

**Alexei’s Reply**

Most Clement Lord and Father,

I have read the paper your Majesty gave me on the 27th of October, 1715, after the funeral of my late consort.

I have nothing to reply to it, but, that if your Majesty will deprive me of the succession to the Crown of Russia by reason of my incapacity, your will be done; I even most instantly beg it of you, because I do not think myself fit for the government. My memory is very much weakened, and yet it is necessary in affairs. The strength of my mind and of my body is much decayed by the sickness which I have undergone, and which have rendered me incapable of governing so many nations; this requires a more vigorous man than I am.

Therefore I do not aspire after you (whom God preserve many years) to the succession of the Russian Crown, even if I had no brother as I have one at present, whom I pray God preserve. Neither will I pretend for the future to that succession, of which I take God to witness, and swear it upon my soul, in testimony whereof I write and sign this present with my own hand.
from LETTERS OF PETER THE GREAT AND HIS SON ALEXIS

I put my children into your hands, and as for myself, I desire nothing of you but a bare maintenance during my life, leaving the whole to your consideration and to your will.

Your most humble servant and son,

Alexei