Learning Objective

- Analyze Peter’s foreign policy goals and the extent to which he achieved them

Key Points

- To improve his nation’s position on the seas, Peter the Great sought to gain more maritime outlets. The goal of making Russia a maritime power shaped Peter’s foreign policy.
- Peter’s first military efforts were directed against the Ottoman Turks. While his efforts to gain access to the Azov Sea eventually failed, his alliance with the Ottoman Empire against Persia allowed him to access the Caspian Sea.
- Peter’s rule was dominated by the Great Northern War, in which he and his allies successfully challenged the dominance of Sweden in the Baltic region. As a result of this war, Russia gained vast Baltic territories and became one of the greatest powers in Europe.
- While during Peter’s reign Russia did not formally wage wars with Poland-Lithuania, Peter made the most of the internal chaos and power struggles in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. He secured formerly Polish-Lithuanian territories in Ukraine and had an impact on internal politics in the Commonwealth.
- Peter’s foreign policy turned the Tsardom into the Russian Empire and left Russia one of the most powerful states in Europe and a major player in global politics.

Terms

**Treaty of Thorn**

A treaty concluded in 1709 between Augustus the Strong of Poland–Lithuania and Peter the Great of Russia during the Great Northern War. The parties revived their alliance, which Charles XII of Sweden had destroyed in the Treaty of Altranstädt (1706), and agreed on restoring the Polish crown to Augustus.

**Great Northern War**

A 1700–1721 conflict in which a coalition led by the Tsardom of Russia successfully contested the supremacy of the Swedish Empire in Central, Northern, and Eastern Europe. The initial leaders of the anti-Swedish alliance were Peter the Great of Russia, Frederick IV of Denmark–Norway, and Augustus II the Strong of Saxony–Poland.

**Treaty of Nystad**

The last peace treaty of the Great Northern War of 1700–1721. It was concluded between the Tsardom of Russia and the Swedish Empire in 1721 in the then-Swedish town of Nystad. It shifted the balance of power in the Baltic region from Sweden to Russia.

**Eternal Peace Treaty of 1686**

A treaty between the Tsardom of Russia and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth signed in 1686 in Moscow. The treaty secured Russia’s possession of left-bank Ukraine plus the right-bank city of Kiev. The region of Zaporizhian Sich,
Introduction

Peter the Great became tsar in 1682 upon the death of his elder brother Feodor, but did not become the actual ruler until 1689. He commenced reforming the country, attempting to turn the Russian Tsardom into a modernized empire relying on trade and on a strong, professional army and navy. Heavily influenced by his advisers from Western Europe, he reorganized the Russian army along modern lines and dreamed of making Russia a maritime power. To improve his nation’s position on the seas, Peter sought to gain more maritime outlets. His only outlet at the time was the White Sea at Arkhangelsk. The Baltic Sea was controlled by Sweden in the north, while the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea were controlled by the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Empire respectively in the south.

Peter the Great and the Ottoman Empire

Peter’s first military efforts were directed against the Ottoman Turks. After the Turkish failure to take Vienna in 1683, Russia joined Austria, Poland, and Venice in the Holy League (1684) to drive the Turks southward. Russia and Poland signed the Eternal Peace Treaty of 1686, in which Poland–Lithuania agreed to recognize the Russian incorporation of Kiev and the left-bank of the Ukraine. The Russo–Turkish War of 1686–1700 followed as part of the joint European effort to confront the Ottoman Empire (the larger European conflict was known as the Great Turkish War). During the war, the Russian army organized the Crimean campaigns of 1687 and 1689, which ended in Russian defeats. Despite these setbacks, Russia launched the Azov campaigns in 1695 and 1696 and successfully occupied Azov (northern extension of the Black Sea) in 1696. However, the gains did not last long. The Russo–Ottoman War of 1710–1711, also known as the Pruth River Campaign, erupted as a consequence of the defeat of Sweden by the Russian Empire in the Battle of Poltava (1709) during the ongoing Great Northern War. The conflict was ended by the 1711 Treaty of the Pruth, which stipulated that Russia return Azov to the Ottomans, and the Russian Azov fleet was destroyed.

Capture of Azov by Russian emperor Peter the Great (on horseback) by Adriaan van Schoonebeek, (1699). While Peter successfully occupied Azov in 1696, the gains did not last long. The Russo-Ottoman War of 1710–1711 was
ended by the 1711 Treaty of the Pruth, which stipulated that Russia return Azov to the Ottomans.

However, Peter managed to gain access to the Caspian Sea. In the Russo–Persian War (1722–1723), Russia had managed to conquer swaths of Safavid Iran’s territories in the North Caucasus, Transcaucasia, and northern mainland Iran, while the Ottoman Turks had invaded and conquered all Iranian territories in the west. The two governments eventually signed a 1724 treaty in Constantinople, dividing a large portion of Iran between them. The annexed Iranian lands located on the east of the conjunction of the rivers Kurosh (Kur) and Aras were given to the Russians, while the lands on the west went to the Ottomans.

Great Northern War

Between the years of 1560 and 1658, Sweden created a Baltic empire centered on the Gulf of Finland. Peter the Great wanted to re-establish a Baltic presence by regaining access to the territories that Russia had lost to Sweden in the first decades of the 17th century. In the late 1690s, the adventurer Johann Patkul managed to ally Russia with Denmark and Saxony by the secret Treaty of Preobrazhenskoye. As Augustus II the Strong, elector of Saxony, gained the Polish crown in 1696, the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, at conflict with Sweden since the mid-17th century, automatically became a member of the alliance.

In 1700, Peter, supported by his allies, declared war on Sweden, which was at the time led by eighteen-year-old King Charles XII. A threefold attack at Swedish Holstein-Gottorp, Swedish Livonia, and Swedish Ingría did not overwhelm the inexperienced Charles XII. Sweden parried the Danish and Russian attacks at Travendal and Narva, and in a counter-offensive pushed Augustus II’s forces through the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth to Saxony, dethroning Augustus on the way and forcing him to acknowledge defeat in the Treaty of Altranstädt (Augustus was restored in 1709). The treaty also secured the extradition and execution of Patkul, the architect of the anti-Swedish alliance. Peter I had meanwhile recovered and gained ground in Sweden’s Baltic provinces. Charles XII moved from Saxony into Russia to confront Peter, but the campaign ended with the destruction of the main Swedish army at the decisive 1709 Battle of Poltava (in present-day Ukraine), and Charles’s exile in Ottoman Bender. After Poltava, the anti-Swedish coalition, which by that time had fallen apart twice, was re-established and subsequently joined by Hanover and Prussia. The remaining Swedish forces in plague-stricken areas south and east of the Baltic Sea were evicted, with the last city, Riga, falling in 1710. Sweden proper was invaded from the west by Denmark–Norway and from the east by Russia, which had occupied Finland by 1714. The Danish forces were defeated. Charles XII opened up a Norwegian front, but was killed in Fredriksten in 1718.

The war ended with Sweden’s defeat, leaving Russia as the new dominant power in the Baltic region and a major force in European politics. The formal conclusion of the war was marked by the Swedish–Hanoverian and Swedish–Prussian Treaties of Stockholm (1719), the Dano-Swedish Treaty of Frederiksborg (1720), and the Russo–Swedish Treaty of Nystad (1721). In all of them, Sweden ceded some territories to its opponents. In Nystad, King Frederick I of Sweden formally recognized the transfer of Estonia, Livonia, Ingría, and Southeast Finland to Russia, while Russia returned the bulk of Finland to Sweden. As a result, Russia gained vast Baltic territories and became one of the greatest powers in Europe.
Signing of the Treaty of Nystad (1721) by Pieter Schenk (II). Nystad manifested the decisive shift in the European balance of power that the Great Northern War had brought about: the Swedish imperial era ended and Sweden entered the Age of Liberty, while Russia emerged as a new empire.

Polish/Lithuanian–Russian Relations

While during Peter’s reign Russia did not formally wage wars with Poland–Lithuania, Peter made the most of the internal chaos and power struggles in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. After Poltava, the rule of Augustus II was restored thanks to the support of Peter (Treaty of Thorn) and largely against the will of the Polish–Lithuanian nobility. Soon Augustus unsuccessfully wanted to terminate his participation in the Great Northern War and free himself from his dependence on Peter. Attempts at peace with Sweden, which would strengthen Augustus’s hand in dealing with Peter, turned elusive. In the end, Saxony-Commonwealth ended up as the only power in the victorious coalition with no territorial gains.

The Polish–Lithuania nobility resisted the Saxon rule and troops in Poland, which led to military resistance. However, the spreading movement, unable to fulfill its mission alone, requested mediation by Peter I. Augustus agreed, and several months of negotiations facilitated by the Russian ambassador followed, with the fighting still intermittently taking place. Eventually Augustus asked for an intervention by Russian forces, the Polish–Lithuanian nobles were defeated by the Saxons in 1716, and a treaty between the king and the Polish–Lithuanian nobility was signed in Warsaw. The Tsardom’s mediation and supervision marked a turning point in the Polish/Lithuanian–Russian relations.

Augustus was still able to largely free himself from Peter’s protectorate, but in return was excluded from the Treaty of Nystad negotiations. Russia took Livonia, a territory that had been historically contested by Sweden, Russian, and Poland–Lithuania, and the Commonwealth no longer shared a border with Sweden. In real terms, Poland, besides Sweden, was the main victim of the war, because of the damage inflicted on its population, economy, degree of independence, ability to function politically, and potential for self-defense.

Sources

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