Russian Isolation:

Although Russia is considered part of Europe, it missed out on much of what Europe experienced due to its isolated geographical position in Eastern Europe. Russia’s frigid temperatures and lack of a warm-water port, a port that would stay unfrozen year round, kept civilians and traders away. For these reasons Russia missed out on trading goods, the Renaissance, both the Protestant and Catholic Reformation, and the general spread of ideas that were taking place throughout Europe. This was both good and bad for Russia. It was good in that Russia never had a Catholic-Protestant debate, like much of Europe had experienced, because all Russians followed the Eastern Orthodox religion. It was mostly bad because Russia fell way behind in the technology that all other European countries were developing. It would take the greatness of one man and one woman to turn all of this around in years to come.

Ivan IV (4th): (1533 – 1584)

One man responsible for Russian isolation and general poor Russian life was Ivan IV, also known as “Ivan the Terrible”. Ivan IV became the czar (king) of Russia in 1533 at the age of three. He would rule for another 51 years and turn Russia completely upside down. Known for his cruel and highly volatile personality, Ivan IV ruled with an iron fist. He arrested, exiled, or executed many Russian people and many of his closest advisors. He even killed his own son in a fit of rage. Ivan IV’s goal was to be an absolute monarch. Ivan IV saw the Boyars (boh yahrz), or Russian nobles, as a threat to his absolute power. In an effort to limit boyar power, Ivan IV took all of the boyar’s land and put it under his direct control. Boyar land made up about one half of Russia. On this seized land Ivan IV placed the Oprichniki (aw preech nee kee), which was a secret police force that terrorized the Russian people.

Ivan IV’s Legacy:

Although Ivan IV did create an absolute monarchy in Russia, for the most part he was a failure who deserved the nickname “The Terrible”. Ivan IV did gain some land from the Mongols (Mongolia), and did expand the Russian economy on a small scale. However, Ivan IV failed to
gain a warm-water port to enhance Russian trade further, and the persecution of the Boyars and the Russian people was unthinkable. When Ivan died in 1584 much of Russia rejoiced. Ivan IV would go down in Russian history as one of the worst rulers ever.

The Romanov Monarchy / Dynasty:

Although much of Russia was happy about the death of Ivan IV, the 29 years following Ivan’s death would be far worse than life under Ivan. This time period, known as the “Time of Troubles”, was characterized by revolution and invasions by the neighboring countries Sweden and Poland. In 1613 a 17-year old named Michael Romanov was appointed czar of Russia. Michael, who ruled Russia until 1645, became the 1st Romanov monarch. The Romanov monarchy would rule Russia until the 1917 Russian Revolution, which would pull Russia out of WWI, see the Czar Nicholas II and his family murdered, have the communist leader Vladimir Lenin rise to power, and see name of Russia be changed to the Soviet Union. Although the Romanov monarchy was in place with Michael’s appointment, Russia would experience civilian rebellion and revolution attempts for many years to come. Four more Romanov monarchs would try to restore order to Russia, but none were successful until the year 1682 when one of Russia’s greatest leaders rose to power.

Peter I (1st): (1682 – 1725)

With the Romanov monarchy in trouble and Russia on the brink of revolution, things did not look better when a 10-year old boy named Peter became czar of Russia in 1682. Peter I was the fifth Romanov monarch and would eventually become one of the greatest leaders in Russian history. Known as “Peter the Great”, he took full responsibility of the Russian throne in 1689 and turned Russia into a true absolute monarchy. Peter I was a huge man, nearly seven feet tall, poorly educated, uncouth, and often brutal. At the same time, Peter I was open to new ideas, practical, hard-working and energetic. Both of his bad qualities and good qualities would help Peter achieve absolute power in Russia and lead the Russian society to greatness.

Peter and Western European Thought:

Peter I knew that Russia was far behind the rest of Europe in almost every aspect of life. In an effort to gain knowledge about Western European life, Peter I toured Western Europe. Upon his return, Peter I tried to incorporate Western European values into Russian life by instituting many radical changes. Peter I named this reform of Russian life “westernization”. Peter I first restored the Boyars and forced them to adopt the beliefs and clothing of Western Europe. Russian men entering Moscow were forced to shave their beards or pay a fine. Women, who had always been excluded from social gatherings, were ordered to attend parties. These changes were opposed at first, but were eventually accepted by all Russian people. Peter I also sent Russian
government officials to Western Europe to study shipbuilding, naval warfare, mathematics, and foreign languages. He also invited experts from foreign countries to come train his Russian people. Peter I’s love of Western European culture and technology lead to many changes in Russian life.

**Russian Economy:**

Peter I needed money to support the changes he was making to the Russian government and society. The Russian economy was bringing in money, but not the amount of money that Peter I needed to support his “Westerization of Russia”. In order to strengthen the Russian economy, Russia had to embrace the theory of mercantilism and consistently import goods into Russia and export goods to other countries. During the 1700’s goods were transported predominantly by water. The problem here is that much of Russia has extremely cold temperatures year round. Surrounding Arctic Ocean waters of Russia would freeze making it very difficult for wooden ships to maneuver and transport goods in and out of Russia. This made it very difficult for Peter I to build a consistent and strong economy. In order to build a strong economy Peter I knew that he had to gain permanent access to a waterway leading to a major sea or ocean that did not freeze over. The need of this waterway, or “warm-water port”, would be an underlying motive for much of what Peter would do throughout his reign.

**Russian Military:**

Peter I knew that he was going to have to go to war to gain a warm-water port. Peter I also knew that his army was not equipped or trained to fight a war. Peter I poured time, money, and training into the Russian army and created the largest standing army in Europe. With his new military, Peter I set out to gain his warm-water port. Peter I first tried to gain a warm-water port in the Black Sea by defeating the Ottoman Empire, but his effort was a failure. Peter I learned from his mistakes and turned his attention to neighboring Sweden, which owned much land along the Baltic Sea. The war began in 1700 and ended in 1709 with Russia winning land along the Baltic Sea and finally gaining a warm-water port.

**St. Petersburg:**

On the land along Baltic Sea gained from the war with Sweden, Peter I decided to build a new city. Peter I would name the city St. Petersburg and make it the new capital of Russia (Moscow being the old capital). During the Russian Revolution St. Petersburg’s name was changed to Leningrad. After the Russian Revolution was over the name was changed back to St. Petersburg. Peter I chose to build St. Petersburg on a piece of land that was very swampy. Peter I forced thousands of serfs, or Russian peasants, to drain the swampy area. Although many serfs died while doing this, Peter I got his city and referred to it as the “Window on the West”. He invited many Western European architects to St. Petersburg to help him design every little bit of the city. Just as the Palace of Versailles became a symbol of Louis XIV and French absolutism, St. Petersburg was a symbol of Peter I and Russian absolutism. Because of the warm-water port built at St. Petersburg, it became the biggest and most important trading
city in Russia. Goods were constantly being imported and exported at St. Petersburg, which lead to a strong Russian economy and much wealth for Russia and Peter the Great.

Peter’s Legacy:

After a 43-year reign of Russia, Peter I died in 1725. Peter had done more for Russia than any other Russian leader before him. He expanded Russian territory, gained a warm-water port, created a huge army, strengthened the Russian economy, and secured Russia as a respected country to the rest of world for many years to come. Although Peter I did carry Russia to greatness, the progression of his vision would be lost until the year 1672 when another great Romanov leader came to the throne and restored the vision of Peter the Great.

Catherine II (2nd): (1762 – 1796)

Peter I died without naming a successor to the Russian throne, which set off a series of power struggles among many Romanovs. Eventually Peter III gained some control over the Russian government and married a German princess named Catherine. Peter soon became unpopular and was assassinated in 1762, leaving the Russian throne to his wife Catherine II. It is believed that Catherine II may have been involved in the assassination plot because of her love affair with one of the assassin’s brothers, but nothing could be proved. Nonetheless, Catherine II gained the throne of Russia and became the 13th Romanov monarch. Catherine II ruled Russia with greatness for 34 years earning her the name “Catherine the Great”.

Catherine’s Policies:

She continued where Peter I left off by incorporating Western European thought into Russian life. Like Peter I, she reorganized the government under her absolute control, created a strong Russian military, and strengthened the Russian economy. Catherine II also created a government sponsored education program for Russian boys and girls. Although Catherine II did great things, she was very ruthless at the same time. Much of her policies and reforms only benefited the Boyars and upper class citizens of Russia. Russian peasants saw no benefits from Catherine II’s policies causing many peasant revolts, which Catherine II swiftly crushed.

Catherine II’s Expansions:
Like Peter the Great, Catherine the Great also wanted to expand the territory of Russia and gain a warm-water port. With a warm water port already on the Baltic Sea, Catherine II wanted another warm-water port on the Black Sea. Catherine II achieved this goal by doing something that Peter I could not. She defeated the Ottoman Empire, gained some land along the coast of the Black Sea, and built a second warm water port. This now gave Russia two warm-water ports for importing and exporting goods, which only made the Russian economy stronger.

The Three Partitions of Poland:

Another place Catherine II had interest in was the unstable country of Poland. Like Catherine II, Frederick William II of Prussia and Maria Theresa of Austria wanted the land of Poland as well. In 1772 the three monarchs met and peacefully partitioned, or divided, Poland three separate ways with each of them gaining significant amounts of land. This event is known as The 1st Partition of Poland, and two more partitions of Poland would eventually take place in 1793 and 1795. Together these three events are known as The Three Partitions of Poland.

Catherine II’s Legacy:

Today Catherine II is known for her numerous love affairs and her inability to speak the Russian language fluently, but one cannot overlook what she did for her country. When Catherine died in 1796, she had completed the vision of Peter the Great. She restored the Russian military and economy, and achieved Peter I’s most elusive goal of a warm-water port on the Black Sea. Catherine II’s only knock would be her persecution of the Russian peasants, which laid the groundwork for the Russian Revolution in 1917 and officially end the Romanov Monarchy.