Ivan IV, the Terrible (1530-1584), in 1547 became the first Russian ruler to be crowned czar. Known for his cruelty, he created a stronger more unified and centralized government and expanded Russia’s territory.

After Ivan began to rule independently in 1547, he conquered vast lands southeast of Moscow along the Volga River and opened trade with England. In the 1560’s, he established his personal rule in much of Russia. His political police terrorized nobles, merchants, and peasants. Ivan's laws helped bind many peasants to the land as serfs.

Ivan was paranoid and prone to mood swings. One day in a fit of rage he killed his eldest son with a blow to the head. Ivan IV became famous for torturing and executing thousands of people. Even members of the Russian Orthodox church were not exempt from Ivan IV's executions. The church had traditionally been a check on the power of the rulers, however when church leaders expressed disagreement with Ivan' IV's policies they were often tortured and executed.


Peter I, the Great (1672-1725), was one of the most famous rulers in history. Peter transformed Russia from an isolated and backward country into a great European power.

In 1697 and 1698, Peter toured Western Europe to get new ideas of how to modernize Russia. He traveled for about 17 months, mostly in England and the Netherlands. Peter recruited Western experts to bring modern techniques of engineering, architecture, art, and science to Russia. Russia then lagged far behind other European nations in these areas.

Peter improved Russia's army, created a navy, and made his government more efficient in raising troops and money for his war effort. Through wars, Russia had gained control over important territory along the eastern shores of the Baltic Sea. This land gave Russia a direct approach by water to the rest of Europe.

In 1703, Peter founded the city of St. Petersburg on territory taken from Sweden. He modeled it after cities in Western Europe. Peter made St. Petersburg the capital of Russia and used it as the focus of his efforts to "Westernize" Russian life.

Peter's rule also had some harmful effects. To finance his military campaigns and domestic reforms, Peter imposed high taxes on the Russian people. He also dealt harshly with people who opposed the reforms. Peter forced many Russians to work against their will in his mines and factories and on building projects. Peter also extended serfdom, a system under which the majority of Russian peasants lived in conditions little better than slavery.

Catherine the Great (1729-1796) ruled as empress of Russia from 1762 until her death. During her reign, Russia expanded greatly. Catherine was born a German princess and promoted European culture in Russia.

At the age of 16, she went to St. Petersburg, Russia, and married Peter III (Peter the Great’s grandson), the weak and incompetent successor to the Russian throne. He became Emperor Peter III in 1762 but was removed later that year by Catherine and her allies and was assassinated.

Catherine did little to grant basic civil rights to the majority of the Russian people. She tightened landowners’ control over the serfs, and she forcefully put down a peasant revolt.

Catherine's achievements consisted mainly in modernizing Russia. She also extended the borders of Russia. She acquired most of Ukraine, Lithuania, and Poland. Her successful wars against the Ottoman Empire gained the Crimea and lands along the Black Sea for Russia. She also conquered Siberian and central Asian peoples.


Nicholas II (1868-1918), the last czar of Russia, ruled from 1894 to 1917. Nicholas believed a czar must have absolute power and opposed parliamentary government. He possessed great personal charm but lacked the vision of a strong leader.

During his reign, industry developed rapidly in Russia. Literature, science, and other branches of learning also made impressive gains. But the middle class increasingly felt the monarchy was out of touch with the needs of the new industrial society. Workers in the cities became dissatisfied with living and working conditions.

Meanwhile, Nicholas attempted to expand Russian territory in Asia. This effort led to the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), which Russia lost. The war sharpened dissatisfaction with the government, and the people revolted in 1905. Workers joined with peasants and intellectuals to force Nicholas to grant reforms. He agreed to establish an elected legislature and granted the people civil liberties.

Russia suffered severe losses in World War I. In 1915, Nicholas assumed direct command of the army. As a result, the people blamed him for Russia's military failures. Many Russians also unjustly accused Alexandra, his German-born wife, of treason. These problems and shortages of food and fuel led the people to revolt in March 1917. Nicholas lost all political support, and he gave up his throne on March 15.

In November 1917, revolutionaries called Bolsheviks (later known as Communists) seized power. They imprisoned Nicholas and his wife and children in Yekaterinburg in the Ural Mountains and killed them there on July 16 or 17, 1918.