

TSAR PETER I AND UTRECHT

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In 1717, Tsar Peter I of Russia visited the Netherlands as part of the 'Grand Embassy' visiting Western Europe. The official purpose of this Grand Embassy was "to renew the old friendships, to champion the cause of the whole of Christendom and to weaken the enemies of the Cross of the Lord, the Turkish Sultan, the Khan of the Crimea and all Musselman hordes."¹ Although Tsar Peter did wish to form an alliance with Western Europe against the Turks, his main motivation was that he wished to visit particularly Holland and England to learn all that he could about shipbuilding and trade.² However, officially it was the Grand Embassy that visited the Netherlands, as the Tsar had decided to travel incognito with the Embassy as a captain of the guards. There were two reasons for this. The first was that no Tsar had ever travelled so extensively outside of Russia and widespread knowledge in Russia of the Tsar's departure would seriously aggravate an already very tense military-political situation.³ Secondly, Peter I was at that time a shy person outside his own environment and he also disliked having to endure the elaborate diplomatic and intricate ceremonial ritual of the court. That going incognito posed problems for European protocol was of no concern to him. Travelling incognito also meant that no official document nor any newspaper could make a direct reference to his presence in Europe or mention the Tsar by name.⁴

By 1713, the War of the League of Augsburg, a war which had dragged on for eight years, was coming to an end. The Dutch armies under the leadership of William of Orange had withstood the grandiose ambitions of the French under Louis XIV. The same William in 1702 had ascended to the British throne as William III. For his part, Peter I had defeated the Turks at Azov in 1711. Both monarchs were, therefore, powerful

rulers over vast domains which had recently successfully repelled external military threats.

Nearing the Netherlands, Peter I could no longer suppress his ardent desire to visit, in particular, Zaandam, and finding the pace of the Embassy too slow, he sped on ahead with eighteen servants and 'volunteers' arriving at Amsterdam the evening of Saturday, August 17, 1697. He had come by sailing down the Rhine by way of Arnhem and Utrecht, and the day following arrived at Zaandam.⁵ The 'Grand Embassy' did not arrive at Nijmegen until August 20, and travelling slowly by way of Dordrecht, Gouda and Utrecht entered Amsterdam on August 26.⁶

Willem III was also present in Holland at this time due to the peace negotiations at Rijswijk, near The Hague. The Stadhouder was residing at 'Het Loo', an estate near Utrecht which has since become the residence of the Dutch monarchs. Because the negotiations were still in a crucial stage and since Willem III did not want to complicate matters by meeting with the Tsar of Russia who was advocating a Christian alliance against the Turks who at that time were allies of the French, a few weeks went by before either the Grand Embassy received an official audience in The Hague by the States-General or an 'unofficial' meeting could take place between William III and Peter I. By the second week of September, the major issues had been settled at Rijswijk and the Grand Embassy received word in Amsterdam that William III would grant an audience.⁷ Envoys of both parties agreed that all ceremonial ritual and protocol be set aside. Further, rather than one monarch travelling to visit the other, it was agreed by common consent that both would travel to Utrecht and meet there.⁸

On the evening of September 10, 1697, Peter I accompanied by a small entourage including three envoys left Amsterdam for Utrecht. The evening departure for Utrecht by ordinary barge

as well as the small entourage were arranged so as not to attract attention. Arriving at Utrecht the following morning, Peter I took lodgings at the inn named "De Toelast". About four o'clock in the afternoon Willem III arrived at the inn, also with a small escort of just three coaches.⁹

The Stadhouder first had a short meeting with Peter's three ambassadors. Shortly thereafter, Willem III and the Tsar met each other in Peter's chambers. They spent well over two hours together in private conversation assisted only by Nicolaas Witsen and LeFort. Almost nothing is known of this first meeting and conversation between these two monarchs except that they were very friendly to each other. Official Russian records have observed complete silence with regard to this private meeting. This is not surprising since it was an unofficial meeting and the Tsar was travelling incognito. Nor do the Dutch sources reveal anything substantial. The only item of substance mentioned was a speech in which Peter I lavishly praised Willem III and wherein he stated that he was ready to place himself and his Russian armies at the disposal of Willem III to fight the latter's enemies. This speech was rejected by Dutch historians as fiction.¹⁰ However, recent discoveries of source material and a more careful analysis of the original sources indicate that Peter did make this speech even though it was probably prepared by someone else beforehand and not as impromptu as first stated.¹¹

Although the details of the meeting are not known, the occasion was thought worthy of a commemorative medal. The now extremely rare medal was struck in Utrecht by Nicholas Chevalier.¹²

Regardless of the penchant of the Tsar for secrecy and his effort to be as inconspicuous as possible, word soon spread through Utrecht and Holland that the Tsar was in Utrecht and a great crowd of curious onlookers came from near and far. The large crowds made Peter very uneasy and led to the cancellation of his plan to attend a dinner at Zuilen

the following day. Though the sources are not clear, it does seem that Peter did have more meetings with Willem III and probably dined privately with him at Zuylenstein near Utrecht. On September 15, the Tsar left Utrecht to return to Amsterdam.¹³

Even though very little is known of the content of the discussions between these two monarchs on this most historic occasion, the intensity of the personal contacts throws a valuable light on our understanding of the future relations between these two rulers and their domains. Both the Tsar and the Stadhouder seem to have developed a liking for each other and Willem III seems to have adapted very well to the complex and strange personality of such a young but powerful and forceful ruler as Peter I. No doubt the informal mood at Utrecht was an important factor.

Less known is the fact that Peter I paid a second extensive visit to the Dutch Republic in 1717. On this occasion he also visited Utrecht. Peter I had passed through Utrecht quietly on December 16, 1716 on his way to Amsterdam but on March 10, 1717 the Tsar visited Utrecht accompanied by the Tsarina and a small entourage. Not only was the Tsar interested in seeing such well-known attractions as the Dom, but he also wanted to visit the famous silk factory, 'Zijdebalen', of David van Mollen. This silk factory was built in 1681; it employed circa 250 workers and was second in Holland only to one in Haarlem. Van Mollen had his own ships and used these to export his products which became known for their quality throughout Europe and also in Russia.¹⁴

Peter had always shown the highest interest in new technology, often insisting on learning first-hand all or if not, at least the rudimentary skills and the techniques involved. His visit to Zijdebalen on the Vecht was no exception. The factory was powered by a very large waterwheel. The Tsar, wishing to see exactly how the scoops on the waterwheel worked, came too close to them and would have been seriously injured

or even killed had it not been for the quick action of the foreman who very roughly but effectively pulled the Tsar out of danger. Peter's bodyguards who had only suddenly noticed that their master had been grabbed and thrown to the floor, drew their weapons. But Peter quickly explained what had happened and embraced the man who had saved his life.¹⁵

Peter came to Utrecht again on 22 August when he and the Tsarina were on their way to Het Loo. On September 2, the Tsar left Amsterdam, Utrecht and the Dutch Republic for good. What is noteworthy is that the first encounter between these two great monarchs took place without fanfare in an ordinary inn in Utrecht in 1697.

Footnotes

¹M. M. Bogoslovski, Petri I-Materiali dia biografii, Moscow, 1940, I, p. 367; N. Ustrialov, Istoria tsarstvovania Petra Velago, St. Petersburg, 1858, III, p. 6. For more details on the Grand Embassy see R. Wittram, Peter der Grossen, Der Eintritt Russland in die Neuzeit, Gottingen, 1964, I, pp. 127ff. All dates are New Style.

²For a discussion on Peter I's motivation and personality see, J. V. Th. Knoppers, The Visits of Peter the Great to the United Provinces in 1697-98 and 1716-17 as Seen in Light of the Dutch Sources, M.A. thesis, McGill University, 1969, Chapter I. The terms "United Provinces, Holland, the Netherlands, Dutch Republic, Low Countries, etc." are used interchangeably here.

³Just prior to his departure from Russia, Peter had squelched a revolt by some of the streltsy (sharpshooters) regiments in Moscow. The ringleaders were executed and many of the streltsy regiments removed from Moscow and sent to the frontiers. To keep order during his absence, the Tsar placed General Patrick Gordon in charge of an army of 12,000 foreign-led and trained troops which were quartered in Moscow "to keep the city in awe". J. Perry, The State of Russia under the Present Czar, London, 1717, p. 156; Wittram, I, pp. 131-135.

⁴For a good review of the rights, privileges and customs of diplomats and envoys, see A. Bohlen, "Changes in Russian Diplomacy under Peter the Great," Cahiers de Monde Russe et Sovietique, 5 (1964) 3:303-319; J. K. Nomen, Aanteekeningen betreffende het verblijf van Czaar Peter I in Nederland in 1697-98 en 1717, MS Nr. 47, Universiteits Bibliotheek, Utrecht. Nomen states, p. 6, "Maer in zijne reijsen mochte geen courante

gemelt werden, dat hij (Peter I) selve in persoon daer present was, want telckens schreven sij dan: Het groot gesantschap van Mosschovien ofte eenige princen van het groot gesantschap van sijn Czaarce majesteijt is hier ofte daer geweest."

⁵See Knoppers, pp. 21ff.

⁶The Amsterdamse Courant in the August 1697 issues speculated as to the exact date of the arrival of the Grand Embassy. Another newspaper, the Europische Mercurius I, pp. 227, 1697 states that the "Muscovy Embassy expected to arrive for some time [and] finally showed itself in Amsterdam the 26th of August."

⁷M. A. Venevitinov, Russkie v Gollandi, Velikoe posolstvo, 1697-98 g., Moscow, 1897, pp. 72-73.

⁸J. Scheltema, Peter de Grote in Holland en Zaandam, Amsterdam, 1814, I, pp. 152-153; and by the same author, Rusland en de Nederlanden beschouwd in de selver wederkeerige betrekkingen, Amsterdam, 1815, II, pp. 206-209; J. Meerman, Discours sur le premier voyage de Pierre le Grand, principalement en Hollande, Paris, 1814, pp. 69-70.

⁹Idem; G. Evers, "Czaar Peter te Utrecht in 1697 en 1717," Maandblad Oud-Utrecht, 47 (1947):63-65. Evers describes "De Toelast" as "het destijds als logement ingerichte huis Blydestein bij de Bezembrug aan de westzijde der Oudegracht, thans nr. 152."

¹⁰Scheltema, Peter de Groote, I, p. 153; B. Raptchinski, Peter de Groote in Holland 1697-1698, Amsterdam, 1925, p. 103.

¹¹Leo Loewenson, "The First Interviews between Peter I and William III in 1697: Some Neglected English Materials," Slavonic and East European Review, 36 (1958):308-316. The speech was definitely anti-French and this may have been enough for the police of Paris to censor it out of Meerman's Discours. On this see Scheltema, Rusland, II, p. 208 note.

¹²E. Schuyler, Peter the Great, London, 1884, I, p. 360; Scheltema, Rusland, II, p. 209.

¹³Loewenson, pp. 314-316. The Amsterdamse Courant reported that on September 16, two hundred soldiers returned to The Hague from Utrecht. Most likely they had been used

to maintain order and to keep the large crowds at bay. According to the custom of the time, the city of Utrecht paid all the expenses incurred by the Tsar during his visit. But in neither the "Vroedschappenresoluties" of 1697-98 nor in the archival index could be found any reference to his visit. The fact that the Tsar travelled incognito may have been the reason for this. The expenses may well have been 'hidden' under another posting in order to protect the Tsar's incognito.

¹⁴J. E. Struick, Utrecht door den Eeuwen Heen, Utrecht, 1968, pp. 244-245; Scheltema, Rusland, III, pp. 356-357.

¹⁵J. F. Reitz, Eenige uytvoerige historie van Moskovien of oude en nieuwe staat van't Russische of Moscovische keizerrijk, Utrecht, 1774, III, p. 304. Scheltema (Rusland, III, p. 357) adds the comment that there is no record of the foreman having received a gift from the Tsar in recognition of his alertness.