

The Czars of Russia

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- In medieval Russia the title tsar referred to a supreme ruler, particularly the Byzantine emperor, who was considered the head of the Orthodox Christian world. But the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453 and the Ottoman Turks' conquest of the Balkans left the grand princes of Moscow as the only remaining Orthodox monarchs in the world, and the Russian Orthodox clergy naturally began to look to them as the defenders and possible supreme heads of Orthodox Christianity. Claims were put forth that Moscow would become the "third Rome" in succession to Constantinople (now Istanbul) and Rome itself. In 1472 Ivan III, grand prince of Moscow, married Sofia (Zoë) Palaeologus, the niece of the last Byzantine emperor. Sofia brought with her the traditions of the Byzantine court and its concept of the exalted nature of monarchical power.



- In 1547 Ivan IV the Terrible, grand prince of Moscow, was officially crowned "tsar of all Russia," the religious and political ideology of the Russian took final form. As tsar, Ivan IV theoretically held power, but in practice he and his successors were limited by the traditional authority of the Orthodox church, the Boyar Council, and the legal codes of 1497, 1550, and 1649.
- In 1721 Tsar Peter I discarded the title of tsar for that of "emperor of all Russia" as part of his effort to secularize and modernize his regime and assert the state's primacy over the church. "Emperor" remained the official title for subsequent Russian rulers, but they continued to be known as "tsars" in popular usage until the imperial regime was overthrown by the Russian Revolution of 1917. The last Russian tsar, Nicholas II, was executed by the Soviet government in 1918. The early Bulgarian emperors (10th to 14th century) and the 20th-century kings of Bulgaria (from 1908 to 1946) also called themselves tsars.

Empress Sophia Alekseyevna,
8 June 1682 – 22 September 1689

Looking at Episode Seven of “The Romanovs. The History of the Russian Dynasty,” answer the following questions:

- How did succession work in the Russian Empire during the 19th century?
- Describe, in your own words, the nature of the Russian Empire – how would you describe it to an outsider?
- What were “serfs”?
- What had changed concerning the role of the Czar within Russia by the reign of Alexander II ?

