There is an apocryphal story that the Tsar of Russia, Peter I (the Great), acquired knowledge of Freemasonry from Sir Christopher Wren during a visit to England in 1698. And it is claimed that Peter participated in the formation of a Masonic Lodge on his return to Russia in 1717 with the help of two friends, Lefort of Geneva and Patrick Gordon. Unfortunately for this story, both Lefort and Gordon died in 1699!

It’s very interesting that Russian masons prefer to trace their origins from Peter the Great, not from the builders of the Solomon Temple! I guess that blue blood of the Tsar – Craftsman was more appealing to the Russian aristocracy that the dusty aprons of the regular masons!

There is better agreement that Freemasonry in Russia began with Lord James Keith, a descendent from Scottish nobility. In 1740 Keith was made Provincial Grand Master of Russian Freemasonry by the Grand Master of England (who also happened to be Keith's Cousin). Captain John Phillips had been appointed to this office for Russia in 1731, but there is no evidence to suggest he ever exercised it.

While the earliest Masonic lodges in Russia were generally formed by foreigners, under Keith Masonry started to move into Russian society where its members were mostly young officers from the best families.

In 1756, under Empress Elizabeth, a daughter of Peter the Great, the Secret Chancellery of the Empire made an inquiry into Russian Freemasonry. At this time, Masonry had existed as a fraternal brotherhood of no exceptional interest to the government except for it’s foreign influence, mainly Prussian, since Frederick the Great was considered the enemy by the Empress. Masonry was found not to be dangerous and it was allowed to continue, although under police surveillance. It was under Catherine the Great that Russian Freemasonry was to bloom with its own national leaders, and under her, the first suppression of masonry would begin.

Catherine II (The Great), born Sophie Augusta Fredericka of Anhalt-Zerbst, was the German princess. The choice of Sophie as the wife of the prospective tsar, nephew of Russian Emress Elizabeth and Sophie’s second cousin, resulted from diplomatic management of Count Lestocq and Frederick II of Prussia, who wanted to establish the friendship between Prussia and Russia.

After coming to Russia at age 14 Sophie studied Russian and Russian Orthodox Christianity, being re-christened as Catherine. Grand Duke Peter, her husband-to-be was a great disappointment to everyone. "Nature made him mean, the smallpox made him hideous, and his degraded habits made him loathsome.” He was also unable to consummate his marriage to Catherine. Empress Elizabeth pressured the couple to produce a son - to secure the dynasty. When it was clear this wasn't going to happen, Empress Elizabeth permitted an affair between Catherine and a handsome Russian officer, Sergey Saltykov. Catherine conceived and bore a son, Paul, who was accepted by
Grand Duke Peter as his own. Immediately after his birth, little Paul was carried away from his mother and the Empress Elizabeth raised him.

On Christmas day 1761, the Empress Elizabeth died. The reign of Peter III had begun, all six months of it! One of Peter's first official actions was stopping the ongoing hostilities against Prussia. The new Tsar signed a treaty with the Frederick the Great, King of Prussia (and a prominent Freemason). All occupied territories would be restored to Prussia, even though Russian army was staying in Berlin by this time. Peter III sent a personal letter to the King of Prussia, assuring him of his friendship, and has joined the Freemasonry.

Peter’s behavior to his wife was brutal and menacing, and in June 1762, he was overthrown by a court coup led by his wife. After his deposition, he was imprisoned in Ropshinskii Castle, where on July 7, 1762 he was killed by Count Alexei Orlov, Catherine's favorite at the time.

According to the popular rumors, plotting against her husband Catherine took money from the British Ambassador Keith, freemason and allegedly a spy of the Frederick the Great. We do not know if Catherine was ever belonged to freemasonry, but it is known that at the beginning of the takeover of the Russian throne, Catherine found the English form of Russian Freemasonry quite acceptable and complimentary to the spirit of her court.

The first prominent Russian Freemason was Ivan Perfilievich Yelaguin (1725-1794), Senator, Privy-Counselor, mentor and a tutor of Grand Duke Paul, etc. etc. He belonged to an ancient family of Russian noblemen and enjoyed the confidence of Catherine the Great. In 1772 he was appointed by the Grand Lodge of England as Provincial Grand Master of the Empire of Russia.

By 1774, Elagin's lodges had a membership of over 200 made up of Russian nobles and members from all levels of the civil and military service. In that year, five Russian Lodges were added to the Grand Lodge of England. By 1777 the entire ruling class and the state apparatus of Russia were thoroughly populated with Freemasons.

Most of the lodges, especially in the provinces, were short - lived, and Russian Freemasonry was very fragmented. Some lodges were subordinated to the Grand Lodge of England; others belonged to the Swedish Rite, the Strict Observance, or some other jurisdiction. A group of Moscow Rosicrucians headed by Johann - Georg Schwarz and Nikolai Novikov became the most influential group of Freemasonry in Russia.

Novikov joined Freemasonry in 1775 through Elagin's St. Petersburg lodge and had sent Russian Freemasonry into its second and more intense phase.

Under Novikov, Russian Freemasonry turned from the casual, fraternal activities of Elagin's "English" Masonry to the highly dedicated and esoteric orders of Scottish Masonry, introducing closer bonds of secrecy and mutual obligation, special catechisms and vows and new Quasi-Oriental costumes, and rituals. Freemasonry became first ideological class movement of the Russian Aristocracy and opposed to the atheistic ideas permeating into Russia from France.

To understand the unique religious influences acting on Russian Freemasonry, it is necessary to make a brief explanatory divergence.
Russia had been converted to Christianity very late in history... in fact not until the 10th century -- in 986 AD.

Prince Vladimir was ruling in Kiev at the time of the conversion of the Rus. He had secured his throne by killing all his brothers. His grandmother, Olga had earlier converted to Christianity and applied pressure on her grandson to do likewise.

The Primary Chronicle tells us Vladimir not only had seven wives, but three hundred (!) concubines at Vyshgorod, 300 at Belgorod and 200 at Berestovo. One wonders how he had the time to become the consummate soldier and administrator he really was.

But, being a good grandson and seeing political advantages in conversion, he considered the available options and saw four contenders: Islam, Judaism, the Church of Rome and Byzantine Orthodoxy. So he sent representatives to all four to investigate and have the contenders argue their case.

Well, as a grown man he didn't think much of circumcision, so Judaism was out.

Nor was Prince Vladimir impressed by the Islamic abstention from alcohol. In fact, his emissaries found Moslem worship to be "frenzied and foul smelling". The Islamic contenders claimed that Mohammed would give each man 70 fair women. With 800 concubines, Vladimir was doing very well, thank you, in this department.

However, rather than being the also-ran in this contest, Orthodoxy's church service and beautiful churches made a deep impression. (The representatives were shown that most beautiful of all Orthodox temples, the Hagia Sophia).

"The Greeks led us to the buildings where they worship their god and we knew not whether we were in heaven or on Earth. For on Earth there is no such splendor or such beauty and we are at a loss to describe it. We know only that God dwells there among men and their service is fairer than the ceremonies of other nations. For we cannot forget that beauty."

Obviously a clear winner since they found no comparable glory in the Roman Church. It may also have helped that women were separated during the service so Vladimir could get some rest! The real point was that concrete beauty and not abstract ideas conveyed the essence of the Christian message to the Rus.

So the Rus were converted en masse in a universal ceremony. But with Christianity came the realization that their country really had no glorious history. No cultural heritage. So somewhat amazing accounts were derived that insist that, for example, St. Andrew visited Moscow on his way to Rome from Palestine; that Russia was settled by the descendants of Shem and so on.

There also arose the semi-mystical concept of The Third Rome, which was a very powerful influence in Russia. This argues that Russia is the repository of the true faith. Also Russia saw itself (and still does) as the savior of Europe. Offering itself as a sacrifice so the rest of Europe may be protected. Russia was invaded by the Mongols, by Napoleon and by Hitler -- all with horrendous loss of life and, perhaps justifiably, they claim their sacrifice saved western Europe.

The Westernizing trends for Russia begun by Peter the Great, reached a zenith with Catherine. She was a cultural vampire, sucking up selected pieces of European culture and she especially drew to her court out-of-context aspects of the French Enlightenment. In 1756 Russia had entered into a new diplomatic and cultural alliance with France. On her accession to the throne Catherine wrote: “If the gain is not great in commerce, we shall compensate ourselves with bales of intelligence."
So it was, that by the 1770s and 1780s, the Russian aristocracy under Catherine's influence found themselves at the crossroads of their religion and Voltairianism (Vol'ter'ianstvo) by which they meant Rationalism, Skepticism and a vague passion for Reform.

Novikov became increasingly uneasy about this turn to the occult, which had overtaken Russian Freemasonry. In the late 1780s he proposed the formation of a purely Christian and philanthropic order. His increasing interest in the religious traditions of Old Russia permeated his publications with a kind of quasi-religious appeal and he adopted the Old Believer form of counting dates from the Creation rather than from the birth of Christ.

In late 1780s Novikov began publicly criticize the Order of Jesuits, favorites of Catherine the Great, accusing Jesuits of being a political order thus betraying the monastic ideal. Novikov had portrayed the Jesuits as faithless, power-seeking, aiming to set up a state within a state. The Empress, being the Jesuits' benefactress, was antagonized by these critics.

By this time her amused tolerance of Freemasonry had already shifted towards overt opposition to the Craft. Visit to Russia by Count Alessando Di Cagliostro (the Sicilian Giuseppe Balsamo) added to this opposition. Count DI Cagliostro carried on “Egyptian Rite” Masonry, and everything that took place there was obscure, fantastic and mysterious. Quite new for Russia was the fact that he admitted ladies to the work, at the head of who stood his wife, the beautiful Lorenza. It is true that she played an even greater role in the gentlemen’s Lodges where she fabricated up spirits for large sums of money, and was not ashamed to call into requisition the charms of her own person. And what did Count Cagliostro do? He kept up a strange intercourse with the ladies with a view to the improvement of the human race!

This was a serious matter - so serious that Empress Catherine herself was aroused! Unfortunately - whether intentionally or not - she confused “Egyptian” Masonry and Freemasonry in general.

In 1785-6 she publicly ridiculed Freemasonry practices and practitioners in three crudely satirical comedies, The Deceiver, The Deluded and The Siberian Shaman. She could not understand why Novikov, a prosperous nobleman who had retired from state service to become the Empire's pre-eminent private publisher, subscribed to such a bizarre doctrine as Freemasonry!

Empress began increasing administrative pressures on Freemasons although no definite command of prohibition was issued. She also closed down the Masonic printing presses and finally had Novikov arrested in 1792. A number of booksellers were arrested as well, interrogated and released with a warning. Some 20,000 copies of the mainly Masonic works were confiscated and burnt in 1793.

Novikov was never tried, but the accusations against him were listed in the sentence eventually pronounced. He was charged with holding secret meetings, he was accused of corresponding in cipher with Prussian Minister and with attempting to lure a "Certain Person" (presumably Grand Duke Paul) into becoming a Freemason. Novikov was condemned to fifteen years' imprisonment.
Catherine's arrest of Novikov marks the end of her flirtation with the Enlightenment in the wake of the French Revolution, which she took as a personal attack. As an enlightened despot, Catherine the Great felt that the French bit the hand that fed them. Her distrust of the commoners seemed justified when, in March 1792, Gustav III, albeit an enemy of Catherine's, had been assassinated.

In January 1793, the execution of Louis XVI made Catherine physically ill. All that simply reinforced Catherine's concept that Freemasonry, as well as the Enlightenment in its entirety, was anathema to her ruling of Russia.

It seems odd that the Empress should suppress a group supporting loyalty to the sovereign and teaching morality and a belief in God. But Freemasonry had involuntarily become associated with personal enemies of the Empress. First was her late husband, Peter III, who had been favorably disposed towards the Craft and Catherine was hostile to any favorites of the late-emperor. The Russian Freemasons were aligned to Germany and Frederick the Great was the greatest enemy of Catherine.

Russian Freemasonry was based on Russian Orthodox Christianity and opposed by and opposed to the Jesuits -- Catherine's favorites. Freemasons in Russia had the support of Grand Duke Paul, son of Catherine the Great, who was now an open, personal enemy and a political opponent of the Empress.

The Swedish ambassador, Count Stedingk, wrote that Catherine "felt a truly feminine repulsion towards Masonry".

On Catherine's death in 1796 the situation for Freemasonry changed. Paul I not only abolished all prison sentences imposed on Freemasons (including Novikov) but rewarded, protected and even consulted them on State affairs although Freemasonry remained officially prohibited.

Russian Freemasonry enjoyed a brief period of relatively unhampered existence in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The craft counted among its members practically every politician, military leader, and intellectual of note, including Mikhail Kutuzov and Alexander Pushkin.

After 1822, when Alexander I imposed a ban on all secret societies, the situation changed. The ban, confirmed by Nicholas I in 1826, signified the official end of Freemasonry in Russia, although some clandestine lodges continued to operate. Freemasonry was again outlawed in Soviet Russia in the early 1920s. The ban ended in the 1990s, when the French National Grand Lodge established lodges in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Voronezh, and chapters of the Ancient and Accepted Scottish Rite were also organized.

By 1997 Grand Lodge of Russia established it’s administrative independence of the Russian Order from any Grand jurisdiction of the world. At present, the Grand Lodge of Russia is recognized by more than 70 Grand jurisdictions of the regular Freemasonry.
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