THE GREAT EMBASSY
TO WESTERN EUROPE

The Great Embassy was one of the two or three overwhelming events in Peter's life. The project amazed his fellow countrymen. Never before had a Russian tsar traveled peacefully abroad; a few had ventured across the border in wartime to besiege a city or pursue an enemy army, but not in time of peace. Why did he want to go? Who would rule on his behalf? And why, if he must go, did he plan to travel incognito?

Many of the same questions were to be asked by Europeans, not in anguish but in sheer fascination. What was the reason for this mysterious journey by the reigning monarch of a vast, remote, semi-Oriental land, a monarch traveling incognito, disdaining ceremony and refusing honors, curious to see everything and to understand how everything worked? As news of the journey spread, speculation as to its purpose was rife. Some believed with Pleyer, the Austrian agent in Moscow, that the Embassy was "merely a cloak to allow ... the Tsar to get out of his own country and divert himself a little, and has no other serious purpose." Others (such as Voltaire, who wrote about it later) thought that Peter's purpose was to learn what ordinary life was like, so that when he remounted the throne he would be a better ruler. Still others believed Peter's claim that he was fulfilling the vow he had taken, at the time of his near-shipwreck, to visit the tomb of St. Peter in Rome.

In fact, there was a sound diplomatic reason for the Embassy. Peter was anxious to renew and if possible strengthen the alliance against the Turks. As he saw it, the capture of Azov was only a beginning. He hoped now to force the Strait of Kerch with his new fleet and attain mastery of the Black Sea, and to accomplish this he must not only acquire technology and trained manpower, he must have reliable allies; Russia could not fight the Ottoman Empire alone. Already, the solidarity of the alliance was threatened. King Jan Sobieski of Poland had died in June 1696, and with his death most of the anti-Turkish fervor had gone out of that nation. Louis XIV
of France was maneuvering to place French princes on the thrones of Spain and Poland, ambitions which were likely to provoke new wars with the Hapsburg empire; the Emperor, in consequence, was eager for peace in the East. To prevent any further crumbling of the alliance, the Russian Embassy intended to visit the capitals of its allies: Warsaw, Vienna and Venice. It would also visit the chief cities of the Protestant maritime powers, Amsterdam and London, in search of possible help. Only France, friend of the Turk and enemy of Austria, Holland and England, would be avoided. The ambassadors were to look for capable shipwrights and naval officers, men who had reached command by merit and not through influence; and they were to purchase ship's cannon, anchors, block and tackle, and instruments of navigation which could be copied and reproduced in Russia.

But even such serious objectives could have been attained by Peter's ambassadors without the physical presence of the Tsar himself. Why, then, did he go? The simplest answer seems the best: He went because of his desire to learn. The visit to Western Europe was the final stage of Peter's education, the culmination of all he had learned from foreigners since boyhood. They had taught him all that they could in Russia, but there was more, and Lefort was constantly urging him to go. Peter's overriding interest was in ships for his embryo navy, and he was well aware that in Holland and England lived the greatest shipbuilders in the world. He wanted to go to those countries, where dockyards turned out the dominant navies and merchant fleets of the world, and to Venice, which was supreme in the building of multi-oared galleys for use in inland seas.

The best authority on his motive is Peter himself. Before his departure, he had a seal engraved for himself which bore the inscription, "I am a pupil and need to be taught." Later, in 1720, he wrote a preface to a set of newly issued Maritime Regulations for the new Russian navy, and in it described the sequence of events during this earlier part of his life:

He [Peter was describing himself in the third person] turned his whole mind to the construction of a fleet . . . A suitable place for shipbuilding was found on the River Voronezh, close to the town of that name, skillful shipwrights were called from England and Holland, and in 1696 there began a new work in Russia—the construction of great warships, galleys and other vessels. And so that this might be forever secured in Russia, and that he might introduce among his people the art of this business, he sent many people of noble families to Holland and other states to learn the building and management of ships; and that the monarch might not be shamefully behind his subjects in that trade, he himself undertook a journey to Holland; and in Amsterdam at the East India wharf, giving himself
up, with other volunteers, to the learning of naval architecture, he got what was necessary for a good carpenter to know, and, by his own work and skill, constructed and launched a new ship.

As for his decision to travel incognito—implemented by his command that all mail leaving Moscow be censored to prevent leakage of his plan—it was intended as a buffer, a façade, to protect him and give him freedom. Anxious to travel, yet hating the formality and ceremony that would inevitably inundate him should he journey as a reigning monarch, he chose to travel “invisibly” within the Embassy ranks. By giving the Embassy distinguished leadership, he could assure a reception consistent with persons of rank; by pretending that he himself was not present, he gave himself freedom to avoid wasted hours of numbing ceremony. In honoring his ambassadors, his hosts would be honoring the Tsar, and meanwhile Peter Mikhailov could come and go, and see whatever he liked.

If Peter’s purpose seems narrow, the impact of this eighteen-month journey was to be immense. Peter returned to Russia determined to remold his country along Western lines. The old Muscovite state, isolated and introverted for centuries, would reach out to Europe and open itself to Europe. In a sense, the flow of effect was circular: the West affected Peter, the Tsar had a powerful impact upon Russia, and Russia, modernized and emergent, had a new and greater influence on Europe. For all three, therefore—Peter, Russia and Europe—the Great Embassy was a turning point.

The Europe which Peter was setting out to visit in the spring of 1697 was dominated by the power and glory of a single man, His Most Christian Majesty, Louis XIV of France. Called the Sun King, and represented in both pageantry and art as Apollo, his rays reached out to affect every corner of European politics, diplomacy and civilization.

When Peter was born, and through all but the last ten years of his life, Louis was the most influential man in Europe. It is impossible to understand the Europe which Russia was entering without first considering the French monarch. Few kings in any epoch have exceeded his majesty. His reign of seventy-two years was the longest in the history of France; his French contemporaries considered him a demi-god. “His slightest gesture, his walk, his bearing, his countenance; all was measured, appropriate, noble, majestic,” wrote the court diarist, Saint-Simon. His presence was overwhelming. “I never trembled like this before Your Majesty’s enemies,” confessed one of Louis’ marshals on entering the royal presence.

Although Louis was born to the throne, the sweep of his majesty depended more on his character—his massive ego and absolute self-assurance
than on his physical or political inheritance. In physical stature, he was short even for that day—only five feet four inches. He had a robust figure and powerful, well-muscled legs which he loved to display in tight silk stockings. His eyes were brown, he had a long, thin, arched nose, a sensuous mouth and chestnut hair, which, as he grew older, was hidden in public beneath a wig of long black curls. The smallpox which had afflicted him when he was nine had left his cheeks and chin covered with pits.

Louis was born September 5, 1638, the belated first fruit of a marriage which had been barren for twenty-three years. The death of his father, Louis XIII, made the boy King of France at four. During his childhood, France was ruled by his mother, Anne of Austria, and her chief minister (who was perhaps also her lover), Cardinal Mazarin, the protégé of and successor to the great Richelieu. When Louis was nine, France erupted into the limited revolution known as the Fronde. This humiliation scarred the boy King, and even before the death of Mazarin he was determined to be his own master, to allow no minister to dominate him as Richelieu had dominated his father and Mazarin his mother. Nor, for the rest of his life, did Louis ever willingly set foot in the narrow, turbulent streets of Paris.

Louis was always a country man. In the first years of his reign, he traveled with the court back and forth between the great royal châteaux outside Paris, but kings of France, especially great kings, built their own palaces to reflect their personal glory. In 1668, Louis chose the site of his own palace, the land of his father’s small hunting château at Versailles, twelve miles west of Paris. Here, on a sandy knoll rising only slightly above the rolling woodland of the Île de France, the King ordered his architect, Le Vau, to build. For years, the work continued. Thirty-six thousand men labored on the scaffolding which surrounded the building or toiled in the mud and dust of the developing gardens, planting trees, laying drainpipes, erecting statues of marble and bronze. Six thousand horses dragged timbers or blocks of stone on carts and sledges. The mortality rate was high. Nightly, wagons carried away the dead who had fallen from a scaffolding or been crushed by the unexpected sliding of a heavy piece of stone. Malarial fever raged through the crude barracks of the workmen, killing dozens every week. In 1682, when the château was finally finished, Louis had built the greatest palace in the world. It had no ramparts: Louis had built his seat undefended, in the open country, to demonstrate the power of a monarch who had no need of moats and walls to protect his person.

Behind a façade one fifth of a mile in length were enormous public galleries, council chambers, libraries, private apartments for the royal family, boudoirs and a private chapel, not to mention corridors, stairways, closets and kitchens. In decoration, Versailles has been said to represent the most conspicuous consumption of art and statuary since the days of the Roman empire. Throughout the palace, the high ceilings and great doors were
emblazoned in gold with the mark of Apollo, the sign of the flaming sun, the symbol of the builder and occupant of this enormous palace. The walls were covered with patterned velvet, paneled in marble or hung with tapestries, the windows curtained with embroidered velvet in winter and flowered silk in summer. At night, thousands of candles flickered in hundreds of glass chandeliers and silver candelabra. The rooms were furnished with exquisite inlaid furniture—gilded tables whose legs were scrolled or decorated with flowers and leaves, and broad-backed chairs upholstered with velvet. In the private apartments, rich carpets were laid over inlaid floors and the walls were hung with huge paintings by Andrea del Sarto, Titian, Raphael, Rubens and Van Dyck. In Louis' bedroom hung the "Mona Lisa."

The gardens, designed by Le Nôtre, were as spectacular as the palace. Millions of flowers, bushes and trees were laid out with precise geometrical precision amidst grassy avenues, terraces, ramps and staircases, ponds, lakes, fountains and cascades. The fountains, with 1,500 jets of water spouting from octagonal lakes, became—and remain—the envy of the world. Tiny clipped hedges curved into ornate designs, separating flowers of every color and description, many of them changed daily. The King was especially fond of tulips, and every year (when he was not at war with Holland) four million tulip bulbs were imported from Dutch nurseries to turn Versailles flaming crimson and brilliant yellow in spring. The King's passion for orange trees led Le Nôtre to design a huge orangery, depressed below the open air so that the trees would be protected from the wind. Even this was not enough, and Louis brought some of his orange trees indoors and kept them by the windows of his private rooms, planted in silver tubs.

Standing at the tall windows of the Galeries des Glaces in the palace's western façade, the King could look down long prospects of grass, stone and water, adorned with sculpture, to the Grand Canal. This body of water, constructed in the shape of a huge cross, was more than a mile long. Here the King was taken to boat and sail. On summer evenings, the entire court boarded gondolas sent as a gift from the Doge of Venice, and spent hours floating and drifting beneath the stars while Lully and the court orchestra, on a raft nearby, filled the air with music.

Versailles became the symbol of the supremacy, wealth, power and majesty of the richest and most powerful prince in Europe. Everywhere on the continent, other princes recorded their friendship, their envy, their defiance of Louis by building palaces in emulation of his—even princes who were at war with France. Each of them wanted a Versailles of his own, and demanded that his architects and craftsmen create palaces, gardens, furniture, tapestries, carpets, silver, glass and porcelain in imitation of Louis' masterpiece. In Vienna, Potsdam, Dresden, at Hampton Court and later in St. Petersburg, buildings arose and were decorated under the stimulus of Versailles. Even the long avenues and stately boulevards of
Washington, D.C., which was laid out over a century later, were geometrically designed by a French architect in imitation of Versailles.

Louis loved Versailles, and when distinguished visitors were present, the King personally conducted them through the palace and gardens. But the palace was much more than Europe's most gorgeous pleasure dome; it had a serious political purpose. The King's philosophy rested on total concentration of power in the hands of the monarch; Versailles became the instrument. The vast size of the palace made it possible for the King to summon and house there all the important nobility of France. Into Versailles, as if drawn by an enormous magnet, came all the great French dukes and princes; the rest of the country, where the heads of these ancient houses had lands, heritage, power and responsibilities, was left deserted and ignored. At Versailles, with power out of their reach, the French nobility became the ornament of the king, not his rival.

Louis drew the nobles to him, and once they were there, he did not abandon them to dreariness and boredom. At the Sun King's command, Versailles blazed with light. A ceaseless round of intricate protocol and brilliant entertainment kept everyone busy from morning until night. Everything revolved in minute detail around the King. His bedroom was placed at the very center of the palace, looking eastward over the Cours de Marbre. From eight o'clock in the morning, when the curtains of the royal bed were drawn aside and Louis woke to hear, "Sire, it is time," the monarch was on parade. He rose, was rubbed down with rosewater and spirits of wine, was shaved and dressed, observed by the most fortunate of his subjects. Dukes helped him to pull off his nightshirt and pull on his breeches. Courtiers argued over who was to bring the King his shirt. They jostled for the privilege of presenting the King with his chaise percée (his "chair with a hole in it"), then crowded around while the King performed his daily natural functions. There was a throng in his chamber when he prayed with his chaplain, and when he ate. It followed as he walked through the palace, strolled through the gardens, went to the theater or rode to his hounds. Protocol determined who had a right to sit in the King's presence and whether on a chair with a back or only on a stool. So glorified was the monarch that even when his dinner was passing by, courtiers raised their hats and swept them on the ground in salute, declaring respectfully, "La viande du roi" ("The King's dinner").

Louis loved to hunt. Every day in good weather, he rode with sword or spear in hand, following baying dogs through the forest in pursuit of boar or stag. Every evening, there was music and dancing and gambling at which fortunes were won and lost. Every Saturday night, there was a ball. Often, there were masquerades, elaborate three-day festivals when the entire court dressed up as Romans, Persians, Turks or Red Indians. The feasts at Versailles were gargantuan. Louis himself ate for two men.
Wrote the Princess Palatine: "I have often seen the King eat four different plates of soup of different kinds, a whole pheasant, a partridge, a large plate of salad, two thick slices of ham, a dish of mutton in garlic-flavored sauce, a plateful of pastries, and then fruit and hard-boiled eggs. Both the King and 'Monsieur' [Louis' younger brother] are exceedingly fond of hard-boiled eggs." The King's grandchildren later were taught the polite innovation of using a fork to eat with, but when they were invited to dine with the monarch, he would have none of it and forbade them using these tools, declaring, "I have never in my life used anything to eat with but my knife and my fingers."

The main feast at Versailles was a feast of love. The enormous palace with its numberless rooms to slip away to, its crisscrossing alleys of trees, its statues to hide behind, made a gorgeous stage. In this, as in everything, the King played the leading role. Louis' wife, Maria Theresa, who had come to him as an infanta of Spain, was a simple, child-like creature with large blue eyes. She surrounded herself with half a dozen dwarfs and dreamed of Spain. As long as she lived, Louis upheld his marriage duties, finding his way into her bed eventually every night, dutifully making love to her twice a month. The court always knew these occasions by the fact that the Queen went to confession the following day and her face had a special glow. But the Queen was not enough for Louis. He was highly sexed, always inclined to go to bed with any woman who was handy and relentless in pursuit. "Kings who have a desire, seldom sigh for long," said the courtier Bussy-Rabutin, but there is no record that Louis was ever seriously rebuffed. On the contrary, the court was filled with beautiful women, most of them married but still ambitious, who flaunted their availability. The three successive Maîtresses en Titre (the acknowledged royal mistresses), Louise de La Vallière, Madame de Montespan and Mademoiselle de Fontanges, were but the tip of the iceberg, although with Madame de Montespan it was a grand passion which lasted twelve years and resulted in seven children. No one was disturbed about these arrangements except perhaps the Marquis de Montespan, who angered the King by making a jealous fuss and referring to his wife through all these years as "the late Madame de Montespan."

Whomever the King chose, the court honored. Duchesses rose when a new mistress entered the room. In 1673, when Louis went to war, he took with him the Queen, Louise de la Vallière and Madame de Montespan, then extremely pregnant. All three ladies lumbered along after the army in the same carriage. On campaign, Louis' military tent was made of Chinese silk and had six chambers, including three bedrooms. War, for the Sun King, was not all hell.

Even in France, the view of Louis as a gracious, majestic monarch was not universally held. There were those who found him inconsiderate: he
would set off on long carriage rides of five or six hours, insisting that ladies ride with him even when they were pregnant, and then would absolutely refuse to halt so that they might relieve themselves. He seemed unconcerned about the common people; those who tried to speak to him of the poverty his wars were inflicting were excluded from his presence as persons of bad taste. He was stern and could be ruthless: after the Affaire des Poisons, in which numerous court personages who had recently died were alleged to have been poisoned and a plot against the life of the King was hinted, thirty-six of the accused were tortured and burned at the stake, while eighty-one men and women were chained up for life at the bottom of French dungeons, their jailors commanded that if they spoke, they were to be whipped. The story of the Man in the Iron Mask, whose identity was known only to the King, and who was held for life in solitary confinement, was whispered at court.

Outside France, few in Europe regarded the Sun King's rays as wholly beneficial. To Protestant Europe, Louis was an aggressive, brutal Catholic tyrant.

The instrument of Louis' wars was the army of France. Created by Louvois, it numbered 150,000 in peacetime, 400,000 in wartime. The cavalry wore blue, the infantry pale red, and royal guards—the famed Maison du Roi—scarlet. Commanded by the great marshals of France, Condé, Turenne, Vendôme, Tallard and Villars, the army of France was the envy—and menace—of Europe. Louis himself was not a warrior. Although as a young man he went to war, making a dashing figure on horseback in a gleaming breastplate, a velvet cape and a plumed three-cornered hat, the King did not actually participate in battles, but he became quite expert in the details of strategy and military administration. When Louvois died, the King assumed his role and became his own minister of war. It was he who discussed the grand strategy of campaigns with his marshal and saw to the raising of supplies, the recruiting, training and allocation and the collection of intelligence.

Thus the century unrolled, and the prestige of the Sun King and the power and glory of France mounted year by year. The splendor of Versailles aroused the admiration and envy of the world. The French army was the finest in Europe. The French language became the universal language of diplomacy, society and literature. Anything, everything, was possible, it seemed, if beneath the paper bearing the command there appeared the tall, shaky signature "Louis."

At the time of the Great Embassy, the gap between Russia and the West seemed far wider than anything measurable in terms of sea-going ships or superior military technology. From the West, Russia appeared dark and
The Great Embassy to Western Europe

The glories of its architecture, its icons, its church music and its folk art were unknown, ignored or despised—whereas, to its own educated inhabitants at least, late-seventeenth-century Europe seemed a brilliant, modern community. New worlds were being explored not only across the oceans but also in science, music, art and literature. New instruments to meet practical needs were being invented. Today, many of these achievements have become the necessities and treasures of modern man—the telescope, the microscope, the thermometer, the barometer, the compass, the watch, the clock, champagne, wax candles, street lighting and the general use of tea and coffee all made their first appearance in these years. Fortunate men already had heard the music of Purcell, Lully, Couperin and Corelli; within a few years, they would listen also to the works of Vivaldi, Telemann, Rameau, Handel, Bach and Scarlatti (the last three all born in the same year, 1685). At court and in the ballrooms of the nobility, ladies and gentlemen danced the gavotte and the minuet. France's trio of immortal playwrights, Molière, Corneille and Racine, probed deep into the foibles of human nature, and their plays, first performed before their royal patron at Versailles, spread rapidly in performance and reading to every corner of Europe. England was giving to literature Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Samuel Pepys and John Evelyn, the poets John Dryden and Andrew Marvell and, above all, John Milton. In painting, most of the mid-seventeenth-century giants—Rembrandt, Rubens, Van Dyck, Vermeer, Frans Hals and Velasquez—had departed, but in France distinguished men and women still had their portraits painted by Mignard and Rigaud, or in London by Sir Godfrey Kneller, a pupil of Rembrandt, who painted ten reigning sovereigns, including the youthful Peter the Great.

In their libraries and laboratories, the scientists of Europe, liberated from obeisance to religious doctrine, were plunging forward, deducing conclusions from observed facts, shrinking from no result because it might be unorthodox. Descartes, Boyle and Leeuwenhoek produced scientific papers on coordinate geometry, the relation between the volume, pressure and density of gases, and the astonishing world that could be seen through a 300-power microscope. The most original of these minds ranged over multiple fields of intellect; for example, Gottfried von Leibniz, who discovered the differential and integral calculus, also dreamed of drawing up social and governmental blueprints for an entirely new society; for years, he was to pursue Peter of Russia in hopes that the Tsar would allow him to use the Russian empire as an enormous laboratory for his ideas.

The greatest scientific mind of the age, spanning mathematics, physics, astronomy, optics, chemistry and botany, belonged to Isaac Newton. Born in 1642, Member of Parliament for Cambridge, knighted in 1705, he was fifty-five when Peter arrived in England. His greatest work, the majestic Principia Mathematica, formulating the law of universal gravitation, was
already behind him, published in 1687. Newton’s work, in the appraisal of Albert Einstein, “determined the course of Western thought, research and practice to an extent that nobody before or since his time can touch.”

With the same passion for discovery, other seventeenth-century Europeans were setting out on other oceans to explore and colonize the globe. Most of South America and much of North America were ruled from Madrid. English and Portuguese colonies had been planted in India. The flags of half a dozen European nations flew over settlements in Africa; even so unlikely and non-maritime a state as Brandenburg had established a colony on the Gold Coast. In the most promising of all the new regions being explored, the eastern half of North America, two European states, France and England, had established colonial empires. France’s was much larger in territory: from Quebec and Montreal, the French had penetrated through the Great Lakes into the heartland of modern America. In 1672, the year of Peter’s birth, Jacques Marquette explored the region around Chicago. A year later, he and Father Louis Jolliet descended the Mississippi in canoes as far as Arkansas. In 1686, when Peter was sailing boats on the Yauza, the Sieur de La Salle claimed the entire Mississippi Valley for France, and in 1699 the lands at the mouth of the great river were named Louisiana in honor of Louis XIV.

The English settlements scattered along the Atlantic seaboard from Massachusetts through Georgia were more compact, more densely settled and therefore more tenacious in times of trouble. The Dutch New Netherlands—absorbed into today’s New York and New Jersey—and the colony of New Sweden, near modern Wilmington, Delaware, both had fallen as spoils to England during the Anglo-Dutch naval wars of the 1660’s and 1670’s. By the time of Peter’s Great Embassy, New York, Philadelphia and Boston were substantial towns of more than 30,000 inhabitants.

Around the globe, the majority of mankind lived near the earth. Life on the land was a struggle for survival. Wood, wind, water and the straining muscles of men and beasts were the sources of energy. Most men and women talked only about people or events within the horizon of field and village; things that happened elsewhere were beyond their ken and interest. When the sun went down, the world—its plains and hills and valleys, its cities, towns and villages—was plunged into darkness. Here and there, a fire might burn or a candle flicker, but most human activity stopped and people went to sleep. Staring into the darkness, they warmed themselves with private hopes or wrestled with personal despair, and then they slept to ready themselves for the coming day.

All too often, life was not only hard but short. The rich might live to fifty, while the life of a poor man terminated, on the average, somewhere between thirty and forty. Only half of all infants survived their first year and the toll in palaces was as heavy as in cottages. Of the five children born to
Louis XIV and his Queen, María Theresa, only the Dauphin survived. Queen Anne of England, desperately trying to produce an heir, gave birth sixteen times; not one of these children lived beyond ten years. Peter the Great and his second wife, Catherine, were to produce twelve children, but only two daughters, Anne and Elizabeth, reached adulthood. Even the Sun King was to lose his only son, his eldest grandson and his eldest great-grandson, all prospective kings of France, to measles within a span of fourteen months.

In fact, through the seventeenth century, the population of Europe actually declined. In 1648, it was estimated at 118 million; by 1713 the estimate had fallen to 102 million. Primarily, the causes were the plagues and epidemics that periodically devastated the continent. Sweeping through a city, borne by fleas in the fur of rats, plague left behind a carpet of human corpses. In London in 1665, 100,000 died; nine years before in Naples, 130,000. Stockholm lost one third of its population to plague in 1710–1711 and Marseilles half of its inhabitants in 1720–1721. Bad harvests and consequent famine also killed hundreds of thousands. Some died directly from starvation, but most were prey to illnesses whose task was easier because of lowered resistance due to malnutrition. Poor public sanitation was also responsible for many deaths. Lice carried typhus, mosquitoes carried malaria, and the piles of horse manure in the streets attracted flies that bore typhoid and infantile diarrhea to carry off thousands of children. Smallpox was almost universal—some died and some survived, marked by deep pits across the face and body. The dark face of Louis XIV was marred by the pox, as were the fair features of Charles XII of Sweden. Not until 1721 was the dread disease partially contained by the development of an inoculation. Then, the brave decision of the Princess of Wales to submit to the procedure not only stirred the courage of others, but even made it fashionable.

Into this modern seventeenth-century world, with all its radiance and energies and all its ills, those few Russians who traveled abroad emerged blinking like creatures of the dark led into the light. They disbelieved in or disapproved of most of what they saw. Foreigners, of course, were heretics, and contact with them was likely to contaminate; indeed, the whole process of conducting relations with foreign governments was at best a necessary evil. The Russian government had always been reluctant to receive permanent foreign embassies in Moscow. Such embassies would only “bring harm to the Muscovite state and embroil it with other nations,” explained one of Tsar Alexis’ leading officials. And the same blend of disdain and distrust governed Russian attitudes toward sending their own embassies abroad. Russian envoys journeyed westward only when there were compelling reasons. Even then, such envoys customarily were ignorant of