

## The Russian empire under pressure

### I. Military defeat and social reform

#### A. The Crimean War (1853-1856)

1. Nineteenth-century Russia expanded from Manchuria, across Asia to Baltic Sea
2. Sought access to Mediterranean Sea, moved on Balkans controlled by Ottomans
3. European coalition supported Ottomans against Russia in Crimea
4. Crushing defeat forced tsars to take radical steps to modernize army, industry

#### B. Emancipation of serfs in 1861 by Alexander II

1. Serfdom supported landed nobility, an obstacle to economic development
2. Serfs gained right to land, but no political rights; had to pay a redemption tax
3. Emancipation did not increase agricultural production

#### C. Political and legal reforms followed

1. 1864, creation of *zemstvos*, local assemblies with representatives from all classes
2. A weak system: nobles dominated, tsar held veto power
3. Legal reform more successful: juries, independent judges, professional attorneys

### II. Industrialization

#### A. The Witte system: developed by Sergei Witte, minister of finance, 1892-1903

1. Railway construction stimulated other industries; trans-Siberian railway
2. Remodeled the state bank, protected infant industries, secured foreign loans
3. Top-down industrialization effective; steel, coal, and oil industries grew

#### B. Industrial discontent intensified

1. Rapid industrialization fell hardest on working classes
2. Government outlawed unions, strikes; workers increasingly radical
3. Business class supported autocracy, not reform

### III. Repression and revolution

#### A. Cycles of protest and repression

1. Peasants landless, no political power, frustrated by lack of meaningful reform
2. Anti-government protest and revolutionary activity increased in 1870s
3. Intelligentsia advocated socialism and anarchism, recruited in countryside
4. Repression by tsarist authorities: secret police, censorship
5. *Russification*: sparked ethnic nationalism, attacks on Jews tolerated

#### B. Terrorism emerges as a tool of opposition

1. Alexander II, the reforming tsar, assassinated by a bomb in 1881
2. Nicholas II (1894-1917), more oppressive, conservative ruler

#### C. Russo-Japanese War, 1904-05: Russian expansion to east leads to conflict with Japan

#### D. Revolution of 1905: triggered by costly Russian defeat by Japan

1. Bloody Sunday massacre: unarmed workers shot down by government troops
2. Peasants seized landlords' property; workers formed soviets
3. Tsar forced to accept elected legislature, the Duma; did not end conflict

## **Russia's Revolutionary Tradition.**

- A. An empire seething with cultural ferment, social dislocation, and economic turmoil + a meeting place, sometimes peaceful and sometimes violent, of ideas, ideologies, and political movements.
1. The Decembrists and Other Malcontents: The westernization of Russian culture, brought not only the arts but also Enlightenment ideas on universal rights, natural law, and popular sovereignty.
    - a. Catherine II, "The Great" (1729-96) considered herself an enlightened monarch until reformers pleaded for the abolition of serfdom, a massive peasant revolt in southeastern Russia, and the Parisians overthrew and executed King Louis XIV. She and her successors then became defenders of legitimacy.
    - b. Nevertheless, some Russians continued to be attracted to the western ideas of democracy. In 1825 they attempted a coup d'etat to either force the new Tsar Nicholas I to become a constitutional monarch, or to eliminate the monarchy and make Russia a republic. The revolutionaries, known as Decembrists for the month of their coup, also called for the abolition of serfdom. While their revolution failed, and their leaders were executed or exiled, the Decembrists became a symbol for succeeding generations of revolutionaries and reformers in Russia.
  2. The Appeal of Socialism: By the mid-19th century, Russia had developed an articulate intelligentsia in opposition to the status quo. At a time when various forms of socialism were the vogue in Europe, this intelligentsia not only adopted western concepts of representative government, civil rights, and democracy, but also Marxism, socialism and anarchism, too.
- B. The Pendulum of Reform and Repression: a pattern of trends can be seen from the early 19th century onwards in which periods of reform or revolutionary change have been followed by periods of state repression, which in turn is followed by reform, and then repression again. These swings in the pendulum seem to be precipitated by a crisis or war.
1. Repression under Nicholas I (1825-1855): restricted travel at home and abroad, restricted the importation of foreign books and magazines, restricted academic freedom in schools and university, restricted foreign study, instituted press censorship, repressed ethnic minorities, ended Polish autonomy, and organized Russia's first modern political police.
  2. Reform Under Alexander II (1855-1881): emancipated the serfs, reformed the army, navy, the judiciary, education, and instituted the first local representative bodies known as the Zemstvos. Press censorship was relaxed, and industrial development was begun. However, the suppression of revolution in Poland led to the development of protest movements among Russian students. Arrests, assassinations of imperial officials, assassination attempts on the tsar, reprisals, and a state of siege ensued. Alexander II was killed by assassins ironically the day he had agreed to the development of a representative body for the whole empire.
  3. Repression Under Alexander III (1881-1894): this period of oppression was also a period of intense industrialization and sweeping changes in Russian society, one which put strains on the old autocratic system. The strains and defeats of War with Japan in 1904 led to another swing of the pendulum.
  4. the Revolutions of 1905 and Duma Reforms (1904-1914): Peaceful demonstrations by workers in St. Petersburg in January 1905 were met by rifle fire from troops. "Bloody Sunday" led to a wave of strikes, disturbances, mutinies in the army and navy, and the formation of political opposition to the tsar's government. Having lost the war with Japan and fearing the overthrow of established order, the tsar's government agreed to a constitution and a Duma (parliament) in October. However, in the years between 1906 and 1914 the tsar's government did not follow through on promised political reforms, dissolved two dumas and limited the extent of democracy in Russia.

### **1. Russia before Reform.**

- The French Revolution and Napoleon's invasion of 1812 produced a backlash in Russia against Westernization. Conservative intellectuals embraced the turn to isolation as a way of vaunting Russian values and institutions, including serfdom.
- When Western-oriented army officers fomented the Decembrist revolt of 1825, Tsar Nicholas I repressed opposition. As a consequence Russia escaped the European revolutions of 1830 and 1848.
- Russia continued its territorial expansion. The Congress of Vienna confirmed its hold over Poland; Polish nationalist revolts during the 1830s were brutally suppressed. Pressure on the Ottoman Empire continued and Russia supported dissidents in Greece and Serbia.

### **2. Economic and Social Problems: The Peasant Question.**

- In economic terms Russia fell behind the West because it failed to industrialize. Landlords increased exports of grain by tightening labor obligations on serfs. Russia remained a profoundly agricultural society dependent upon unfree labor.
- The significance of the failure to industrialize was demonstrated by the Crimean War (1854-1856). Britain and France came to the support of the Ottomans and defeated the Russians because of their industrial economies.
- Tsar Alexander II was convinced that reforms were necessary, and that meant resolving the issue of serfdom. Many individuals believed that a free labor force would produce higher agricultural profits; others wished to end abuses or to end periodic peasant risings. *Reform was seen as a way to protect distinctive Russian institutions, not to copy the West.*

### **3. The Reform Era and Early Industrialization.**

- The serfs were emancipated in 1861; they received land but did not gain any political freedoms. They were tied to their villages until they paid for the lands they had received. The payments, plus increasing taxation, kept most peasants very poor. The emancipation did create a larger urban labor force, but it did not spur agricultural productivity. Peasants continued to use old methods on their small holdings. Peasant uprisings persisted because of the enduring harsh conditions which were exacerbated by population growth.
- In the 1860s and 1870s Alexander II improved law codes and created local political councils (*zemstvoes*) with authority over regional matters. The councils gave political experience to middle class people, but they had no influence on national policy.
- Military reform included officer promotion through merit and increased recruitment.
- There was limited extension of the education system. During this era literacy increased rapidly and a market for popular reading matter developed. Some women gained access to higher education and to the professions.
- A move to industrialization was part of the process of change. State support was vital since Russia lacked a middle class and capital.
- A railway system was created in the 1870s; it reached the Pacific in the 1880s. The railways stimulated the iron and coal sectors as well as the export of grain to the West. They also opened Siberia to development and increased Russian involvement in Asia.
- Factories appeared in Russian and Polish cities by the 1880s and the government quickly acted to protect them from foreign competition. Under Count Witte, from 1892 to 1903, the government passed high tariffs, improved the banking system, and encouraged Western investment. By 1900 about one-half of industry was foreign owned.
- Russia became a debtor nation, but the industries did not produce economic autonomy. Even though by 1900 some Russian industries were challenging world leaders, the Russian industrial revolution was in its early stages. Its world rank was due to its great size and rich resources, not its technology or trained work force.
- *Despite all the reform, Russia remained a traditional peasant society that had not experienced the attitudinal change occurring with Western industrialization.*

### **The Road to Revolution.**

- Alexander II's reforms and economic change encouraged minority nationality demands in the empire. Cultural nationalism led to political demands and worried the state.
- Social protest was heightened by the limitations of reform and by industrialization. Peasants suffered from famine, redemption payments, taxes, and population pressure.
- Educated Russians also were dissatisfied. Business people and professionals sought more personal freedom and fuller political rights; the intelligentsia wanted radical political change and deep social reform while preserving a distinct Russian culture. Some of the intellectuals became anarchists who hoped to triumph by winning peasant support. When peasants were not interested, some turned to terrorism.
- The government reaction was to pull back from reform, introduce censorship, and exile dissidents to Siberia. Alexander II was assassinated in 1881; his successors opposed reform and continued political, religious, and ethnic repression.
- By the 1890s new protest currents appeared. Marxist socialism spread among the intelligentsia. Lenin (Vladimir Ulyanov) attempted to make Marxism fit Russian conditions and organized disciplined cells to work for the expected revolution. At the same time working-class unrest in the cities showed through union formation and strikes - both illegal - to compensate for lack of political outlets.

### **The Revolution of 1905.**

- Russia had continued imperialist expansion through the 19th and into the 20th century. Gains were made against the Ottomans in the 1870s. New Slavic nations, Serbia and Bulgaria, were created, and conservatives talked of Russian leadership of a pan-Slavic movement. In the Middle East and central Asia Russia was active in Persia and Afghanistan. In China the Russians moved into Manchuria and gained long-term leases to territory.
- Russia encountered the similarly expanding Japanese and was defeated in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05. The loss unleashed protests in Russia.
- Urban workers and peasants joined liberal groups in the Revolution of 1905. The government bowed and created a national parliament, the *Duma*. Minister Stolypin introduced important peasant reforms: greater freedom from redemption payments, liberal purchase and sale of land. He aimed to create a market-oriented peasantry divided from the rest of the peasant mass. Some entrepreneurs among the peasants - *kulaks* - did increase production.
- But the reform package quickly fell apart as the tsar withdrew rights, took authority away from the Duma, and resumed police repression.

### **Russia and Eastern Europe.**

- After the loss to Japan, Russian foreign activities returned to the Ottoman Empire, and eastern Europe. The nations - Hungary, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, some recently gaining independence from the Ottomans, established parliaments elected by carefully restricted voters. Kings ruled without much check.
- Most nations abolished serfdom, but landlord power remained extensive and peasant unrest continued.
- In economic organization industrialization was minimal; they remained agricultural exporters dependent on Western markets.
- In the midst of their many problems eastern Europe enjoyed during the late 19th century a period of cultural productivity that helped to enhance their sense of national heritage. Russian novelists -- such as Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy -- gained world fame. In music composers moved from the brilliant romanticism of Tchaikovsky to innovative atonal styles. Eastern European composers, such as Chopin and Liszt, produced important works. In science the Czech Mendel advanced the study of genetics and the Russian Pavlov contributed in physiology.