

Russia 1881-1914

Part One - Background

I. Overview

- Russia had expanded geographically to cover over 20% of the world's land surface by 1881, stretching from Poland in the west to the Pacific in the east.
- The population was just under 100 million, of whom less than half were technically "Russian". While the western areas were far more populated than further east.
- Economically, Russia was backward and overwhelmingly rural so agriculture, particularly grain, was the mainstay of the economy. As well as feeding her own population, much grain was exported.
- Russia had immense industrial raw material resources (iron ore in the Urals, coal in the Donetz basin) but development of these was so far limited.
- Russia was slipping behind European production levels, although technology in cotton textiles was more modern and she was the world's fifth largest producer.
- There was still a strict social hierarchy in which the top "tiers" (10%) governed the rest, the bulk of which (80%+) were peasants.
- The middle class was small.
- Nicholas put "landowner" as his occupation in the 1897 census. He said "I conceive of Russia as a landed estate, of which the proprietor is the Tsar, the administrator the nobility, and the workers the peasantry".
- Politically, late nineteenth century Russia had more in common with medieval England than contemporary Europe, the Tsar owning all the land as his personal estate.
- Russian autocracy had a strong religious element, involving a mystical union between himself and the people who loved and obeyed him as a father and a god. As the embodiment of God on earth it was his mission to carry out God's will unrestricted by any laws, parliaments or governmental systems.
- For its survival, autocracy depended on the support of the nobility, the army and the Orthodox Church.

The pillars which supported autocracy

The nobility

- Made up less than 10% of the population, but dominated the bureaucracy and army leadership.
- Many of the provincial (lesser) nobility not involved in the government were in serious economic decline even before they lost their serfs' labour in 1861.
- Between 1861 and 1900, 40% of gentry land was sold to peasants and far more than this was being rented out to them.
- Those that did meet the economic challenge often became liberal "zemstvo men" who challenged autocracy by demanding an extension of the role of the zemstvas and seeking to get the peasantry actively involved in their activities. The refusal of the Tsars to allow this could push such potential supporters of Tsarism into becoming opponents – Prince Lvov is a classic example.

The army

- Technically it belonged to the Tsar in person - all soldiers swore an oath of loyalty to the Tsar.
- The army's dismal military record in the Crimea (1854 -6), against Turkey (1877-8) and then Japan (1904-5) was blamed on the incompetence of the narrow clique at Court who took decisions.
- Military funding had dropped since 1850, with the Finance and Interior ministries getting bigger budgets, so that by 1904 the Germans were spending twice as much per soldier as were the Russians, and the Austrians 60% more.
- The high number of army mutinies in 1905 – 06 (400) was the short term result, even if ultimately the loyalty of the armed forces allowed Nicholas to survive. In the longer term, when Nicholas abdicated in February 1917, it was because the army leaders would no longer back him.

The Orthodox Church.

- Both Church and state promoted the idea of "Holy Russia", whereby God had singled out Russia to be the holy land where humanity would be saved under the guardianship of the Tsar.
- Church support was an essential pillar on which autocracy rested, but it was failing to meet the challenges of Russia in the 20th Century.
- The Church failed to provide the guidance needed by the new urban workers as Russia industrialised (no Russian equivalent of Methodism) – Father Gapon could be seen as an example of someone who tried to provide this but was rejected by the Church.

Tsar Alexander II

- Became Tsar in 1855 in the Crimean War
- The war showed up how backward Russia was
- Industry failed to meet need for munitions
- Agriculture didn't supply demand for food
- Civil Service unable to organise the war
- 1856 he made peace with GB and France and set out to reform Russia

The Peasants

- Tsar and nobility owned most of Russia's arable land
- Most people were serfs who:
 1. Had to work 3 days a week for their owner
 2. Paid most of the tax intake
 3. Could be sold and punished without trial eg flogging by their masters
 4. Could be conscripted for service in the army
- Each family had about 15 acres to farm for themselves but they didn't own it

Effects of Serfdom

- Inefficient agriculture
- No incentive to work hard – profits went to owners
- Developing industries short of workers
- Serfs not allowed to move to the factories
- West European revolutionaries could persuade serfs to revolt
- Alexander II: "It is better to abolish serfdom from above rather than await the time when it will begin to abolish itself from below"

The Edict of Emancipation 3 March 1861

- 44 million peasants freed by this edict
- They could now own land
- They could leave their estate but had to carry a passport
- They didn't have to work on the nobles' land
- Government surveyors divided the land between the owners and serfs
- Former serf families given about 8 acres – less than when on their master's estate
- They had to pay for land
- It was valued by a government official
- The government paid the owner

- The ex-serfs had to pay instalments for 49 years
- The mir (village commune) became the new owners
- Each year the 'elders' divided the land according to the numbers in each family
- The mir collected the debt instalments

Developments

- Population increased from 50 million (1850) to 82 million (1900)
- After 1861 annual division of land led to the award of smaller and smaller plots
- Farming was so inefficient that peasants could feed their own families but few produced enough for sale
- Result – shortages in the towns
- Many peasants had to abandon farming because they were unable to pay the annual instalments
- Some went to work for more successful ex-serfs (kulaks)
- Others went to work in industrial towns

Local Government Reforms

- Upper classes had governed the countryside, building bridges and schools etc
- After Emancipation another way was needed to do it
- The mir (commune) was bottom of the government ladder
- There were elections to choose its leaders
- Zemstvos (district councils) controlled by nobles
- After 1861 they were elected by nobles, townspeople and peasants (ex serfs)
- Zemstvos ran roads and bridges maintenance, and an improved school system
- Zemstvos were 2nd rung of government ladder above the mir
- 3rd rung were the provincial zemstvos
- They looked after public health and chose magistrates for the new law courts

Liberals

- Pleased by democratic elections to the mir and district zemstvos (included nobles gentry and townspeople)
- Such partial democracy made them discontented because Provincial Governors (appointed by government) could overrule a zemstvo
- Tsar had created these 3 tiers of government but refused a national council or parliament
- Also forbade members of zemstvos meeting in national conferences

Other Reforms of Alexander II

Press

- Censorship relaxed
- Writers could criticise government – Alex wanted critics out in the open
- National newspapers increased from 6 to 16 by 1881

Legal System

- Judges and magistrates were appointed for life and could not be sacked by the government
- Equality before the law was proclaimed and trials were open
- Trial by jury replaced a system in which a nobleman judge/magistrate presided
- Limits to the legal reforms:
 1. Political offenders were not tried by jury
 2. Peasants and offending newspaper editors had their own courts
 3. These couldn't speak in their own defence during trial

Army

- 1874 all classes became liable for military service & not only the peasants
- Service length reduced from 25 to 15 years
- Flogging of soldiers stopped

Education

- 10,000 schools built by local zemstvos to deal with illiteracy
- Old fashioned schools offered mainly classics – no sciences
- Modern schools offered science
- Only students from old-fashioned schools could go to university
- Government regarded science as dangerous

Poland

- Poland part of Russian Empire
- 1863 Poles rose in revolt because:

1. Russian defeat in Crimean War suggested they were too weak to crush a revolt
2. Italians rebelled against Austria
3. Reforms created a liberal atmosphere

- Revolt was sparked by the closing of the Polish Agricultural Society
- Anti-Russian demonstrations took place
- Troops fired on the crowds
- Napoleon III of France wanted to help the Catholic Poles
- But Bismarck wouldn't allow French troops to cross Prussia
- This gained Russian friendship
- The rising was savagely crushed
- Alexander II and his ministers now encouraged:

1. Russian nationalism
2. Pan-Slavism
3. Union of the Slavs of South-Eastern Europe under leadership of Russia

Threat of Revolution

- Revolutionary movements developed because:

1. Land reform left many dissatisfied
2. Education produced more literate people who could read radical literature
3. Each reform increased the appetite for more
4. Growth of industrial towns led to increase in radical workers

The Nihilists

- From Latin – 'nihil' means 'nothing'
- This was a group of revolutionaries who believed that everything from the past had to be destroyed
- From this a new society could be developed
- Took advantage of new press freedoms to gain support
- Thousands joined
- Used terrorism in effort to overthrow system – bombs, guns, knives etc

Government Repression

- Thousands sent to Siberian exile
- Many leading nihilists were students so government tried to restrict university entrance to those thought to be loyal to the Tsar
- Newspaper editors sacked if they failed to reveal names of nihilist writers

Narodniki

- This was the name given to thousands of students
- In the 1870s went to preach revolutionary ideas to the peasants
- Little success because:
 1. Most peasants didn't understand the ideas involved
 2. Local priests had great influence and got the peasants to attack them
 3. Peasants shocked by their behaviour
- Movement faded away and Alexander restricted university entrance further

Socialism

- Socialism had influence in 1870s
- Revolutionaries were attracted by the village commune
- Believed it was the ideal socialist society with commune land shared according to need
- Tried to preach peaceful revolution
- Others led by the ex-nihilist Michael Bakunin wanted violent revolution

Assassination of Alexander II in 1881

- He began as the 'Tsar Liberator' making key reforms
- But he couldn't satisfy everyone
- Unable to get what they wanted, some turned to terrorism
- 1866 attempt to kill him
- 1879, 2 more unsuccessful attempts on his life
- In one 5 shots were fired at him; in another they dynamited the Winter Palace but he wasn't there
- 1880 he was away again when the dining room at the palace was mined
- A mine on a track his train was on failed to explode
- 1881 they finally succeeded in killing him with a bomb

Alexander III 1881-94

According to Orlando Figes, “the counter reforms of his reign were a vital turning point in the pre-history of the revolution....to a certain extent determining the outcome of events 1905-17”.

Regarding his father’s reforms as misguided and, under the guidance of his ultra-conservative adviser, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, determined to claw back as much central power as he could: his father’s assassins were executed; censorship restored; a new, more ruthless, secret police created (the Okhrana); university fees raised to exclude all but the well off; in 1889, 2,000 land captains were created from the gentry with powers to overturn what zemstvas did and repress the peasantry; the 1890 statute disenfranchised Jews and peasant landowners from zemstva elections and reduced the range of zemstva powers and budgets. The police helped the provincial governors by arresting the professional statisticians working for the zemstvas.

- He declared that his father’s reforms were wrong and had failed
- He determined to undo the reforms
- He thus gave a free hand to his minister Pobedonostsev

Pobedonostsev

- 1865 he was Alex’s tutor
- Alex made him Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod controlling the Church
- He was responsible for a number of severe policies
- The Okhrana (secret police) were given extra powers to deal with terrorists
- Many were exiled, imprisoned or executed

Education

- University entrance restricted to classical students
- Teachers were spied on and government critics sacked
- Children of peasants and working classes denied secondary education
- Primary schools now controlled by Church
- Children taught to be obedient to the government

Press

- More closely supervised
- 14 newspapers critical of government closed

Land Captains

- Drawn from old nobility
- Given powers over all other officials
- Replaced magistrates appointed by Alex

Subject Races

- Latvia Estonia & Lithuania had been allowed to keep their own languages/customs
- Now they had to use Russian –it became official language in the press, courts and in dealings with officialdom
- Russian made compulsory in all Polish schools
- Lutheran Church was persecuted

The Jews

- Attacks on the Jews common but intensified (pogroms)
- Only allowed to live in towns
- Fewer allowed secondary education
- Orthodox priests encouraged people to attack Jews

Industrialisation

- Russia was poor, inefficient and militarily weak
- Industrialisation on the western model essential
- But with it would come such ideas as trade unions and political development
- Some progress already:

1. 1855 only one railway in Russia
2. By 1860 over 1,000 miles of rail
3. By 1888 13,000 miles
4. This boosted iron steel and coal industries
5. Textile industry began centred on 2 or 3 areas

- Foreign participation proved vital in this development:

1. French finance helped pay for raw materials and machinery imports
2. Nobel brothers of Sweden began oil industry and built 1st oil tankers
3. British formed the New Russian Company to set up factories in Donetz Basin
4. Siemens of Prussia set up telegraphic system and factories

Paying for Development

- Interest had to be paid on borrowed money and the loans themselves
- Exported wheat to get the money
- Government increased peasant taxes – got the money in the form of grain
- Result – peasants even poorer than before
- Hit industrial workers too – prices rose because not enough grain
- Result – famines but exports maintained
- Workers suffered from:

1. Shortage of food and high prices
2. Poor housing
3. Poor working conditions
4. Low pay
5. No trade unions

- Another result was that number of town workers increased
- These were less under the influence of the Church than peasants
- Foreign industrialists showed the benefit of working for a profit and that science was essential for industrial progress

Finance ministers:

Bunge as Finance minister (1881-87) had tried to stimulate the economy by reducing the tax burden on the peasantry so they had more to spend, but high military spending elsewhere in the government sabotaged his approach.

Vyshnegradsky (1887-92) then changed tack and prioritised raising revenue by squeezing the peasantry as much as possible and raising tariffs higher. He succeeded in building up a budget surplus and strong gold reserves, but was then undone by the famine of 1891.

Witte

- Minister of Finance 1892-1903
- Responsible for the effort to industrialise Russia at that time
- Encouraged foreign capital investment into key areas, lots from France.
- Main industry – agriculture – Witte thought this was strong
- It was industry that needed developing
- 1892 took foreign loans to build Trans-Siberian Railway (completed 1902)

- 1900 coal output 15 million tons (GB 200 million tons)
- Central Asian cotton farming allowed textile production to grow in Poland and Moscow area
- Wool, iron and steel grew
- 1885-1900, industrial output increased 3-fold
- 3 million industrial workers
- Industrial development helped by import tariffs on goods Russian factories could make
- To pay for loans, government income had to increase
- One way was by the government taking a monopoly on alcohol sales
- Provided ¼ of government revenue
- Put Russia on Gold Standard 1897
- By 1902, half the industrial workforce were in factories employing over 1,000 workers
- The scale of the overcrowding in living conditions was obvious given the 200% growth of Moscow 1867-1900 and the 700% increase in Baku
- Huge growth in strikes (68 in 1895, 125 in 1900 and 14,000 in 1905), even though they were illegal until 1905.

Development of Revolutionary Organisations

Social Revolutionary Party (SRP)

- Founded 1901 from earlier attempts to rouse the peasantry
- Industrialisation led to fall in peasants' standard of living
- They paid most of the tax take
- Their poverty was reflected in their mortality rate
- Caused by poor diet and living conditions
- 1882 Peasants' Land Bank helped them buy land
- Interest rates high though
- Payment of instalments for land grants made after 1861 left little cash for new purchases
- SRP hoped to lead the peasants to violent revolution

- SRP carried out terror attacks on Land Captains and other officials
- Attacks on Alex III eg 1887 assassination attempt failed – plotters tried in court
- Lenin's brother Alexander Ulyanov was executed

The Liberals

- Known as the **Kadets** from the initials of their **Constitutional Democratic Party** wanted the Tsar to allow a British style parliament
- Most of their support came from the zemstvos

The Social Democratic Party (SD)

- Formed 1898
- Main support - industrial workers
- Followed Marxist policies
- Didn't believe terrorism could succeed
- Often attacked by secret police
- Encouraged workers to strike

The Bolsheviks

- Lenin arrested in 1895
- 1897 put in prison again
- 1897-1900 exiled to Siberia then forced to live abroad
- He and other exiles published a newspaper called *Iskra* (the Spark)
- They smuggled it into Russia
- 1903 its production committee had meetings in Brussels and then London argued over what a revolutionary party should be like
- Trotsky wanted a mass party like the SR - MENSHEVIK
- Lenin wanted a small party in which every member was a revolutionary who knew what a Marxist revolution meant - BOLSHEVIK
- They voted on it:
 1. The majority (*Bolsheviks* in Russian) agreed with Lenin
 2. The minority (*Mensheviks*) agreed with Trotsky