

Nineteenth-century Russian autocracy



Michael Hughes

Russia's autocracy fell because it refused to change. Or had it changed too much?

Many Western visitors to nineteenth-century Russia condemned the country's autocratic system of government as despotic and tyrannical. Successive tsars certainly claimed that their right to rule was derived from God, and therefore should not be subjected to any form of constitutional constraint, but the character of the nineteenth-century Russian autocracy was more complex than many of its critics realised. The sheer size of Russia meant that there were very real limits to the effective power of the government in St Petersburg, particularly in the more distant provinces, while the notoriously incompetent bureaucracy was seldom proficient at carrying out its instructions.

Defenders of the autocratic system of government in any case dismissed the idea that it represented a form of tyranny, on the grounds that the divine right to rule also imposed on Russian monarchs a duty to promote the welfare of their subjects.

The traditional fabric of Russian society came under increasing pressure in the nineteenth century, particularly as it became clear that the country could only remain a great power by adapting to the demands of the modern world. Russia's rulers therefore faced a difficult task maintaining the autocratic system of government, while at the same time setting in motion precisely the kind of social and economic changes that threatened to undermine it. Their failure to reconcile the forces of tradition and change goes a long way to explaining why the tsarist regime eventually fell in 1917.

Alexander I (1801–25) and Nicholas I (1825–55)

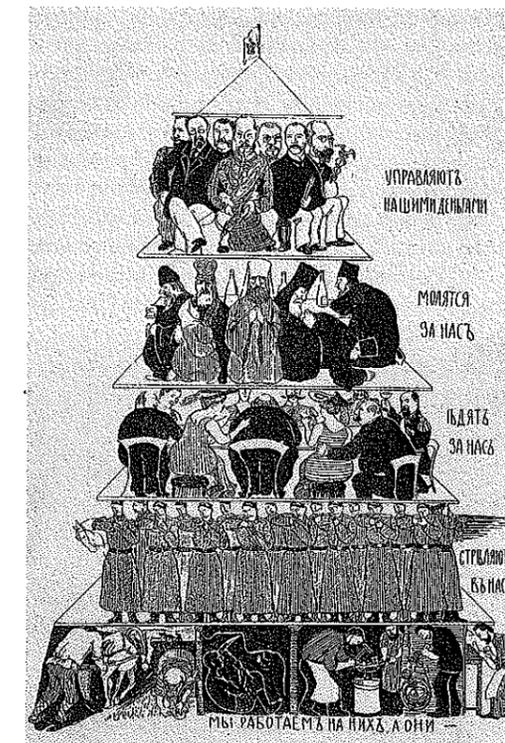
When Tsar Alexander I came to the throne in 1801, he quickly approved the establishment of a new

system of ministries designed to operate more efficiently than the existing administrative system. During the first part of his reign, the tsar listened most carefully to reform-minded aristocrats and bureaucrats, such as Prince Adam Czartoryski and Michael Speransky, who were both deeply perturbed by the backward character of Russian society, most notably the continuing existence of **serfdom**.

There were, though, strict limits to the **liberalism** of Alexander and his counsellors, and the

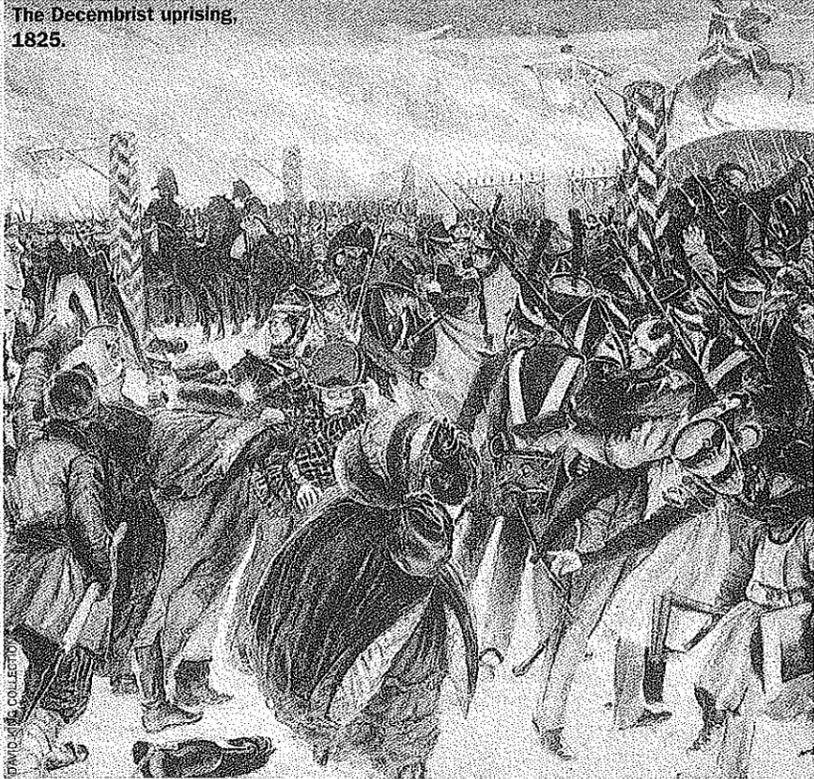
serfdom: system in which peasant farmers were tied to a particular piece of land and subject to the will of the landlord who owned it. The emancipation of the serfs took place in Russia in 1861, marking the start of the era of great reforms.

liberalism: favourable to liberty and progress.



Early twentieth-century caricature of the tsarist hierarchy.

The Decembrist uprising, 1825.



Decembrist revolt: following the death of Alexander I, a revolt was led by a number of young soldiers from aristocratic families who wanted to see major social and political change.

Third Section: part of the Imperial Chancery, created in 1826 to conduct secret police operations, particularly against those believed to pose a threat to the existing political order.

subversive: activities aimed at undermining government, often with the goal of overthrowing it.

Official Nationality: name given to attempts by Nicholas I's government to promote an ideology stressing that Russia's national identity was intimately bound up with the existence of the Russian Orthodox Church and the autocratic system of government.

reforms they promoted were always primarily designed to improve the effectiveness of the Russian government, rather than place any real constraints on its power. Alexander's rule became more reactionary (conservative) during the second half of his reign; in the wake of the defeat of French Emperor Napoleon I (Bonaparte) in 1812, and following the dismissal of Speransky, he paid most attention to the advice of conservatives such as Count A. A. Arakcheyev and Prince A. N. Golitsyn. By the time he died in 1825, the tsar had abandoned many of his early reformist ambitions, fearing that they would weaken the autocratic system of government.

The political views of Tsar Nicholas I, who came to the throne in 1825, were profoundly influenced by the **Decembrist revolt** that took place at the start of his reign. The rebellion convinced the new

Michael Speransky (1772–1839)

Russian reformer and chief adviser to Tsar Alexander I.

- 1810** Created Council of State and Russia's first system of regular budgets.
- 1812** Forced into temporary exile by conservative groups opposed to his attempts to establish representative central and local assemblies (councils).
- 1832** Completed codification (categorisation) of Russian legal system (under Tsar Nicholas I).

tsar that Russia faced a serious threat of revolution, and his 30-year rule was subsequently marked by the creation of the **Third Section** and a systematic attempt to combat the spread of **subversive** ideas. In addition, the promotion of the ideology of **Official Nationality**, articulated most clearly by the education minister, Count S. S. Uvarov, in 1833, represented a systematic effort to establish in the minds of the Russian people the virtues of 'orthodoxy, autocracy and nationality'.

The reign of Nicholas I nevertheless witnessed the publication of some of the most important works of nineteenth-century Russian literature by writers such as Lermontov and Gogol. It also saw the birth of the Russian intelligentsia, whose members were defined by their passionate interest in radical social and political ideas, although censorship and repression meant that they were seldom able to discuss such things in public before Nicholas's death in 1855.

Effects of the Crimean War

Nicholas and his ministers were not insensitive to the problems facing Russia, and his government did make some modest attempts to introduce new laws designed to make it easier for individual landowners to free their own serfs. The scale of the problems facing Russia only really became apparent, though, following the country's defeat in the **Crimean War** that broke out in 1853 (see MODERN HISTORY REVIEW Vol. 13, No. 3).

Key points

- Nineteenth-century Russian tsars claimed that their autocratic power and position were derived from God.
- The size of the Russian empire and the poor quality of the bureaucracy meant that the tsar was less powerful than was sometimes believed.
- The influence of radical foreign ideas and the emergence of a critical intelligentsia in the years before 1860 paved the way for the rise of the Russian revolutionary movement in the later part of the nineteenth century.
- Tsars such as Alexander II recognised that they had to encourage social and economic reform in Russia so that the country did not fall behind its neighbours, but in doing so, they actually created greater pressure for political change.
- The coercive and reactionary domestic policies followed by Alexander III and Nicholas II contained political opposition for a time, but were unable to forestall the radical demands for change put forward during the 1905 revolution.

Alexander II's reforms

- 1861** Abolition of serfdom and emancipation (liberation) of serfs, who became free citizens and received land from their landlords, who were in turn compensated by the state. Though labour became more mobile, peasants were crippled by redemption debts and land distribution was unequitable.
- 1861** Introduction of changes in legal code.
- 1863** New statute regulating universities.
- 1864** Reforms to organisation of secondary education.
- 1864** *Zemstva* (elected local councils) established. Introduction of trial by jury.
- 1870** Municipal government reformed. Duma (town councils) established.
- 1874** Introduction of universal military service (conscription).

The defeat of the Russian forces showed that the country's status as a great power was in jeopardy unless the country could modernise its economy and administration to a level where it could compete with the main Western powers. Nicholas himself shied away from introducing major changes, since he was afraid they might undermine the autocratic system of government, but his death in 1855 paved the way for the end of serfdom and the era of the great reforms.

The reign of Alexander II (1855–81)

Alexander II had been critical of serfdom even before coming to the throne, believing that it was immoral and damaging to the long-term welfare of Russia. Any attempt by the government to abolish serfdom was, though, likely to be bitterly resisted by the serf-owning gentry. It was also going to require major changes to the whole framework of Russian government.

Alexander initially attempted to win the support of the landowning classes for emancipation, but when the extent of the opposition became clear, his government pushed the process through without much further consultation. The tsar and his senior advisers took a risk in pursuing such a strategy, though, since it risked alienating the powerful landowning nobility, who were the regime's most natural supporters.

The era of the great reforms instituted by the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 represented an attempt to transform the character of both Russian society and the Russian state. The establishment of the *zemstva* in 1864 was designed to institute a new system of local government in the Russian countryside, where more than 90% of the country's population still lived. The judicial system was also



Tsar Alexander II.

overhauled, while other important changes were made to the organisation of the army and navy.

Most of the reforms were designed to make the system of Russian government more efficient; but some of them had the effect of placing limits on the power of the tsar himself, though neither Alexander nor his ministers ever intended such an outcome. While they successfully opposed demands for a new national representative assembly to 'cap' the *zemstva*, the mere existence of such local councils provided a forum for critical debate about the government. The judicial reforms, which allowed for trial by jury and the independence of judges, also placed limits on the powers of the autocratic state. Although the great reforms had been instituted to modernise Russian society and improve the effectiveness of the autocratic system of government, their implementation inevitably raised difficult questions about whether such a traditional system of government could endure in a changing world.

The pressures were made worse by the continued rise of violent political opposition to the government, which culminated in the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. The easing of censorship and the general relaxation in the political climate after 1855 undoubtedly helped to foster the growth of the revolutionary movement, and after a first attempt on his life in 1867, the tsar became more cautious about promoting further reforms.

Alexander faced the same problem as all nineteenth-century Russian tsars: if he refused to allow any major social and economic reforms, then Russia was likely to slip further behind the Western powers. However, by promoting such changes as the emancipation of the serfs and the creation of the *zemstva*, he ran the risk of creating pressure for

orthodoxy: Russian Orthodox Church, which had allied itself very closely to the Russian autocracy.

Crimean War (1853-56): fought by Russia against British, French and Ottoman (Turkish) forces in the Crimean peninsula in southern Russia; primarily the consequence of a dispute over Russia's right to act as protector of the Orthodox Christian subjects of the Turkish Sultan.

zemstva: (sing. *zemstvo*) established in 1864 to provide local government in the Russian countryside, following the emancipation of the serfs. *Zemstva* existed at both provincial and district levels to provide social and economic services to the local population but often became a focus for criticism of the regime before the 1917 revolution.



Death stalks the barricades of the 1905 revolution.

Russification: enforcing Russian language and culture on non-Russian areas of the empire.

1905 revolution: threatened the existence of the tsarist regime and forced Nicholas II to sign the October Manifesto, which laid the foundations for the establishment of new political institutions in Russia, including a constitution, appointment of a prime minister, and establishment of a new *duma* with a range of legislative powers.

proletariat: unprivileged wage-earners who own no property.

further political changes that would in time undermine his own position and power. In the weeks before his assassination, Alexander was actually considering further political reform, but he was killed shortly before authorising a series of changes that would have allowed some modest popular involvement in the political process.

The reigns of Alexander III and Nicholas II

Tsar Alexander III came to the throne in 1881 determined to defend the principle of autocratic government and defeat the threat of revolution. He dismissed the reform-minded interior minister, General M. T. Loris-Melikov, preferring to appoint men who were content to follow orders uncritically. Alexander's government also pursued a policy of **Russification** in the Russian borderlands, which was designed to promote greater order in areas where nationalist sentiment was feared to be on the increase. The domestic policies pursued by Alexander III were successful for a time in confronting the challenge posed by the revolutionary movement, but they did not address any of the deep-seated problems facing Russia, and the tsar and his ministers failed to recognise that political reform was required, both to promote efficient government and to encourage greater popular support.

The same was true of his son, Tsar Nicholas II, who made it known after coming to the throne in 1894 that he regarded ideas of constitutional reform as 'senseless dreams'. Nicholas became convinced that he had a sacred duty to pass on his autocratic powers intact to his heir, and his reluctance to contemplate any form of change became one of the main sources of political tension in the years before 1917. Although the **1905 revolution** forced him to accept a degree of modest political reform, his reluctance to make the new constitutional system work was a major factor in undermining the legitimacy of the tsarist regime.

Conclusion

The autocratic system of government that existed in nineteenth-century Russia was rooted in an age when the country was almost entirely rural and insulated from contacts with the Western world. During the course of the nineteenth century, though, the Russian government had to face a whole new series of challenges, ranging from the rise of political opposition through to defeat in war.

Russia had, by 1900, become a major industrial power with a **proletariat** and an urban middle class. The country's traditional political institutions struggled to cope with the demands of an increasingly modern society, albeit one in which a large majority of the population remained working on the land, while the principle of autocratic rule seemed increasingly outmoded to many of the tsar's own subjects. These tensions exploded in the early twentieth century, and Nicholas II's half-hearted acceptance of political reform played a critical role in the eventual collapse of the tsarist regime in February 1917.

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Further study

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MOMENTS

The **moment** of a force is another name for the **turning effect** it has.

For example, if you sit on one end of a see saw you cause it to turn. Your **weight** is therefore producing a **moment**. If somebody else sits on the other end of the see saw they produce an opposite **moment**.

The size of each moment is given by the formula

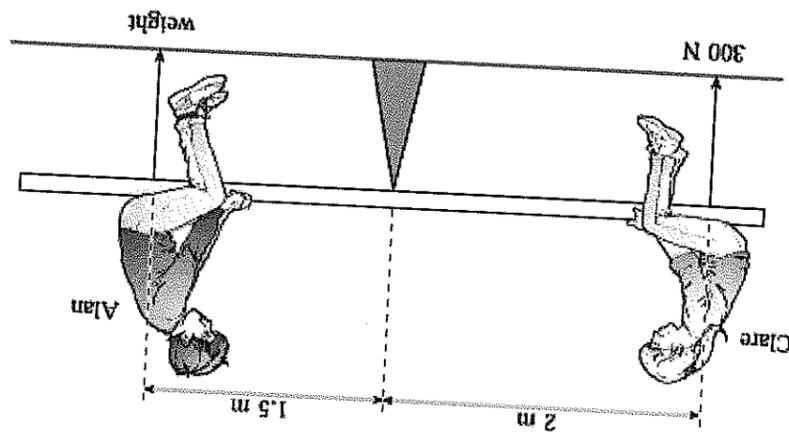
$$\text{Moment of force} = \text{Force} \times \text{distance from pivot}$$

(in Nm) (in N) (in m)

The direction of the moment will be either **clockwise (c.w.)** or **anticlockwise (a.c.w.)**. If they sit in exactly the right place it is possible to balance the see saw, even if their **weight** is not the same as yours.

To make the see saw balance (or achieve '**equilibrium**') the **clockwise** and **anticlockwise moments** must be equal. This is called the **principle of moments**.

Using these ideas fill in the spaces below:



The see saw is in equilibrium (balanced)

| Person | Weight /N | Distance from pivot /m | Moment produced /Nm | Direction of moment |
|--------|-----------|------------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Alan | | | | |
| Clare | | | | |