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Part One

Autocracy, reform and revolution: Russia 1855–1917

1

Trying to preserve autocracy, 1855–1894

1

The Russian autocracy in 1855

EXTRACT 1

The Russian Empire was deeply divided between the government and the Tsar’s subjects; between the capital and the provinces; between the educated and the uneducated; between Western and Russian ideas; between the rich and the poor; between privilege and oppression; between contemporary fashion and centuries-old custom. Most people (and over 90 per cent of the Emperor’s subjects were born and bred in the countryside) felt that a chasm divided them from the world inhabited by the ruling elites. Russia was an empire, but national consciousness was only patchily developed and local traditions and loyalties retained the greatest influence. National consciousness was not a dominant sentiment among Russians. Except in times of war, most of them were motivated by Christian belief, peasant customs, village loyalties and reverence for the Tsar rather than by feelings of Russian nationhood. Christianity itself was a divisive phenomenon; Russian Orthodox teachings were not accepted universally. But the Tsar and the Church hierarchy wanted obedience and they had the authority to secure just that.

Adapted from Robert Service, History of Modern Russia, 1997

The well-respected modern historian Robert Service has painted a picture of tsarist Russia as it was in the mid-nineteenth century and was to remain, scarcely changed, until the end of tsarist rule in 1917. His account of the state of the Russian Empire stresses its geographic, social, intellectual, economic and even religious divisions. Above all, he emphasises the localism of Russian society and the lack of national consciousness. The empire he describes seems to be held together by a ‘reverence for the Tsar’, and by the power of that Tsar and the Russian Orthodox Church to demand obedience.

The political context

In 1855, Russia was an autocratic empire. At its head was a Tsar, who took the title ‘Emperor and Autocrat of all Russia’. According to the ‘Collected Laws of the Russian Empire’ compiled by Tsar Nicholas I in 1832, ‘The Emperor of all the Russians is an autocratic and unlimited monarch; God himself ordains that all must bow to his supreme power, not only out of fear but also out of conscience.’

A CLOSER LOOK

Empire

An empire is made up of a number of lesser states ruled over by one monarch. Nineteenth-century Russia was a vast empire of around 21 million square kilometres, twice the size of Europe and a sixth of the globe’s surface. It had been acquired through military conquest and colonisation, and was still growing.
Problems of governing the Empire

Many different ethnic groups lived within the Russian Empire, each with their own culture, customs, language and, in some cases, religion. Less than half the total population of around 69 million people in 1855 was Russian, and three quarters of the total population lived within European Russia – to the west of the Urals – on less than a quarter of the total land mass.

Nicholas’ statement is a reminder that the Tsar was, in name only, also the Head of the Russian Orthodox Church and was regarded by Orthodox believers as the embodiment of God on Earth. The vast lands of the Russian Empire were his private property and the Russian people were his children. Russians were taught to show devotion to their Tsar and to accept their conditions on Earth as the will of God. The Patriarch of Moscow, who worked in close harmony with the Tsar, provided spiritual guidance, while the Over-Procurator of the Holy Synod, a post created in 1721, was a government minister appointed by the Tsar to run Church affairs. This meant that the structures of Church and State were entwined, as archbishops and bishops at the head of the Church hierarchy were subject to tsarist control over appointments, religious education, most of the Church’s finances and issues of administration.

The Tsar’s imperial edicts (ukazy in Russian) were the law of the land. The Tsar did, of course, have advisers and ministers, but these were all chosen by the Tsar himself and no-one could do anything without the Tsar’s approval. His main advisory bodies were the Imperial Council or Chancellery, a body of 35 to 60 nobles specially picked by the Tsar to advise him personally and provide their ‘expert’ opinion; the Council of Ministers, a body of 8 to 14 ministers in charge of different government departments; and the Senate, which was supposed to oversee all the workings of government but in practice was largely redundant by 1855.

The Tsar and the central government were based in the Imperial capital of St Petersburg but the regime also depended on the provincial nobility for support. Nobles had not been obliged to serve the State since 1785, although many continued to do so, for example as a provincial governor of one of the Empire’s fifty provinces. However, their sense of obligation remained strong and all landowners were expected to keep order on their estates. Furthermore, when circumstances demanded, Tsars might choose to appoint a special committee to carry out an investigation or prepare a report. Such committees were usually headed by trusted nobles but, even so, there was no need for the Tsar to take any notice of their findings.

The civil servants who made up the bureaucracy were paid noble officials, selected from a ‘table of ranks’ that laid down the requirements for office.
There were 14 levels, from rank 1, held by members of the Council of Ministers, to rank 14, which covered the minor state positions, for example, collecting taxes or running a provincial post office. Each rank had its own uniform, form of address and status. This bureaucracy was riddled by internal corruption and incompetence, but through it orders were passed downwards from the central government to the provincial governors and, in turn, to district governors and town commandants. It was a one-way operation though; there was no provision for suggestions to travel upwards from the lower ranks.

As well as his civilian officials, the Tsar also had at his disposal the world’s largest army of around 1.5 million conscripted serfs, each forced into service for 25 years and made to live in a ‘military colony’. This huge army and the much smaller navy absorbed around 45 per cent of the government’s annual spending. The higher ranks of the military were prestigious posts, reserved for the nobles who bought and sold their commissions, but for the lower ranks discipline was harsh and army life was tough. This army could be called upon to fight in wars or to put down risings and disturbances inside Russia. The Tsar also had the service of elite regiments of mounted Cossacks, with special social privileges. The Cossacks acted both as a personal bodyguard to the Tsar and as police reinforcements.

**A CLOSER LOOK**

**Cossacks**

The Cossacks came from the Ukraine and Southern Russia. They were known for their skills in horsemanship and their strong military tradition. By the nineteenth century, the Cossacks formed a special and prestigious military class serving the Tsar. They were provided with arms and supplies by the tsarist government, but each soldier rode his own highly trained horse.

To maintain the autocracy, the country had developed into a *police state*. The police state prevented freedom of speech, freedom of the press and travel abroad. Political meetings and strikes were forbidden. Censorship existed at every level of government and the police made sure that the censorship exercised by the State and Church was enforced. The secret state security network was run by the ‘Third Section’ of the Emperor’s Imperial Council. Its agents kept a strict surveillance over the population and had unlimited powers to carry out raids, and to arrest and imprison or send into exile anyone suspected of anti-tsarist behaviour. They sometimes acted on the word of informers, and were greatly feared.

Following the *French Revolution*, Alexander I, Tsar between 1801 and 1825, considered setting up an advisory representative assembly and possibly giving it law-making powers, but he never put this into practice. His brother Nicholas I, who ruled between 1825 and 1855, totally rejected such a thought. A military uprising against his rule in December 1825 encouraged him to follow a path of repression, and he deliberately sought to distance Russia from
the West where the liberal ideas he most feared were spreading. He believed in strict autocracy and severe restrictions were imposed on Russia’s other nationalities. While leading intellectuals argued for a civil society based on the rule of law, Nicholas tightened censorship and set up the secret police, or Third Section. His reign ended in military defeat in the Crimea, which finally brought the long-ignored need for change to the new Tsar’s attention.

The economic and social context

The economic situation
When Alexander II came to the throne in 1855, Britain, Belgium, France and the states comprising Germany were already well advanced industrially. Mills, factories, coal pits, quarries and railways were transforming the landscape and trade was flourishing. However, the Russian economy remained mostly rural with a ratio of 11:1 village to town dwellers, compared with 2:1 in Britain.

There were good reasons for Russia’s economic backwardness. Although the Russian Empire was vast, much of its territory was inhospitable (over two thirds lay north of the 50th parallel north), comprising tundra, forests and stretches of barren countryside, especially to the north and east. As a result, both size and climate placed severe strains on economic development. Although mid-nineteenth century Russia was Europe’s main exporter of agricultural produce and possessed vast reserves of timber, coal, oil, gold and other precious metals, much of its potential remained untapped and communications between the different parts of the Empire were poor.

However the lack of progress was primarily due to Russia’s commitment to a serf-based economy. The landowning aristocracy, the tsarist government and the army were all reliant on the serfs. This inhibited economic development by limiting the forces that drive change, such as wage-earners, markets and entrepreneurs. The serfs were poor. Most just about managed to survive on the produce they grew for themselves on the land made available by their landlords, and ‘cottage industries’ provided the little extra cash they needed for special purchases and taxes. However, they often suffered with starvation in the winter, particularly in years of bad harvest, and systems of land management within the serf communes (mirs) meant that individual serf families worked scattered strips and were obliged to follow a communal pattern of farming. There was little incentive or opportunity, therefore, for them to develop into ‘wage-earners’.

What was serfdom?
Russian peasants (serfs) were men, women and children who were classified as the ‘property’ of their owners, rather than as ‘citizens’ of the State. Serfs could be bought and sold, were subject to beatings, and were not allowed to marry without permission. Serfs were also liable for conscription into the army. There were two main types: a little over half were privately owned, with around 30 per cent of these paying rent (obrok) and around 70 per cent providing labour (barshchina). The remainder were ‘state serfs’ who paid taxes and rent. Most serfs worked on the land in village communes (mirs) run by strict rules imposed by the village elders. Some performed domestic service.
Markets existed (and indeed were growing) although ‘business’ was mostly small-scale. The most common peasant purchases were vodka (for celebrations), metal tools and salt (to preserve food), which they bought in the nearest town, or at a fair. However, self-sufficiency meant that comparatively few goods were actually ‘purchased’ and in peasant markets, money was not the usual form of payment. Exchanges took place ‘in kind’; for example some eggs might be given in return for a length of wool. In some areas, particularly near large cities, market forces were beginning to develop as peasants sought wage-work in nearby towns at slack times in the farming year, but for the vast majority, money was simply irrelevant and there was no internal market demand.

At the other end of the scale was the small landowning elite, who obtained most of what they needed from their serfs in the form of service and feudal dues. They were generally uninterested in how efficiently their estates operated. For many, serf-owning merely provoked idleness. So long as their bailiffs squeezed sufficient amounts out of the peasants for their own benefit, the aristocratic landowners saw little need to do more. There was no opportunity for capital accumulation, since income was generally falling. This was thanks to the rural population growth and the agricultural changes in Western Europe that had increased the competitiveness and productivity of the European markets. Many landowners had been forced into debt and had to take out mortgages on estates which had previously been owned outright by their families. Sometimes they even mortgaged their serfs, but despite their despair, they did not seek alternative ways of ‘making money’, because money as such was of little use in Russia’s under-developed economy.

**A CLOSER LOOK**

**Agricultural changes**

Crop rotation, new fertilisers and developments in agricultural machinery had all helped to transform Western agriculture.

**Serf poverty**

The serfs’ working and living conditions were, by Western standards, primitive. It was normal for corn to be cut by hand with sickles and for peasants to share their huts with their animals. In such circumstances, it is perhaps unsurprising that most peasants were illiterate but deeply religious, inclined to superstition and deeply hostile to change.
The social context

Socially, Russia was, as Service suggested in Extract 1, starkly divided between the privileged land-owning elite and the serf majority; the non-productive and the productive classes. The former consisted of the clergy, nobility, civil and military officials, army and naval officers and, at the very top, the royal court. In addition to the serfs, there were some urban artisans, manufacturers and merchants within the ranks of the ‘productive classes’, but the striking feature of mid-nineteenth century Russian society was the absence of any coherent ‘middle class’, as was becoming increasingly dominant elsewhere in Europe. There were a small number of professionals (doctors, teachers and lawyers, for example) some of whom comprised an educated ‘intelligentsia’, but these were often the sons of nobles.

Adapted from Derek Offord, Nineteenth Century Russia: Opposition to Autocracy, 1998

The word ‘class’, with its connotation of ‘economic status’ is actually a rather modern term to use of nineteenth-century Russian society, which was still based on birth, land and service. As in the past, in 1855 legal barriers still limited social mobility. Serfs were liable for dues, as demanded by past custom, to their masters (from whose bond it was almost impossible to escape). They also paid direct and indirect taxes to the government. The nobility and clergy, however, were exempt from the payment of any direct monetary taxes.

A CLOSER LOOK

Taxes

The government was financed from taxes and dues. The main direct tax, paid by all except the merchants, was the poll tax, literally a ‘tax on heads’, which had been introduced in 1719 in order to cover the costs of maintaining Russia’s large army. It was levied, at the same rate, on every male peasant in the Empire, no matter what his circumstances. This, together with the obrok paid by state serfs in lieu of land and service dues, made up 25 per cent of ‘ordinary’ government income. Indirect taxes (on services and goods) included a tax on salt, and, even more importantly, on vodka. This had grown during the nineteenth century to represent 30 per cent of ordinary government income by 1855, suggesting that a change was already underway towards a more ‘commercial’ source for government revenue. Overall, the taxes hit hard at the peasantry who, together with the urban workers and tradesmen, provided around 90 per cent of Imperial finance.
Most of the structures present in mid-nineteenth century Russia were still typical of the pre-modern world. A small ruling group, unified by the structures of autocracy, lived off resources mobilised directly from a large agrarian population through the system of serfdom. Most of the peasant population lived lives little different from those of the Middle Ages. The family, the household and the village were the crucial institutions of rural life. Largely self-sufficient peasants used traditional ways of working the soil, and levels of productivity were little higher than those of the Middle Ages. However, new forces were already beginning to undermine the traditional patterns. In some areas, market forces were beginning to transform village life, while the government’s revenues came increasingly from commercial sources. At the upper level of society, the increasingly westernised outlook of Russian elites undermined the autocratic political culture of Russia’s ruling group. The government became aware of how threatening these various changes might be to its own power only in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Adapted from David Christian, *Imperial and Soviet Russia*, 1986

So, while Russia was still considered a ‘great’ power in Europe because of its size and huge army, politically, economically and socially it remained undeveloped and ‘backward’ in comparison with the West. Small changes were taking places but, as yet, these had been insufficient to promote extensive modernisation.
In the mid-nineteenth century, the empire of the Ottoman Turks stretched from the Middle East across the Black Sea Straits and into the Balkans. However, ever since the 1820s, the Sultan had struggled to control the Christians in his European dominions and consequently Tsar Nicholas I had seized the opportunity to increase Russian influence in the area by posing as the Protector of Slavs and Christians.

In June 1853, Nicholas sent a Russian army to Moldavia and Wallachia (now part of present-day Moldova). This provoked the Turks into declaring war in October. The Russians were the stronger, and triumphantly sank a squadron from the Turkish Black Sea Fleet, which had been at anchor in Sinope Bay on the Black Sea. This brought the British and French, who were anxious to protect their own trading interests in the area, into the war in...
defence of Turkey. They sent a joint expeditionary force of more than 60,000 men to the Russian Crimea, where they mounted a land and sea attack on the major Russian naval base of Sebastopol.

The war was marred by incompetence on both sides, and the death toll was made worse by an outbreak of cholera. Russia suffered badly from outdated technology, poor transport and inadequate leadership and while the Russian conscript army was larger in number, it lacked the flexibility and determination of the smaller French and British units. The Russians were defeated at Balaclava in October 1854 and at Inkerman in November 1854.

Shortly before his death in March 1855, Nicholas I addressed his son, the future Alexander II, with the words, ‘I hand over to you my command, unfortunately not in as good order as I would have wished.’ By September, the fortress of Sebastopol had fallen to its enemies, leaving the tsarist government shocked and humiliated.

Although they had gone to war in a spirit of utmost confidence, the course of the fighting had revealed Russia’s military and administrative inadequacies. In every respect, the war was little short of disastrous. Trade had been disrupted, peasant uprisings escalated and the intelligentsia renewed their cries for something to be done to close the gap between Russia and the West. The concluding Treaty of Paris (1856) added the final humiliation by preventing Russian warships from using the Black Sea in times of peace.

**A CLOSER LOOK**

Transport was a major problem for the Russians. It took them longer to get equipment to the front line than it took France and Britain to send soldiers and materials from the channel ports. Russian equipment was also outdated. Their muskets were inferior and there was only one to every two soldiers. The Russian navy still used sails and wooden-bottomed ships, while Western ships had metal cladding and were powered by steam. Furthermore, the inshore fleet contained galley boats, rowed by conscripted serfs.

Fig. 6  *The siege of Sebastopol*
Failure in the Crimean War provided the ‘wake-up call’ that Russia needed. With the death of Nicholas I, decades of stagnation came to an end. In 1855 there came to power not only a new Tsar, Alexander II, but also a new generation of liberal-minded nobles and officials who were to have a major influence on his reign. The dilemma was how to match the other European powers in economic development without weakening the autocratic structure that held the Empire together.

**Fig. 7  Alexander II receiving congratulations from his family after his coronation**

**ACTIVITY**
Write a short newspaper editorial on the death of Nicholas I. Refer to the situation Russia is in and your hopes and/or fears for the future.

**STUDY TIP**
Don’t forget that all essays require balance. So, even if you are going to disagree with this statement, you should also put forward the opposing case, but remember to explain why this is less convincing.

**SUMMARY**

**Activity**
1. Draw a chart, as illustrated below, and complete it with bullet point notes, based on what you have learned in this chapter.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Using this chart, assess the validity of the statement, ‘The Russian Empire had more strengths than weaknesses in 1855.’
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