

## 2 The reforms of Alexander II

This section will look at the reforms of Alexander II and the move from reform to reaction in the second part of his reign. It will consider the reasons for the reforms and the consequences for the people involved and for the regime.

After the Crimean War, even conservative statesmen in Russia accepted that the tsarist system needed major reform since it was lagging far behind its European neighbours. Liberal reformers and conservatives alike agreed that the institution of serfdom lay at the heart of the system's backwardness and that other reforms, especially reform of the military, could not take place unless it was abolished. This was a damning proposition because it would involve making major changes in the way rural Russia was organised and administered, and the tsar was likely to offend the very people – the nobility – on whom his regime depended.

### Westernisers and Slavophiles

From the 1840s there had been a debate among intellectuals on the way forward for Russia. 'Westernisers' believed that Russia should adopt certain values and political and economic institutions from the West including individual rights and parliamentary democracy. They thought that Russia needed to industrialise and urbanise like the West or be left behind.

'Slavophiles', on the other hand, believed that Russia had its own distinctive rich culture and traditions that were special and superior to those of the West. This culture was transmitted by the Orthodox Church and institutions like the village commune, which they held in special regard because of its emphasis on 'togetherness' which they saw as a Slavonic value. Slavophiles rejected Western parliamentarism, individualism, rationalism and atheism. They believed that autocracy, and the relationship between tsar and people, conveyed Russia order and stability that was lacking in Western countries. Some embraced Pan Slavism – the notion that the Slav peoples could be united under the leadership of Russia.

These two positions do not represent two distinct groups. Love of Russia was common to both, as was concern about the dominance of Western European countries. Both thought changes were necessary, for instance, many Slavophiles supported the emancipation of the serfs and both thought the tsar had become divorced from his people by an insensitive bureaucracy. But whereas the Westernisers thought a constitution and parliament was the best option, Slavophiles wanted the tsar to convene a consultative assembly that represented the different estates (social groups) of Russia to bridge the gap that had opened up between the imperial elite and ordinary Russians.

These intellectuals did not touch the mass of the people but their views did influence the debates and discussion being held at higher levels about government policies and particularly the nature of reforms.

The army was crucial to the survival of the tsarist regime. Not only was it required to defend Russia's long borders, it was also used to suppress internal disturbances and revolts. This was particularly important because its officials and police were spread very thinly over the huge expanse of Russia. So the loyalty of the army and its willingness to follow orders was of paramount importance to the tsarist regime. One section of the army, the regime could rely on was the Cossacks who came from the Don area of Russia and had been incorporated into the army in the early nineteenth century. They were fiercely loyal to the tsar and could be trusted to act against other peoples in the Empire, including Russians. They were feared because they could be brutal and ruthless.

## Great power status and the Crimean War

How was Russia shocked into reform?

In 1815 Russia was the leading power in Europe. Napoleon's invasion in 1812 had been repulsed and the Russian army, the most powerful in the world, had liberated Europe. In 1814, Alexander I had ridden through Paris in triumph and had dominated the Congress of Vienna, which produced a settlement for Europe after twenty years of war. Maintaining great power status was a high priority for the Russians. Therefore defeat in the Crimean War (1853–56) was a huge shock to the Russian regime, especially as it had been fighting on its own territory. The defeat revealed a number of worrying deficiencies.

- 1 It highlighted Russia's poor communications and its inability to harness and deploy human and material resources effectively. There was no railway south of Moscow, so troops, armaments and supplies had to be moved along bumpy roads which turned to mud in wet weather.
- 2 The army's rifles and artillery were hopelessly outclassed by the weapons of the British and French which could fire further and more accurately.
- 3 Serious questions were raised about the efficiency of the army and the quality of the leadership (see military reforms).

In short it cast doubt on Russia's continued status as a major power and this was damaging to the Romanov dynasty which was identified with military power and now appeared ineffective and unable to defend Russia's own territory. It also showed that the sheer size of Russia made it vulnerable: ships and troops had had to be kept away from the war zone to counter any attacks by the British and French in the Baltic or rebellious uprisings in the Caucasus.

It was clear that Russia did not have adequate resources to fight a major European power. Western European countries had undergone industrial revolutions and industrial might was equated to military might. Many in the top echelons of the tsarist government were convinced that Russia's backwardness had caused its defeat. The case for reform looked unanswerable.

### The Crimean War, 1853–56

The Crimean War was fought mainly on the Crimean peninsula between Russia on one side and Britain, France, Sardinia and the Ottoman Empire (modern-day Turkey) on the other. The immediate cause was a dispute over control of Christian sites in the Holy Land and the protection of Christians in the Ottoman Empire. But the British and French thought the Russians were trying to move in on the weak Ottoman Empire and gain a strategic advantage in this part of the world. They did not want to see Russian warships with easy access to the Eastern Mediterranean from the Black Sea. So they landed troops on the Crimea to attack the Russian Black Sea fleet at its base in Sevastopol. After two years of heavy fighting the Russians were forced to sue for peace.

**Romanovs** – Michael Romanov was chosen to be tsar in 1613. His descendants were to rule Russia for the next 300 years until the last Romanov, Nicholas II, abdicated in 1917.

# 1 Russian society in the middle of the nineteenth century

This section looks at the size, geographical divisions and diversity of the Russian Empire in the middle of the nineteenth century. It introduces the main groups that made up Russian society and provides an overview of the way Russia was governed.

## Russia: the land, people and social structure

What were the main physical features of Russia and what did Russian society look like?

Tsarist Russia in the mid-nineteenth century occupied a vast area across two continents – Europe and Asia – covering about one-sixth of the world's total landmass. Its boundaries stretched some 6,000 km from the west to the Pacific Ocean and some 3,000 km from the Baltic Sea in the north to the Black Sea in the south. The USA could fit into it two and a half times and Britain over ninety times. Large parts were (and still are) either uninhabited or sparsely populated. The northern part of Russia, the tundra, is frozen for most of the year and only supports scrub vegetation. South of the tundra lies endless miles of forest, a huge resource of wood but impenetrable in places. Then comes the steppes – open plains and grassland. It is here that the most fertile land for agriculture can be found, particularly the Black Earth region. To the far south there are deserts. The climate of Russia has had a huge impact on its people. It has made agriculture difficult with unpredictable rainfall patterns and droughts that can ruin harvests.

The size and inhospitable geography of Russia has created problems for its rulers. Communications across this huge area were poor. There were few paved roads except in the big cities. Most of the roads were hard packed earth, which turned to mud in heavy rain and became impassable in winter. For longer journeys, rivers were used. Most of Russia's major cities had grown up along important river routes. The other major form of travel – railways – was undeveloped by the 1850s. The Moscow to St Petersburg railway was only opened in 1851. All this made it difficult to administer the Empire from the centre.

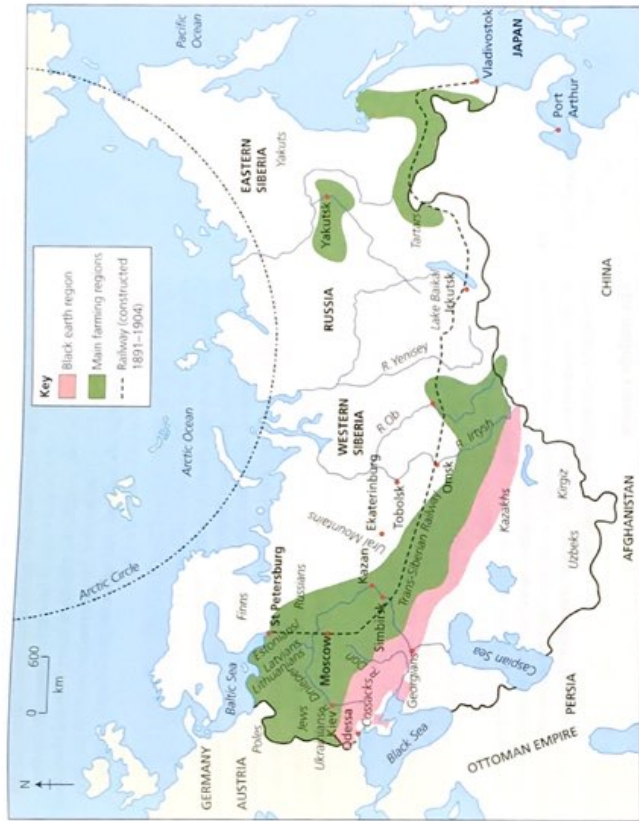
## The people

Tsarist Russia in the middle of the nineteenth century was a vast, sprawling empire containing a patchwork quilt of different national groups. From the fifteenth century onwards, the Russians who lived in the area around Moscow had conquered the peoples around them. The land they controlled expanded and developed into the Russian Empire (see Figure 1). Large areas were added only in the middle of the nineteenth century. Vladivostok and the most easterly part on the Pacific Ocean became part of the Empire in 1859. The Caucasus region, which included the Georgian and Chechen people, was secured as late as 1864, and the central Asian area of Russia including Turkistan was conquered in the 1860s and 1870s. This late expansion brought over 100 different nationalities under the control of the Russian state.

The Russians themselves formed about half of the population, the vast majority of whom lived in the European part of Russia west of the Ural mountains. The diversity of culture, religion and language throughout the Empire was astonishing.

### NOTE-MAKING

- Throughout this section make your own notes on:
- the problems Russia's size and diversity created for its rulers
  - the social structure of Russia
  - the way tsarist Russia governed this huge area



▲ Figure 1 Map showing the Russian Empire.

from sophisticated European Russians living in St Petersburg to nomadic Muslim peoples living in the desert areas of the south, to the tribes who wandered the vast spaces of Siberia, living and dressing very much like Native-Americans. You can read more about the nationalities and their position in the Russian Empire in Chapter 2.

## The social structure of Russia

The population in 1859 was around 70 million. Over 90 per cent were peasants living and working in the countryside.

### Nobility

Nobles made up less than one per cent of the population. In the seventeenth century they had been given landed estates by the tsars. In return for the land the nobles would provide services for the tsar, most usually as officers in the armed forces or as public officials in the capital or the provinces. This established a system of military officers and civil servants who had a vested interest in supporting the tsar. It was based on the idea of rewards for services. The nobles were not only given land but they were also given the people to work the land and provide their masters with food and revenue. These were called serfs and their position was little better than that of slaves in America.

The nobility had another important role – administration and keeping order. Russia covered such a vast area that it would have been impossible for the central authority to provide enough state officials to cover it. In fact there were far fewer officials in Russia than in other European countries. So the nobility filled this role, acting as the judiciary and administrative officials running regions and local areas on behalf of the tsar.

There were huge variations of wealth among the nobility. The most wealthy estate owners were a tiny minority, owning large numbers of serfs. In the 1850s Count Sergei Seremetev, one of the richest, owned nearly 150,000 male serfs. He also owned large amounts of property in Moscow. Other rich nobles profited from owning timber or distilleries. The vast majority, around three-quarters of the nobility, owned fewer than 100 serfs which meant their estates did not generate sufficient income to support a lavish lifestyle. Some nobles were downright poor which meant that they had to seek income in other areas or live in relative poverty. As the nineteenth century progressed many of these sold up their estates and moved to the towns and cities.

A significant number of nobles lived away from their estates either because of state service or personal choice, preferring to live in the cities, particularly St Petersburg. Here the rich and powerful enjoyed a life of luxury and power, taking important positions in the government or dominating the army. Many middle-ranking nobles worked as government officials earning a salary.

The nobility was not necessarily conservative. An active minority in the middle of the century were looking to reform aspects of Russian society, particularly the institution of serfdom. Some even questioned the notion that the nobility should not pay taxes or automatically hold key positions in state service. Others felt that Russia needed a more representative government and looked to ideas of liberalism to be found in Western Europe.

### The middle classes

This was a small group in mid-century Russia, due largely to the absence of industry on a large scale. There were merchants who played an important part in Russia's trade with the rest of the world and some of these were wealthy and influential. There were entrepreneurs and businessmen but it was not until the second part of the century that they became a more dynamic force in society (see Chapter 2). Probably most could be found in bureaucratic clerical roles in central and provincial government and running shops and stores.

### Peasants

In the mid-nineteenth century over 90 per cent of the Russian population was peasants, most of whom supported themselves by farming. There was a huge amount of variation among peasants across Russia but we can make some general observations. Broadly they can be divided into two groups:

- 1 Around half were serfs who were tied to the landowning nobility. They were found mainly in central Russia and the western provinces. Serfdom ensured that the nobility had labour and income. The key features of serfdom were:
  - Serfs were bound to the landed estates of the nobles and could not leave the estates without the land-owner's permission.
  - They were required to provide labour, usually three days a week on the noble's land (more at harvest time), or pay *dues* in cash or produce, or sometimes all three. The amount of work to be done was sometimes worked out for a whole village, sometimes for individual households. Some landowners paid serfs for extra work at busy times, some set it against their labour obligation. There was variation between estates and between regions

### Who paid taxes in tsarist Russia?

The nobility and the clergy were exempt from direct taxation. So it was the peasants who largely bore the burden of a poll tax. Indirect taxes on everyday items like kerosene and tobacco also bore most heavily on poorer Russians.

**Dues** – Payments in cash or kind for example, produced made by serfs to nobles.

- In return they could use a plot of land for their own use, to grow food to feed themselves or sell locally.

- The nobles acted as police, judge and jury in respect of serfs on their estates. Serfs had no access to the legal system.
- They had almost no rights as individuals and could be sold, traded or forbidden to marry.
- No male serfs, around seven per cent, worked as domestic servants. They had no land and were not paid and consequently led the worst lives.

Labour service was most common in the Black Earth regions to the south and east of Moscow where the land was fertile and agriculture was the main activity. Dues were more common in less fertile central and northern regions. Where estates were near large cities, nobles used serf labour to produce foodstuffs for the urban market. They also hired out serfs to work in industry. Some landowners treated their serfs well and even educated them. Others were brutal: whipping was common and trouble-some peasants could be shipped off to the army.

- 2 State peasants formed the other half. They lived on estates owned by the state, Church or the tsar. They paid rent to the state for the use of the land they farmed. Legally free, they were still under the control of state administrators and there were restrictions on their travel. Generally, they were better off than serfs, had larger landholdings and could get more involved in rural handicrafts or get work in factories to supplement their income.

### The Mir

Peasants were subject to controls exercised by the village commune, the *Mir*, an assembly of households. It was run by the peasants themselves and village meetings allowed discussion of issues. It had distinct advantages and drawbacks. It provided security and support and ensured an equitable distribution of land. But it controlled the members in important areas:

- It allocated land, deciding who should get what. The amount of land depended on the size of the household. So that everybody had a share of good and bad land it was divided up into strips in fields. In some villages there were periodic redistributions as the size of households changed. Pastureland and meadows were held in common.
- On private estates it was responsible for making sure that serfs fulfilled their obligations in labour or payments.

Although egalitarian, the allocation and redistribution of strips was inefficient with time wasted moving between strips and no incentive to improve strips if they changed hands. Arable decisions had to be co-ordinated so there was little scope for enterprising peasants who wished to try something different. The commune tended to be dominated by older peasants who resisted change. They could punish people who did not conform; for instance, they chose the conscripts for the army. On the one hand the *Mir* could be a model of co-operation and mutual support, on the other it was a source of petty jealousies and rivalries where violence, communal and domestic, was not uncommon.

Farming was generally organised around a three-field rotation system with wheat, rye and oats being the main crops, depending on the region. Peasants also had the household plots – land on which their houses were built – and garden plots where they grew vegetables and kept domestic livestock. Vegetables formed a large part of the diet, depending on the area: cabbage soup was common in the north and centre of Russia, beetroot soup in the south. Little meat was eaten but fish was common. Beer was the main drink, with vodka drunk at festivals and celebrations.

**Mir** – The peasant commune.  
**Three-field rotation system** – Crops were grown in two fields while one field was left fallow each year to recover.

Typically Russian villages consisted of a line of unpainted wooden huts with thatched roofs along each side of an unpaved main street. Most peasants were poor and illiterate. Their lives were hard and unremitting, slogged out on their small patches of land. They got by in the good years and suffered greatly when the harvests were poor. In famine years many thousands died of starvation. Many peasants lived in squalor, prone to drunkenness and sexually transmitted diseases, especially syphilis.

### Workers

Russia had not experienced an industrial revolution like Britain and Germany so there were few large-scale industrial works by the 1850s. The closest they got to factory industry were the spinning mills around St Petersburg. There were iron-ore mines in the Urals but the iron industry was technologically backward. Most other industry was carried out in peasants' cottages (handicrafts, weaving) or in small-scale workshops. The conditions in which people worked were generally appalling in smaller enterprises, workers and their families might live and sleep alongside their workbenches in stinking, filthy surroundings. The hours of work were long. At this time the workers formed a relatively small proportion of the population.

### The Russian Orthodox Church

The Russian Orthodox Church was the established Church in the Russian Empire. It was part of the wider Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity and was independent of the Pope and Catholic Europe. Russia had not experienced the Reformation or Renaissance although there were divisions in the Orthodox Church, notably between the mainstream Church and the Old Believers. The Russians believed that they kept the true faith and this gave them a belief that they were somehow special – hence the expression 'Holy Russia'. The Orthodox Church was intimately bound up with the autocracy since the tsar was God's lieutenant on earth.

A large majority, about 70 per cent of the population, were members of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Church was staffed by 100,000 clerics who played a significant role in Russian society and exerted a huge amount of influence over the peasants. Priests lived in the villages and so were involved in the lives and struggles of the peasants, especially as it was the villagers who supported them. Religious observance played a significant role in the life of the peasant, especially in the rites and rituals connected with birth, death and marriage. Most peasant huts had an icon in one corner of the room. The Church was also the means by which peasants, for the most part illiterate, got information. For instance, the terms and details of the emancipation of the serfs were read out in churches.

### The Old Believers

The Old Believers remained true to the old customs of the Orthodox Church before the reforms by Patriarch Nikon in the mid-seventeenth century, and to an ideal of Russianness which harked back to before Peter the Great. They faced persecution, which continued up until 1905. They had a deep religious faith and a strict work ethic.

**Autocracy** – System of government in which there are no constraints on the power of the ruler.

**Icon** – A religious painting, usually of a holy figure, often on wood and used as an aid to devotion.

### Tsarist government

How was Russia governed under the tsars?

The tsar was an autocrat, an absolute ruler, who had supreme power over his subjects. As far as the tsars were concerned they had been appointed by God and rejected any hint that their power rested on the consent of the people – their role was to lead and guide the people. The autocrat could rule the country without constraints. You can read more about the nature of the autocracy and the tsarist state in Chapter 2.

The tsar had an Imperial Council (see page 40), made up of nobles to advise him, and a cabinet of ministers who ran the various government departments. But they were responsible to him alone, not to a parliament or prime minister. They reported directly to the tsar and took instructions from him. This meant that the tsar was the pivot at the centre of the system.

There was a huge bureaucracy of civil servants and officials who ran the Empire. The top ranks were dominated by the nobility. In the 1850s and 1860s an élite of bureaucratic officials was developing alongside a more professional civil service. Some of these had liberal reforming tendencies and wanted to bring about changes in the way Russia was run. The lower ranks that had contact with the people were generally badly paid and there was a culture of corruption in which bribery was common. This, together with the arbitrary nature of decision-making, undermined respect for the authorities. The bureaucracy was virtually impenetrable for ordinary citizens who rarely found that their interests were served properly.

The different regions of the Empire were under the control of governors who had their own local bureaucracies. Poor communications meant that it was hard to get decisions from the centre carried out. The regional governors often acted like independent rulers in their own fiefdoms. They were supported in districts by nobles, who controlled judicial and police functions.

The government made use of the secret police, the 'Third Section', to root out people likely to cause trouble. There was a system of surveillance with an extensive network of agents. Strict censorship was imposed on newspapers, periodicals and books to stop the spread of ideas deemed dangerous to the regime. Those who fell foul of the regime faced tough punishments – execution, floggings, imprisonment or exile. Large-scale disturbances or riots were suppressed by the army. Tsarist Russia was an oppressive regime.

### The role of the army

The Russian army was the largest in Europe and an important element in Russia's status as a world power. Most officers were from noble backgrounds. Ordinary soldiers were conscripts taken from the villages who were required to serve for 25 years, reduced to 15 for those with good service records. The government kept them for so long because it was worried that peasants returning home might use their training to promote discontent. Soldiers had to be completely subservient to officers and had few rights, for instance they could be flogged and were not allowed to enter most restaurants and cafes. Pay was extremely poor and most soldiers grew their own food and lived mainly on soup, tea and bread.

### Tsar Nicholas I, 1825–55

Nicholas I established a centralised and authoritarian state. He believed in a personal autocracy in which the tsar exercised a God-given right to rule his subjects. He exercised great personal control over the details of government. Worried by the prospect of revolution, he set up the Third Section of Personal Chancery – the secret police. His approach was centred in military discipline and he used its language: 'I am a sentry at an outpost on guard, to see all and observe all. I must stay there until relieved.'