4.6: Russia

In many ways, the histories of Great Britain and Russia were always exceptional in the context of nineteenth-century European politics. Neither underwent revolutionary upheavals, and neither had much difficulty suppressing nationalist movements from within their respective empires. And yet, the two countries were in many ways polar opposites: Britain was an advanced industrial economy with a liberal constitution and a monarchy whose real political power declined over time, while Russia was an overwhelmingly agricultural - even feudal - economy with a powerful, autocratic head of state: the Tsar. The modernizing trends that changed much of the rest of Europe over the course of the century had the least impact on Russia of any of the major states.

Tsar Alexander I, who ruled from 1801 – 1825, was present at the Congress of Vienna. He was intensely conservative and had a powerful attraction to Orthodox Christian mysticism. In turn, he sincerely believed that he had a mission from God to maintain the sacred order of monarchy, nobility, and clergy. In this, he was influenced by timing: he became Tsar shortly after Napoleon seized power in France. To Alexander, the French Revolution was not just a bad idea or a threat to his personal power, it was an unholy abomination, a perversion of the proper order of society as it had been ordained from on high. Ultimately, it was the Russians who defeated Napoleon's armies in 1812, thanks largely to the winter and their brilliant tactical decision to camp out and wait for the French to run out of supplies. Alexander sat in a position of great power at the Congress of Vienna because of the strength of his armies and the prestige he had earned chasing the French forces back to France and aiding in their defeat in 1814 and 1815.

In 1815, Russia, along with Austria and Prussia (and, technically, the restored French monarchy), formed the Holy Alliance that vowed to crush attempts to overthrow the social and political order with force. For Austria, this was a pragmatic gesture because the Habsburgs had to the most to lose in the face of nationalism. For Prussia, it was a way to cement their great power status and to be treated as an equal by the other members of the anti-Napoleonic coalition. For Russia and for Alexander, however, it was nothing less than a true holy mission that had to happen regardless of any practical benefits. Russia did indeed intervene to crush rebellions over the course of the next few decades, most
importantly in 1848 when it decimated the Hungarian Revolution and returned Hungary to the Austrians.

Alexander I died in 1825 and his death promptly set off the Decembrist Uprising (noted above). Not only was the uprising crushed, but Alexander's younger brother and heir Nicholas I took a personal hand in interrogating its organizers. Nicholas was much less of a mystic than his brother had been, but he was equally trenchant in his opposition to any loosening of the Russian social order. He went on to rule for decades (r. 1825 - 1855), and during that time he did everything in his power to champion the conservative cause. As noted earlier, not only was he a staunch supporter of the Holy Alliance, but he formed the world's first modern secret police force, The Third Section. Nicholas declared his three principles of government in 1832: autocracy, orthodoxy, and nationality, the last of the three in service to the idea of Russian supremacy over its enormous empire (and the other ethnic groups present in it).

Not only were the Tsars of the nineteenth century arch-conservatives, the vast majority of the Russian population had no interest in political change. They were among the poorest, least educated, and most oppressed in Europe: the Russian serfs. The Russian Orthodox Church was closely tied to the government and preached total obedience to the authority of the Tsar. For that tiny sliver of educated society that could read and had access to foreign books, even to discuss politics at all, let alone advocate reform of any kind, was a punishable crime, with thousands exiled to Siberia for the crime of having made an off-hand remark about politics or owning a book describing a political concept originating in the west.

These people, almost all of whom were nobles, formed the Russian intelligentsia: a small class of educated and very self-consciously cultured people who were at the forefront of Russian literature and artistic creation. They were the ones who began modern Russian literature itself in this period, producing great Russian novelists like Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov. The themes of their art dealt with both the thorny political issues of their time and a kind of ongoing spiritual quest to understand the Russian “soul,” something that was usually identified with both nature and the mystical.
qualities of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The problem with being a member of the intelligentsia in Russia, however, was that reading or discussing anything to do with politics was itself sufficient cause for arrest and exile to Siberia. Many of the great novelists spent at least part of their lives in Siberia as a result; even Dostoevsky, who ended up being a deeply conservative thinker who was hostile to radical, or even disruptive, politics, spent part of his life in exile. To be an intellectual was almost the equivalent of being a criminal in the eyes of the state. It was a short step for intellectuals to simply act like criminals. It was in large part thanks to the police apparatus that matured under Nicholas I’s rule that this phenomenon occurred.

That being noted, a momentous event occurred late in Nicholas’s reign unrelated to Tsarist autocracy per se: the destruction of the Congress System created at the Congress of Vienna, thanks to the Crimean War. From 1854 – 1856, France and Britain fought a war against Russia in the Crimea, a peninsula on the northern shore of the Black Sea. The war was fought over great power politics: Russia tried to take advantage of the political decline of the Ottoman Empire to assert total control in the region of the Black Sea, and both France and Britain recognized those machinations as a threat to the balance of power. The Austrian government unwisely stayed neutral during the ensuing war, which ruptured the alliance between it and Russia (after all, Russia had just put down the Hungarian uprising on Austria’s behalf during the Revolutions of 1848).

The Crimean War, while not long by the standards of the Napoleonic period, was nevertheless a major conflict. 600,000 men died in the war, the majority from disease thanks to the abysmal conditions at the front. Russia ultimately lost, and the end result was that the Congress System was finally undone. From that point on, the great powers of Europe were in open competition with one another, fearing and resenting each other more so than they feared revolutionary forces from within - one manifestation of this newfound rivalry was the wars that saw the birth of Italy and Germany, described above.

Nicholas finally died in 1855, and his son Alexander II took the throne (in the midst of the war). In 1861, following Russia’s defeat, Alexander made the momentous decision to emancipate the serfs, two years before the Emancipation Proclamation in the United States freed the African-American slaves. It was thought by many Russian elites that one of the reasons Russia had lost the war was its backwardness, a backwardness that Alexander and many others believed could not be mitigated with serfdom weighing down the possibility of progress. The emancipation, however, had surprisingly little immediate impact on Russian society, because the serfs legally owed the government the money that had been distributed to buy their freedom from the nobility. Thus, for generations, serfs were still tied to the same land, laboring both to survive and to pay off the debt incurred with their “freedom.”

The emancipation of the serfs was the single most significant reform spearheaded by a Russian Tsar of the nineteenth century. It is thus ironic that Alexander II was the only Tsar assassinated by a radical terrorist group. The group that killed him, The People’s Will, believed that the assassination of a Tsar would result in an enormous uprising of the newly-“liberated” peasants (i.e. the former serfs). In this, they were inspired by the anarchist socialism of the exiled Mikhail Bakunin, whose vision of an apocalyptic revolutionary transformation spoke directly to the social and political conditions of his native Russia.

Before the assassination, young members of the intelligentsia formed a social movement known as the Narodniki. The Narodniki advocated going “back to the people,” living among and trying to educate the former serfs, which they did during the spring of 1874. The Narodniki believed that the serfs would form the nucleus of a revolutionary class that
would rise up and dismantle Tsarist autocracy if properly educated. Instead, the serfs were deeply suspicious of the urban, educated Narodniks, and in many cases the serfs actually turned the Narodniks in to the local authorities. It was disappointed Narodniks that formed the **People's Will**, and in March of 1881 they succeeded in killing Alexander II.

While The People’s Will had hoped that their assassination of Alexander II would result in a spontaneous uprising of the peasants against Tsarist despotism, nothing of the sort occurred. Instead, another reactionary Tsar, Alexander III, came to the throne and ruthlessly hunted down the terrorist groups. What had changed by the 1880s, however, was that there were terrorist groups, not just intellectuals guilty of discussing politics, and the one thing that practically every intellectual in Russian society (terrorist or not) believed was that meaningful change would require a significant, even radical, restructuring of Russian society. To many intellectuals and terrorists, there was no room for weak-kneed reformism; it was revolution or nothing. This is the context into which Vladimir Lenin and the other future Bolsheviks, the leaders of the Russian Communist Party who seized power in 1917, were born. Lenin was a brilliant intellectual who synthesized the writings of Marx with the tradition of Russian radical terrorism, producing a potent combination of theoretical and practical political concepts that were realized in 1917.

Thus, by the late nineteenth century Russia had changed the least among the great powers of Europe. Whereas the other states, from Austria to the new Germany to France, had all adopted at least some form of representative government, Russia remained staunchly autocratic and monarchical. The Russian economy was overwhelmingly agriculture and rural, with industrialization only arriving at the very end of the century in and around some of the large cities of western Russia. Russia was, in a sense, stuck in a historical impasse. That impasse would only end with outright revolution, first in 1905 and again in 1917.

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