

Russia as a Great Power 1801-1855

The following chapter gives an overview of the key developments before the course starts in 1855. Read through the chapter and make notes on the political and social conditions of Russia up to 1855.

There is also further reading and a video to watch to fully prepare you for the start of the course in September. You will also see a recommended list of textbooks that will be vital to your learning throughout your time here at J6.

Introduction

During the first half of the 19th century,, the status of the Russian Empire in the international arena change dramatically. After 1812, it reached the pinnacle of prestige and influence, but in the mid-1850s Russia endured a military defeat that exposed the internal weakness of the country, throwing into doubt its visibility as a great power. Tsars Alexander I (1801-1825) and Nicholas I (1825-1855) revelled in Russia's enhanced status, but both seemed to sense that political and social changes would be necessary to retain status. From time to time, they actually contemplated a wide range of reforms, and they even implemented a few, but none that fundamentally altered the structure of society. In the end, Russia in 1855 was politically, and socially, not appreciably different from the Russia of 1801.

It is tempting to attribute the Tsars' failures to introduce reforms to a lack of wisdom and to weakness of character. However, it must be kept in mind that the tsars faced intractable problems. Russia retained institutions – the autocracy, serfdom, a rigid social structure – that made change exceedingly difficult. Fear that the whole structure of authority would then collapse paralysed the tsars in their attempts to cope with some of the most critical problems in facing the nation. The result was stagnation and a slow but steady growth in popular disaffection with the status quo.

Tsar Nicholas I

By temperament and conviction Nicholas was not likely to undertake bold initiatives. Although a well-educated man who spoke several foreign languages, he was no especially gifted intellectually and had little understanding of sympathy for anyone with convictions different from his. He was a deeply religious man, convinced that the hand of God guided his every action as an autocrat. He was also passionately devoted to military values. He insisted that obedience, discipline, order and regimentation must be the guiding principles of the Russian state. He deplored any questioning of his views and insisted on personally formulating state policies and making the decision to implement them.

Within education, the minister of education Sergei Uvarov promoted the idea that the Russian people were unique in their fervent devotion to autocracy and Orthodoxy and that their culture, especially their language, was superior to every other. This was interesting as Russian was not the only language spoken, and the Russian Empire had grown to include many cultures in the 18th and 19th century. Uvarov urged schools to focus on the training of loyal, subservient subjects and believed that the lower classes should not receive any education.

In 1826, the government created the notorious Third Department for the purpose of collection information on counterfeiters, religious sects, dissenters and all happenings without exceptions. Designed to prevent the organisation of opposition, it consisted of two sets of agents. There was a uniformed military force that drew most of its officers from educated and well-established families and operated throughout the Empire, and a large corps of secret informers who were instructed to keep an eye on every social group and to report on all signs of disaffection.

Still, the reign of Nicholas I was not all darkness. Despite the police state, Nicholas recognised that serfdom was an evil and he favoured measures to improve the peasants life. But he did not advocate emancipation of the peasants, for fear that it would lead to great catastrophe, by weakening the landowning class, the pillar of autocracy, and by provoking an uprising of peasants dissatisfied with the conditions of their freedom. In 1842, they passed a law which allowed noble landowners to reach voluntary agreements with their serfs under which land would be transferred to the serfs in return for financial compensation. However, the amount of land to be transferred was not made clear and as a result on 24,700 serfs received their freedom,

The peasants were certainly not satisfied with the government initiatives. Although no massive disturbances occurred, from the period 1826-1854 was far from peaceful. During those 24 years, there were 712 instances of unrest, during which peasants killed 173 landlords. During the 18 years from 1836-1854, the government had to use troops on 132 different occasions to put down disturbances.

The most significant development under Nicholas I was the emergence of the Russian intelligentsia, a group that came to exercise enormous influence in the course of Russian history. Intelligentsia is a term that is not easy to define. Put simply, the members of this group were individuals – writers, philosophers, political activists, artists – who devoted their lives to intellectual pursuits, but that alone does not adequately define them. The Russian intelligentsia were also individuals who took a critical stance towards the prevailing order. Most of the intelligentsia in the first half of the 19th century came from the nobility, the best educated social class in the country, but as the education system expanded commoners became part of the intelligentsia. The authorities realised very quickly that the group's ideas could influence the public and consequently watched their activities with the greatest anxiety. One of the central theme of Russian history from the 1830s-1917 and beyond is the government's attempts to curb the intelligentsia. The government's main weapon was tight censorship, but this was not effective. Russian writers found ingenious ways of circumventing the censorship.

One of the more contentious debates among intellectuals was the conflict between Western ideas and the rise of Slavophilism. During the second half of the 19th century, a faction of so-called "Slavophiles" emerged in intellectual circles. They were convinced that Peter the Great made a mistake in trying to modernize and Westernize the country and that Russia's salvation lay in the rejection of Western ideas. Slavophiles believed that while the West polluted itself with science, atheism, materialism, and wealth, they should return to a simple peasant-based society centred on the Orthodox faith. The government rejected these ideas in favor of

rapid modernization. The intelligentsia then, although diverse and could not agree, but it did have something in common: it wanted Russia to change. In the end, it was the government's bumbling foreign policy in the early 1850s, the Crimean War, that exposed the frailties of the Russia's economic, social, and political system and made reform the order of the day.

Please see also:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5oUo3yUuCU>

<https://alphahistory.com/russianrevolution/russian-society/>

https://acsibhistory.weebly.com/uploads/2/2/8/6/22869418/background_to_russia_problems_worksheet.pdf

<https://explaininghistory.org/russia-aqa-section-one/>

Recommended Textbooks:

My Revision Notes: AQA AS/A-level History: Tsarist and Communist Russia, 1855-1964

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Revision-Notes-level-Communist-1855-1964/dp/1471876160/ref=sr_1_2?crid=YULE2W1UYAY3&dib=eyJ2ljojMSJ9.yC4Lj69WcqtYUWDNvB_7mq5TWvNcqpUgjdWc_NE9gXDI9FTO42aX9amWkBbsaV_bqvVIJLjmVujJYfx9CAcPfA.sgy92W7ngxuVqNaLZ6oCPZqIrojYir-n0vx0Oj3UR8E&dib_tag=se&keywords=1h+tsaris+and+communist+russia+aqa&qid=1719565160&srefix=1h+tsaris+and+communist+russia+aqa%2Caps%2C53&sr=8-2

Oxford AQA History for A Level: Tsarist and Communist Russia 1855-1964 (Oxford A Level History for AQA)

You can get a smaller version of this that is cheaper, but I recommend the thicker textbook as it provides more detail and will give you enough context to get a B and above. I use this book to plan from a lot in my lessons.

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Oxford-AQA-History-Level-Communist/dp/0198354673/ref=sr_1_4?crid=YULE2W1UYAY3&dib=eyJ2ljojMSJ9.yC4Lj69WcqtYUWDNvB_7mq5TWvNcqpUgjdWc_NE9gXDI9FTO42aX9amWkBbsaV_bqvVIJLjmVujJYfx9CAcPfA.sgy92W7ngxuVqNaLZ6oCPZqIrojYir-n0vx0Oj3UR8E&dib_tag=se&keywords=1h+tsaris+and+communist+russia+aqa&qid=1719565160&srefix=1h+tsaris+and+communist+russia+aqa%2Caps%2C53&sr=8-4