

# 2

## The consolidation of Russian Conservatism, 1855–1894

- 2.1 What forces were there for continuity and for change within the Russian Empire on the eve of the Crimean War?
- 2.2 Was serfdom a source of strength or of weakness for the Russian state and the Russian economy?
- 2.3 What were the domestic political implications of Russia's defeat in the Crimea?
- 2.4 How effective were the measures taken from 1861 to emancipate the Russian serfs?
- 2.5 Historical interpretation: To what extent does Alexander II deserve the title of 'Tsar Liberator'?
- 2.6 How seriously was the Tsarist regime threatened by the opposition that arose during Alexander II's reign?
- 2.7 Why did Tsarist policy change between reform and reaction in the years 1879–1894?
- 2.8 Why and with what consequences did the Tsarist government pursue a policy of Russification?
- 2.9 To what extent was Russia's international prestige restored in the reigns of Alexander II and Alexander III?
- 2.10 What was the extent of Russia's economic development during the reigns of Alexander II and Alexander III?

### Key Issues

- Why did Alexander II undertake an extensive programme of reforms in the 1860s?
- What was the impact of these reforms upon Russian society and upon the Tsarist regime?
- Why did the Russian regime return to conservative policies in the 1880s?

### Framework of Events

1854	Outbreak of the Crimean War
1855	Death of Tsar Nicholas I; accession of Alexander II
1856	Conclusion of the Crimean War by the Treaty of Paris
1861	Emancipation of the Russian serfs
1863	Polish Revolt
1864	Introduction of <i>zemstva</i> . Reform of judiciary system
1872	Russia enters League of the Three Emperors
1873–74	Radical students institute the 'To the People' movement
1874	Introduction of Milyutin's military reforms
1877–78	Russo-Turkish War
1878	Congress of Berlin
1881	Assassination of Alexander II; accession of Alexander III
1889	Introduction of Land Commandants
1894	Death of Alexander III; accession of Nicholas II.

**Tsar:** Title of the emperor of Russia. Also spelled Czar and Tzar. Believed to be a shortened form of Caesar (Roman emperor).

**Private enterprise:** The economic activities of a country or a community which are independent of government control and directed to satisfy private wants.

**Autocracy (adj. autocratic):** A form of government in which the ruler (the autocrat) exercises absolute political power, unlimited by other factors such as a parliament or a constitution.

landlords guaranteed the transmission of the Tsar's will to the lowest ranks of society. The disadvantages of such a system lay in the fact that it severely hampered **private enterprise**. The fact that the peasants were not free to pursue greater prosperity, and that many landowners were comfortably cushioned by their privileged position, deprived Russia of the kind of growth that was generating an economic revolution in many parts of western Europe. Awareness of such disadvantages, along with a degree of ideological opposition to **autocracy** and serfdom, was already growing when defeat in the Crimean War emphasised the extent of Russia's decline as a great power. If that war sometimes appears to be little more than a footnote in French or British history, it was a key event for Tsarist Russia. The Crimean War stimulated attitudes and triggered policies in Russia that had simmered below the surface for decades.

Under these circumstances, Tsar Alexander II introduced a programme of reforms that was undoubtedly the most radical and far-reaching of any attempted by a European government in the 19th century. Over 40 million people were released from slavery, and a series of further reforms was implemented that appeared to be based upon liberal institutions in western Europe. Nevertheless, a profound paradox ran through this programme. While it introduced a degree of personal and legal freedom previously unknown in Russia, it did so by an act of the monarch's autocratic will. Indeed, the preservation of the Tsar's authority, and the consolidation of conservative interests, were among the fundamental aims of the programme. Does this mean, as Soviet historians usually claimed, that the 'great reforms' were confused and sterile? Was it all a hopeless attempt to preserve a doomed political system? Or is it better to follow the interpretation often reached by liberal, western historians, who see these reforms as steps that could have taken Russia forward into a modern age of political reform and economic progress?

The tragedy of Alexander II's great reform programme was that he and his ministers only partly understood the implications of their actions. They hoped for peace and stability in the countryside, for a more prosperous and contented peasantry, and for a degree of industrial growth that would strengthen and modernise both the economy and the army. Yet the reforms transformed most of the existing social, political and economic relationships within the state. They were bound to hasten Russia into a new world of market forces and political debate that was incompatible with the habits of command and blind obedience upon which Russian government had been based for centuries. Perceived as a short, sharp burst of radical change which would earn widespread gratitude for the 'Tsar liberator' (Alexander II), the reforms opened a troubled era of Russian history. As governments sought, alternately, to advance modernisation or to apply the brake, so various sections of the population tried to exploit the momentum towards change, or recoiled from its implications. The assassination of Alexander II in 1881 was a result of these political tensions. It guaranteed that for a generation, Russia's rulers would recognise the dangers of reform more clearly than they recognised its benefits, and that they would abandon that path. For three decades before the outbreak of the First World War, the Tsarist regime attempted to restore the effectiveness of traditional forms of government, without the bedrock institution of serfdom, upon which those traditional forms had been based.

At the same time as it struggled with the domestic problems that the Crimean War had highlighted, the Russian government also had to confront the diplomatic implications of the war. Recently regarded as the European continent's strongest military power – the 'gendarme of Europe' – Russia now found itself isolated and vulnerable. In addressing this problem, the government employed two different strategies. On the one hand, it attempted to find a working relationship with the other powers of continental Europe, especially with the new German state that emerged in 1871. On the other, in a fashion that resembled the westward expansion of the USA, it sought to exploit the vast 'virgin' regions that lay to the east. It sought power in Asia as a compensation for weakness in Europe. In the short term, there is a good case for arguing that Russia had regained its status as a great power by the end of Alexander III's reign. In the longer term, the steps taken in foreign policy led directly to Russia's disastrous involvement in the wars of 1904 and 1914. In foreign affairs, as in domestic policy, these decades prepared the ground for the traumas that Russia experienced in the first decades of the 20th century.

### **Tsars of Russia**

Nicholas I	1825-1855
Alexander II	1855-1881
Alexander III	1881-1894
Nicholas II	1894-1917

## **2.1 What forces were there for continuity and for change within the Russian Empire on the eve of the Crimean War?**

### **Autocracy**

As Russia went to war in 1854, the reign of Tsar Nicholas I was nearing the end of its third decade. Throughout that period the Tsar had rigidly maintained the traditional, autocratic forms of government. Under this system, all executive political authority was concentrated in the hands of one man, and his edict (*ukaz*) was the only source of law. In principle, the Tsar's relationship with the Russian people was that of a loving, but authoritarian, father. 'His subjects,' as a senior police official explained, 'are his children, and children ought never to reason about their parents.' Just as it would be a dereliction of responsibility by a father to allow children to make decisions about the future of the family, so all political decisions lay in the hands of the Tsar. Although a variety of opinions existed in Russia on political and social issues, it remained difficult to express them, and virtually impossible to implement them unless one could enlist the support of the Tsar himself. This was the principle that was expressed by Tsar Paul I (1796-1801) when he informed an official that 'no one is important in Russia except the man who is speaking to me, and then only when he is speaking to me'.

### **The roles of the nobility and of the Orthodox Church**

It remained a more difficult matter to implement the Tsar's authority throughout the vast Russian Empire (see map on page 48). At the centre, the main tool of government was His Imperial Majesty's Private Chancery. The Third Section of this Chancery was in charge of state security, standing at the centre of a complex web of censorship and surveillance. The work of the censors extended from the strict limitation of any reporting of events in western Europe, to the banning of any criticism of social conditions within Russia. It also involved the control of any careless or dangerous expression in any form of literature. In the reign of Nicholas I, the Third Section shadowed some 2,000 persons and dealt with around 15,000 security cases annually. In the distant provinces, the regime relied heavily upon the Russian nobility. Some of these served the Tsar as provincial

governors, but all landowners had a vested interest in local law and order, ruling their estates and their serfs (peasants) almost as miniature Tsars. In the early years of the 19th century, this consensus of political and social interests provided Russian government with a considerable degree of unity. 'The landowner,' commented Nicholas I's Chief of Police, 'is the most faithful, the unsleeping watchdog guarding the state; he is the natural police magistrate.' It remained unclear how the Russian Empire could be governed if that cohesion were ever dissolved.

Throughout the 19th century the Orthodox Church, with its message of faith in God and unquestioning submission to God's will, was the major support of the Tsarist regime. It endorsed the regime's claim that its power was an expression of the Divine Will. There were numerous other religious groups within the Empire. A commission set up in 1839 reported 9.3 million non-Orthodox Christians alone. However, for most of the century it was claimed, with varying degrees of coercion, that only members of the Orthodox faith could really be true and reliable subjects of the Tsar.

### The political beliefs of Nicholas I

As has already been explained, any project for political or social change in 19th-century Russia would be totally dependent upon the reaction of the Tsar himself. Several factors dictated, during the long reign of Nicholas I, that the Tsar's attitude would be rigidly conservative. Nicholas, for instance, was profoundly influenced by the dramatic Decembrist revolt that accompanied his accession in 1825. This was an unsuccessful attempt by liberal intellectuals and army officers in St Petersburg to place Nicholas' brother Constantine at the head of a constitutional monarchy. It filled Nicholas with horror. It convinced him that, despite the defeat of France in 1815, Europe was not safe from the radical ideas of the French Revolution, from blasphemous attempts to undermine the authority of monarchs who were God's representatives on earth. The fear and revulsion inspired by such radicalism were renewed at regular intervals: by the deposition of Charles X by the French in 1830; by the Polish revolt of 1831; and by the European revolutions of 1848. Nicholas' pretension to act as the 'gendarme of Europe' in Wallachia (1848) and in Hungary (1849) typified the role that he felt compelled to play throughout his reign - that of defender of the old discipline against the influences of 'rotten, pagan France'.

### Slavophiles

The conservative principles of Nicholas I were part of a broader system of beliefs that dominated Russian thought in the 19th century. This was the conviction that Russian social organisation, religion, government, culture and philosophy were superior, by virtue of their isolation from the mainstreams of western European development. It was thus the duty of all Russians to protect these blessings against all external (i.e. western) threats. Those who wished to preserve and consolidate the essentials of Slav culture, and to spread that culture throughout the Empire, became known as 'slavophiles'. There can be no doubt that, for 30 years before the Crimean War, the Russian government shared the views of such slavophile thinkers. To the west, the reaction of Nicholas I to the Polish Revolt of 1831 showed very clearly his deep concern at the spread of western liberalism and nationalism. The rising was ruthlessly suppressed and many important elements of Polish national identity were subsequently attacked. The constitution was withdrawn, the universities closed and the Russian language was vigorously imposed in Polish public life. To the south, consistent attempts were made to support the Slav inhabitants of the declining Turkish Empire and to turn

Radicalism. The belief that there should be great or extreme changes in society.

The growth and spread of loyalty towards a nation, and the decline towards an individual.

them into clients of Russia. Indeed, Nicholas' attempts to exert influence over the Sultan's Orthodox Christian subjects were a major cause of the Crimean War (see later section). The most spectacular expansion of Russian culture and political influence occurred to the south and south-east. The acquisition of Persian Armenia (1828), was followed by the establishment of influence over Dagestan and the Caucasus in the 1830s and 1840s, and of control over the Uzbeks and the Kazakhs in the same decades.

### Westernisers

The alternative view was that Russia would be strengthened and modernised by the adoption of some western technical and philosophical ideas. Such 'westernising' beliefs comprised the major forces for change that operated within 19th-century Russia, but they made little headway during the reign of Nicholas I. Such ideas clearly lay behind the Decembrist revolt of 1825, and their association with that event condemned them in the eyes of the Tsar. The failure of the revolt drove liberal ideas underground and for the next 30 years they found expression mainly in literature and in the discussions of intellectuals. If those intellectuals were too outspoken in their statements, they might expect severe consequences. Alexander Pushkin, arguably the greatest of Russia's poets, had his work personally censored by the Tsar. It is possible that Pushkin's political views contributed to his death in a duel (1837). Pyotr Chaadaev was officially pronounced insane after the publication of an anti-government essay in 1836.

Nevertheless, indirect criticism of the existing social system could be expressed in more subtle forms. Nikolai Gogol exposed provincial corruption in his play *The Government Inspector* (first performed in



1. Where do you think the painter of this picture stood in the contemporary debate between westernisers and slavophiles?

2. What evidence is there in this work of the artist's attitude towards Russia's past and present?



A work by the Russian artist Vasilii Perov, painted between 1865 and 1875 and entitled 'A monastic refectory'

**Dmitri Milyutin  
(1816–1912)**

His early life was divided between military and academic circles, and he had some experience of travel in western Europe. Dmitri was Deputy Minister for War (1860) and Minister for War (1861–81), introducing expansive reforms of the Russian

army. Milyutin resigned upon the death of Alexander II, but continued to sit on the Council of State until 1905.

**Nikolai Milyutin  
(1818–1872)**

Younger brother of Dmitri, and prominent among the 'enlightened bureaucrats' at the end

of the reign of Nicholas I. As a high official in the Ministry of the Interior, he played a major role in the drafting of the legislation for the emancipation of the serfs (see page 50), but was dismissed for the radicalism of his views in 1861.

**Patrons:** Those who could offer jobs, promotion or favours to other individuals

**Paternalism:** 'Fatherly' attitude shown by a ruler or government. All decisions are made for the people, thus taking away personal responsibility.



1. Outline the means by which the Tsar maintained his control in Russia in the first half of the 19th century?

2. Summarise the forces that resisted liberal and modernising reforms in Russia at the opening of Alexander II's reign?

3. On what issues did 'slavophiles' and 'westernisers' disagree in 19th-century Russia?

1836) and satirised the institution of serfdom in his novel *Dead Souls* (1842). The publication of 224 new magazines from 1826 to 1854 indicates that ideas continued to circulate in Russia during the reign of Nicholas I, even if the Tsar remained unmoved by most of them. Similarly, the number of university students in Russia doubled between 1836 and 1848. This was mainly due to the government's desire to educate an administrative élite, but inevitably a proportion of this group would learn to think for themselves. Indeed, one of the most important developments of Nicholas' later years was the emergence of a group identified as the 'enlightened bureaucrats'. These younger officials emerged from the education system into official positions, fully aware of some of the weaknesses of the Russian system. They were eager to remedy them if their political masters would permit it. The Milyutin brothers, Dmitri and Nikolai, fit into this category. They found influential **patrons** in such major political figures as Count Lev Perovski, the Minister of Internal Affairs, and Nicholas' younger son, the Grand Duke Constantine Nikolaevich.

The greatest weakness of such thinkers was that they had no alternative to Tsarist autocracy, but merely sought to give it a more humane, or a more efficient form. They were powerless as long as the Tsar refused to entertain their arguments. Nicholas steadfastly refused to do so, not because he rejected change, but because he remained extremely wary about the means of change. As the historian David Saunders (1992) concludes, 'the Tsar knew that changes had to be undertaken, but was determined not to allow them to be promoted by any movement or group beyond the control of the government. He believed that reform could be achieved by the government acting alone.' Nevertheless, the last years of Nicholas I's reign remained unpromising for the westernisers. The European revolutions of 1848–49 destroyed any positive elements that remained in the Tsar's **paternalism** and he reacted sternly against any hint of liberalism within Russia. The campaign against any freedom of thought or expression was typified by the formation of the Buturlin Committee to supervise and regulate the work of the existing censors, and by the attack (April 1849) upon the intellectual circle of M.V. Petrashevsky. This circle was influenced by the works of the French socialists, and included in its ranks the young writer Feodor Dostoevsky. With the appointment of a new Minister of Education, Platon Shirinsky-Shikhmatov, school fees were duly raised, the number of university students was reduced (from 4,600 in 1848 to 3,600 in 1854), and the study of such 'dangerous' subjects as philosophy and European constitutional law was suppressed.