

The History of Russia: The Road to the Revolutions

A Brief History of Russia, part 3

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Region: [Russia and FSU](#)

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Introduction

Part 2 of this series was an attempt to explain how Russia progressively asserted itself on the international stage. As for the present part, it will deal with the long downfall of tsarism during the nineteenth century which eventually resulted in the Russian Revolutions. We may use the plural here, because of the 1905 and February Revolutions, little known compared to the October one but they have been instrumental nevertheless, as it will hopefully be shown in the next part of this series.

Napoleon made a major mistake when he declared war on Russia over a dispute with Tsar Alexander I in 1812. Unable to decisively defeat the Russian army, he attempted to seize Moscow at the onset of winter. But his troops were unprepared for winter warfare especially in the harsh Russian weather and thousands of French soldiers were killed by peasant guerrilla fighters as a result. Alexander became known as the 'Savior of Europe' and he participated in the redrawing of the European map at the Congress of Vienna (1815), with his fellow allied statesmen Klemens von Metternich (Prince of Austria), Viscount Castlereagh (Foreign Minister of England) and Karl von Hardenberg (Chancellor of Prussia). [1]

Thanks to this prestigious position as the power that defeated Napoleonic France, the Russian Empire would play a leading political role in the next century. However, the upholding of serfdom prevented any economic progress in Russia. Indeed, in the meantime West European economic growth accelerated during the Industrial Revolution through sea trade and colonialism while Russia kept being an underdeveloped nation, thereby creating new problems for the empire as a great power. In fact, Russia's great power status concealed its economic backwardness, which would be a key (if not the main) factor in the engagement of the revolutionary process. [2]

Moreover, following the defeat of Napoleon, Alexander I was willing to discuss constitutional reforms but only a few were introduced, meaning no dramatic changes were attempted, which was of course another reason for public discontent. [3]

The Decembrist Revolt and its Intellectual Aftermath

Alexander I was succeeded by his younger brother, Nicholas I, who ruled from 1825 to 1855. At the beginning of his rule, he was challenged by an uprising known as the Decembrist Revolt. The background of this protest laid in the Napoleonic Wars, when a handful of Russian officers traveled across Europe, where they were exposed to liberalism. It encouraged them to seek change on their return to autocratic Russia. Therefore, the Decembrist Revolt of 1825 has been the output of a small circle of army officers and liberal nobles who wanted to install Nicholas' brother as a constitutional monarch, the English

political system being considered by West European elites of that time as the highest available standard.

[4] Unfortunately for them, the revolt was easily smashed, leading Nicholas to turn away from the Westernization program begun by Peter the Great and to coin the doctrine “Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality”. [5] Then in 1831 he crushed a major revolt in Congress Poland, which would be followed by another significant Polish and Lithuanian uprising in 1863. [6]

In this context, Mikhail Bakunin emerged as the father of anarchism. In 1842, he moved to Western Europe where he became active in the early socialist movement. In particular, he took part in the May Uprising in Dresden in 1849, joining forces with Karl Marx despite significant ideological differences. [7]

The debate over Russia’s political direction has existed since Peter the Great’s reforms (see part 2 of this series). However, in the course of the nineteenth century this question became more and more urgent.

The Slavophiles opposed bureaucracy and preferred the collectivism of the medieval Russian *mir* (i.e village community) to the individualism advocated by Western philosophers and the “enlightened” elite that promoted such ideas. Still, Russia has been forced into involvement in the affairs of Europe, as part of the “Holy Alliance” designed as the “Policeman of Europe” since the war against Napoleon (a move that sounds like a foretaste of NATO, as pointed out by Bertrand Badie). [8]

But in order to be the policeman of Europe, the Holy alliance needed large armies. Therefore, Russia supplied the forces needed by the Holy Alliance to quell the revolutionary uprisings in Europe in 1848 and 1849, which would become known as the Spring of Nations. [9]

In exchange, Nicholas I expected that the other great powers would leave Russia free to deal with the Ottoman Empire, considered as the “sick man of Europe” by the tsar. Some observers including Karl Marx and Frederick Engels predicted that there would be a Russo-Turkish War soon. Marx and Engels predicted that any conflict between these two nations would necessarily turn into a European War. [10]

One year before the death of Nicholas I, Russia became involved in the Crimean War. After defeating Napoleon, Russia was regarded as militarily invincible, but the reverses it suffered during the Crimean War exposed the weakness of Nicholas’ regime. [11]

Political Shifts During Alexander II’s Reign

In 1855, Alexander II came to the throne when desire for reform had become widespread. The most urgent issue facing the Government was that of serfdom. Indeed, four years after the coronation of the new tsar there were around 35% of serfs within the Russian population. [12]

The emancipation of the serfs in 1861 can be considered as one of the most important events in Russian history, because it marked the beginning of the fall of the landed aristocracy, who has managed to secure a monopoly on power since the creation of the Russian state. The freed peasants bought land from the landowners with state assistance but these properties were owned collectively by the *mir*, the village community, which divided them among the peasants. This move can be seen as a first attempt at collectivizing

lands, which would one of the main policies undertaken during the first half of the USSR's lifetime [13]

Then, Alexander II reformed the military service and the judiciary system in 1864. In general, the judicial system was quite effective but the government lacked cultural influence and finances to extend the court system to villages, where traditional justice prevailed with minimal interference from provincial officials. He abolished capital punishment and decided to mold the Russian judicial system after contemporary French and German law, which means that each case had to be decided on its merits and not on precedents. This approach has remained in place ever since. [14] He also introduced local self-governments (*zemstva*) for the rural districts and towns, made up of representatives of all classes who were in charge of health, education, transport facilities, food supply, and other issues. It was during Alexander's reign that education became widespread and elected city councils (*duma*) dominated by property owners were formed in 1870. The *zemstva* and *duma* raised taxes to support their activities. [15]

Moreover, the intensity of censorship decreased significantly and universities became autonomous, which greatly helped to expose corruption and thus improve the efficiency of public policies. Regarding financial regulation, Alexander II has to be credited along with the Ministry of Finance for setting up the State Bank in 1866, which supported railroad development. Besides, the Ministry of Finance founded the Peasant Land Bank in 1882 to enable enterprising farmers to acquire more land. However, the Ministry of Internal Affairs countered this policy by establishing the Nobles' Land Bank in 1885 to prevent foreclosures. [16]

Foreign Policy after the Treaty of Paris

In 1856, the Treaty of Paris put an end to the Crimean War between Russia and the Ottoman Empire, allied with France, the United Kingdom and the Kingdom of Sardinia. The "Black Sea clause", which demilitarized the area, came at a tremendous disadvantage to Russia, because it significantly decreased the naval threat it posed to the Ottomans. Besides, Russian protectorates of Moldavia and Wallachia acquired in the previous war were returned to the Ottoman Empire while the Great Powers pledged to respect the independence and territorial integrity of the Ottoman Empire. The treaty also caused a symbolic setback to Russia, as it gave the West European powers the duty of protecting Christians living in the Ottoman Empire, a role that was once attributed to Russia by the Treaty of Kuchuk-Kainarji (1774). [17]

As a result, Russia's primary goal during the beginning of Alexander II's reign was to alter the Treaty of Paris to regain naval access to the Black Sea. Russian statesmen considered the British Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire as opposed to that goal, therefore the tsar sought to maintain good relations with France, Prussia, and the United States. Nevertheless, following the Crimean War Russia revived its expansionist policies, which was not seen positively by the other great powers, especially Great Britain. The Russian army first moved to gain control of the Caucasus region, where the revolts of Muslim tribes (Chechens, Dagestanis and Circassians) had continued despite numerous Russian campaigns in the nineteenth century. In 1859, the forces of Baryatinsky captured Shamil (the Chechen leader) and the Russian army was able to resume its expansion into Central Asia that had begun under Nicholas I. By 1867, Russian forces had captured enough territory to form the *Guberniya* (i.e Governorate General) of Turkestan. Then, the Bukhara Khanate lost the crucial Samarkand area to Russian forces in 1868. To avoid a conflict with

the British Empire, which had strong interests in protecting India, Russia left independent the Bukharan territories located at the Afghan and Persian borders. The Central Asian khanates managed to retain a degree of autonomy until 1917. [18]

On the other hand, Russia followed Britain, France and the United States in establishing relations with Japan, and also obtained concessions from China with Britain and France after the Second Opium War (1856–1860). Indeed, under the Treaty of Aigun (1858) and the Treaty of Beijing (1860) China ceded to Russia extensive trading rights and regions located near the Ussuri and Amur rivers and allowed Russia to begin building a naval base and a port in Vladivostok. Regarding the foreign policy issues in Europe, Russia initially gave military support to France's anti-Austrian diplomacy, but the Franco-Russian entente weakened quickly and France even backed a Polish uprising against Russian rule in 1863. [19]

Afterwards, Russia got closer to Prussia by approving the unification of Germany in exchange for a revision of the Treaty of Paris and the remilitarization of the Black Sea. These diplomatic achievements came at the London conference (1871), following France's defeat in the Franco-Prussian War. After 1871, Germany united under Prussian leadership and became the strongest continental power in Europe. [20]

In 1873, Germany set up the League of the Three Emperors with Austria-Hungary and Russia to prevent them from forming an alliance with France. However, Russian and Austro-Hungarian ambitions clashed in the Balkans, where rivalries among anti-Ottoman feelings and Slavic nationalities erupted. In fact, throughout the 1870's Russian nationalist opinion became a serious domestic factor in favor of making Bulgaria and Serbia quasi-protectorates and "liberating" Balkan Christians from Ottoman rule. As a result, a kind of Russian crusade took place four centuries after the Siege of Belgrade (1456), which was the last western crusade, in order to prevent the Ottoman sultan Mehmed II from conquering Hungary. Then, in the late 1870s the Ottoman Empire and Russia fought each other again during the Russo-Turkish War. Within one year, Russian troops were nearing Constantinople, and the Ottomans chose to surrender. In 1878, nationalist diplomats and generals convinced Alexander II to force the Ottomans to sign the Treaty of San Stephano, which created an independent and enlarged Bulgaria that stretched into southwestern Balkans. [21]

However, Britain wouldn't let any other nation decide important international issues without its approval, that's why Britain threatened to declare war over the terms of the above-mentioned treaty. Russia couldn't afford an open conflict with the British Empire so the tsar backed down at the Congress of Berlin a few months later, where Russia agreed to the creation of a smaller Bulgaria. Russian nationalists were furious with Germany and Austria-Hungary for failing to back their country as part of the League of the Three Emperors, but the tsar agreed in terms to strengthen the alliance as well as Austro-Hungarian hegemony in the western Balkans. Despite this revived agreement, the previous war increased tension with Austria-Hungary, which also had ambitions in the region. [22]

During this period, Russia outstretched its empire into Central Asia, conquering the khanates of Bokhara, Khiva and Kokand (all located in present-day Uzbekistan), as well as the Trans-Caspian region. These regions were (and still are) rich in raw materials, therefore one can argue that the origins of Russian energy politics in Central Asia can be found in the period following the Crimean War. [23]

The Populist Movement, Intellectual Background of the Revolutions to Come

Alexander II's reforms, the lifting of state censorship in particular, enabled the formation and expression of diverging political thoughts. Indeed, the regime relied on state-controlled newspapers to gain support for its policies but nationalist, liberal and various radical writers also helped to mold public opinion against the imperial state and private property. From the 1860s through the 1880s, Russian radicals, collectively known as Populists, focused mainly on the peasantry. [24]

The leaders of the Populist movement included idealists and advocates of terrorism, i.e direct and violent action intended to achieve a religious or political goal, mostly regime change (although it is a basic concept, in this age of endless propaganda providing a simple yet precise definition of original terrorism in certainly no waste of time). In the 1860s, Chernyshevsky, who was arguably the most influential radical writer of the period, defended the thesis that Russia could move directly to socialism under the leadership of an individual of a superior nature who would guide a new and revolutionary generation. His main work, entitled *What Is to Do ?* would have a tremendous impact on the dynamics of the October Revolution, for the emergence of Lenin as uncontested leader of the movement is certainly no stranger to the myth of the "superior" individual. By the way, Lenin's 1902 political treaty bears the same title as Chernyshevsky's. [25]

One of the leading streams of the Populist movement became known as nihilism, a concept originally coined by Turgenev in *Fathers and Sons* (1862). The advocates of this doctrine aimed at the destruction of human institutions and laws, because of their supposedly inherent artificiality and corruption. The fundamental idea behind Russian nihilism is that the world lacks comprehensible moral ideals such as truth or value, or even a broad meaning allowing the definition of objectives. As a result, the nihilists shocked the Russian establishment, for they questioned all old values stemming from Western Enlightenment. However, they eventually moved beyond being purely philosophical to becoming major political forces by getting involved in the cause of reform. Their path was eased by the previous actions of the Decembrists (1825) and the financial and political distress caused by the Crimean War, which led a huge proportion of Russian people to lose faith in political institutions. [26]

Surprisingly, the nihilists attempted to convert the aristocracy to the cause of reform in the first place. But failing to do so, they turned to the peasants, hence the denomination of "Populist movement". It was based on the idea that the people carried the wisdom and ability to lead the nation.

Another noteworthy dissident to tsarism was Tkachev, who argued against marxists that a centralized revolutionary organization had to seize power before capitalism could fully develop. [27]

Eventually, anarchists had the most significant impact, killing prominent officials one after another, establishing anarchy as a powerful revolutionary force in the country. After several attempts, acting under the group name *Narodnaya Volya* ("People's will") they managed to murder Alexander II in 1881, on the very day he had approved a proposal to call a representative assembly to consider new reforms designed to meet revolutionary demands. [28]

Alexander III and the Reign of "Unlimited Autocracy"

The new tsar (1881-1894) took on Nicholas I's doctrine "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and National Character". Alexander III's belief was that his country's salvation relied on moving away from western ideas introduced in Russia by Peter the Great, for they were deemed subversive. The "Slavophiles" considered that a return to a simpler peasant society centered on the Orthodox faith would be beneficial, as opposed to the "pollution" generated in the West by materialism, atheism, and the new worship of science and technique in their supposed ability to solve all the problems faced by the human race. [29]

At that time, the most influential adviser in the Winter Palace was Pobedonostsev, the procurator of the Holy Synod (1880-1895), the highest governing body of the Russian Orthodox Church. His lessons dealt mainly with the political system: the message was that democracy should be considered as an unfit option, especially in its parliamentary variety, and that freedom of speech should be feared by the monarch. As a result, the tsar strengthened the security police (*Okhrana*) and placed it under the command of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. A witch hunt against revolutionaries began. [30]

On the other hand, Alexander III has to be credited for the introduction of labor legislation in 1882, which included both a sort of compliance body (the inspectorate of factories in charge of health and life saving regulations) and a regulation of working hours and child labor. He continued the longstanding imperial infrastructure policy as well, with the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway in 1891 as main achievement. [31]

Regarding foreign affairs, during Alexander III's reign Russia gained significant territorial and commercial concessions from China, completed the conquest of Central Asia undertaken by Peter the Great and reached an agreement with France to contain the growing power of Germany. For a short period of time, the tension between Russia and Germany remained at a low intensity, probably thanks to the latter's diplomatic support towards Russia when Great Britain expressed its concerns over the Russian occupation of Turkmen lands on the Afghan and Persian borders in 1881. [32]

In the meantime, the tsar's decision to sponsor the Bulgarian independence turned out to be unproductive, for Russia's continuing interference in domestic affairs fueled the Bulgarians' will to gain the support of their mighty neighbor, Austria-Hungary. In the ensuing dispute, Germany officially stood by Russia once again by concluding a bilateral defensive alliance, known as the Reinsurance Treaty of 1887. However, less than a year after the signature of this new agreement, Bismarck decided to forbid any further loan to Russia, with France becoming the latter's main financier. Bismarck would be dismissed in 1890, which marked the official end of the 25-years-lasting entente between Russia and Germany. Three years later, Russia entered into a joint military coalition with France aimed at matching the dual alliance formed by Austria-Hungary and Germany in 1879. [33]

Let's remark that as soon as 1893 the general power framework which led to World War I was already in place, although the possibility of the *Triple Entente* would need to wait until 1904 that Great Britain and France settle their dispute over colonial policy.

A Renewed Revolutionary Atmosphere under Nicholas II

Nicholas II, son of Alexander III, has been the last Russian tsar (1894-1917). While the country finally experienced the Industrial Revolution, high taxes and dreadful living conditions led to more frequent strikes and peasant unrest. [34]

In this context, a lot of political parties were created to address the issues unfolding from industrialization. In 1892, the nationalistic Polish Socialist Party was founded in Paris by some Russian Poles, to further the interests of their relatives who had suffered major educational and administrative Russification. Its stated final ambition was to reunite a divided Poland with the territories held by Germany, Russia and Austria-Hungary. Another important political movement was Social Democracy: in 1898, the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) was created and received support from Georgians and Latvians whereas the Finnish Social Democrats decided to remain an autonomous organization. To continue with ethnical and religious minorities, Armenians were generally inspired by both Balkan and Russian revolutionary traditions. Consequently, they were politically engaged in Russia and in the Ottoman Empire. Speaking of the Ottoman Empire, Russian Muslims tended to be influenced by pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic movements that were developing there and in Egypt as well.

However, at that time the largest radical movement in Russia was without contest the United Socialist Revolutionary Party (USRP), founded in 1901. Paradoxically, the most important event in Russian politics in the early 20th century did not occur within the USRP: in 1903, the RSDLP split into two wings, the “moderate” Mensheviks led by Martov and the radical Bolsheviks led by Lenin. The first was convinced that Russian socialism could grow gradually and peacefully and that tsarism should be succeeded by a democratic republic in which the socialists would cooperate with liberal parties. The latter advocated for the formation of a small elite of professional revolutionists who would strictly respect party discipline and whose mission would be to seize power by force in the name of the *proletariat*. [35]

Imperialist Competition in China

Alongside the denunciation of the harsh economic conditions of the people, opposition to imperialist policies was the main theme of Russian revolutionaries.

By the end of the 19th century, Russia itself was an imperialist power, whose alliance with France combined with the growing rivalry between Britain and Germany allowed to extend its reach in Asia, in China more precisely. In 1896, Witte (Minister of Finance) founded the Russo-Chinese Bank with the support of French capital. The newly created bank was aimed at financing the construction of a railroad across northern Manchuria to shorten the Trans-Siberian Railway. Moreover, Russia managed to acquire leases in Port Arthur and on the Liaotung Peninsula and began to build a trunk line from Harbin in central Manchuria to Port Arthur on the coast within two years. In the meantime, Germany and Great Britain respectively occupied the provinces of Kiaochao and Wei-Hai-Wei. [36]

China's reaction to foreign interference on its territory took the form of an armed popular uprising in Northern China, known as the Boxer Rebellion. A coalition of European powers, Russia, Japan and the United States came together to crush the revolt (some Russian forces were already stationed in China before the war to secure the railroads). A succession of battles including the one on Amur River and the Russian invasion of Central and Northern Manchuria (1900) can be seen as early developments of the upcoming Russo-Japanese War, which began officially when Japan opened hostilities at Port Arthur in 1904. The city was finally conquered one year later by Japanese forces, at the cost of a 60000 death toll.

These heavy casualties prevented Japan from pursuing Russian forces north of Mukden but a

few months later they destroyed the tsar's fleet at the Tsushima Straits, which was Russia's last hope in the war.

Indeed, diplomatic pressure and a growing social unrest at home forced Nicholas II to seek peace. Russia accepted mediation by Theodore Roosevelt, which resulted mainly in the acknowledgement of Japan's ascendancy in southern Manchuria and Korea. The disastrous performance of the Russian armed forces during the Russo-Japanese War was both a significant blow to the Russian State and a supplementary reason to challenge the tsar's authority ... [37]

Conclusion

Part 3 of this series was aimed at pointing out the political, economic and intellectual dynamic that would lead to the Russian Revolutions.

One of the instrumental moments on the path to the fall of the Romanov Dynasty has been Alexander III's decision not to continue the administrative and social reforms implemented by his father. Part 2 developed the long hesitation of the tsarist regime between Enlightenment-oriented ideals and autocratic rule. One can argue that after Alexander III's reign, the decision had been made. On the international stage, the Russian will to be recognized as the uncontested ruler of Central Asia and to get access to Chinese resources as well fueled the hostility of all the other major powers except France. In particular, the British Empire was busy enough containing fellow European colonial powers to accept the assertion of another contender in the "Eastern front" of the race for world domination.

The financial cost of this expansionist ambition combined with the economic backwardness of the country focused the attention of a new and talented generation of revolutionary thinkers, from anarchists to social-democrats (not to be confounded with modern impostors acting under the same denomination, who have nothing to do with socialism).

Part 4 will be dedicated to the successive revolutions that took place in Russia from 1905 to 1917 and to the ensuing civil war.

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Notes

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[2] Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark D. Steinberg, *A History of Russia*, Oxford University Press, 8th ed., 2010

[3] Ibid.

[4] It is common knowledge that English, French and German philosophers of the Enlightenment regarded England as the political promised land. For instance, Montesquieu stated in *The Spirit of Laws* (1748): "Britain is a nation that may be justly called a republic, disguised under the form of a monarchy".

[5] Nicholas V. Riasanovsky and Mark D. Steinberg, op. cit.

[6] Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland*, Vol. 2: 1795 to the Present, Columbia University Press, 2nd ed., 2005

[7] See textbooks on the history of political thought. In English, Alan Ryan's *On Politics: A History of Political Thought: From Herodotus to the Present* (Liveright, 2012) is considered as an excellent work. Personally, throughout my studies I have been using : Pascal Ory, *Nouvelle histoire des idées politiques*, Hachette Littérature, 1989 and Henri Denis, *Histoire de la pensée économique*, PUF, 2008

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[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

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