

## PART 1: AUTOCRACY, REFORM AND REVOLUTION: RUSSIA, 1855–1917

# 1 Trying to preserve autocracy, 1855–1894



In this section, we will examine the nature of political authority in Russia from 1855 to 1894, considering some of the changes that were taking place and how these changes began to affect the relationship between the people and their Tsar. We will look into:

- the nature of autocracy in Russia, including social divisions and the cultural influences of the Church
- the impact of the Crimean War on Russia
- attempts to reform Russia
- the governance of Russia under Alexander II and Alexander III
- the Tsars' treatment of ethnic minorities
- the growth of opposition
- the economy.

## Introduction to Tsarist Russia

Russian political life was overwhelmingly the preserve of social elites in the 19th century under the Romanov dynasty. Ordinary people played almost no role in the institutions that governed Russia and this was to remain the case until 1917 when Tsardom fell. The imposition of **autocracy** on Russia changed little under

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## Key terms

**Radical:** someone who believes in drastic change away from traditions or government policy.

**Russification:** a policy undertaken by the Tsars to assimilate ethnic minorities and different nationalities within Imperial Russia. The policy meant forcing minorities to give up their language and aspects of their culture or religion.



## Speak like a historian

Historians often use the word ‘backwardness’ to describe Russia in the 19th century. The word was first used by an economic theorist called Alexander Gerschenkron, who suggested Russia was ‘backward’ economically because there was a reliance on agriculture as the main source of income, because banks rather than private investors were relied upon to invest in enterprise, and because new technologies were limited in use.

Alexander II (the 16th Romanov Emperor), who ruled 1855–1881, even as he oversaw the most dramatic domestic reform witnessed in Russia in 200 years: for example, he abolished serfdom, introduced trial by jury and relaxed censorship. He was assassinated in 1881 by a **radical** group that believed his reforms were too conservative, but autocracy survived, the throne successfully passing to his son, Alexander III.

Alexander III did not want to suffer the same fate as his father, and he imposed autocracy even more ruthlessly as police powers were extended and Russia’s conservative traditions were reinforced. Especially since an earlier assassination attempt on Alexander II in 1866, ethnic minorities and, in particular, the Jewish community had borne the brunt of the imperial government’s attempts to affirm the three goals of autocracy, religious orthodoxy and nationality (see the section ‘Political authority and the state of Russia: autocracy’). These minorities became targets for discrimination under a policy that became known as **Russification**. This discrimination intensified under Alexander III.

On his deathbed in 1855, Tsar Nicholas I said to his son and heir: ‘I am passing command to you that is not in desirable order. I am leaving you many disappointments and cares. Hold it like that!’<sup>1</sup>. At 36 years old, Alexander II was to inherit the largest power in the world – but with it the largest problems. Russia was on the brink of defeat to Britain and France in the Crimean War and couldn’t even afford to repay the national debt. The regime was facing increasingly frequent riots by peasants in rural areas and the emergent middle classes were becoming more critical of Russia’s evident political and economic ‘backwardness’. The 1.5 million subjugated minorities on the fringes of the empire were beginning to call for self-determination and there was genuine fear that the 59 million peasants living in rural Russia were a real threat to the Tsar’s authority. It was left to Alexander II to maintain a difficult balancing act: modernising Russia whilst retaining autocratic power.

### Political authority and the state of Russia: autocracy

Autocratic rule was not unique to Russia. This system of government, in which solely the sovereign exercises supreme power, had existed in France and Britain, too, but by 1855 Russia was the last great autocratic state in Europe. Tsarist imperial government had been developed under Peter the Great (1682–1725) at a time when there was little alternative to centralised authority. Russia was a vast country; poor roads, no railways and an unfavourable climate meant that mid-17th-century travellers could expect to travel approximately just 50 miles in 24 hours, travelling by horse-drawn carriage. Unprecedented territorial expansion during the 19th century did not alter Russian autocracy; in fact, it only heightened the perceived need for highly centralised authority. In 1900, Italy and France spent more than twice as much per capita as Russia on policing; Russia, whose population was spread thinly over vast areas, possessed only four state officials for every 1000 inhabitants. Lacking a network of state control, the government became reliant upon the infrastructure of the Orthodox Church to enforce its authority. Tsars did not want to see their power curtailed and they were supported by officials whose careers and authority depended on the maintenance of the

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status quo. This provided a powerful motivation to obstruct change – resulting in systemic inertia.

Therefore, by 1855 little had changed; the Tsars had established a form of autocracy that was uniquely powerful in Europe, and Alexander II's political authority within Russia was virtually unbounded, as it was believed that the Tsar was ordained to his position by God. In 1833 Tsar Nicholas I had set out the doctrine of 'Official Nationality', which was based on autocracy in government, orthodoxy in religion and Russian nationalism. The final three Tsars – Alexander II, Alexander III and Nicholas II – always retained their allegiance to this doctrine, and continued to implement dramatic shifts in policy without popular consent. As the historian Richard Pipes suggests, the final three Tsars seemed to lack any method for resolving political crisis other than repression. Indeed, the styles of government that they imposed seemed to reflect the character of the men themselves.

The concept of autocracy had important implications for the Russian people. For example, the nature of law in Tsarist Russia was very different to the rest of Europe. In the West it became accepted that the monarch was subject to the same laws that governed the behaviour of the population – known as the rule of law. This was never accepted in Russia, where the law was something imposed on the population by the state, embodied by the sovereign. In this sense, the Russian Tsars were above the law. The Tsars' representatives were able to act with impunity in passing judgement on any particular issue or meting out punishments. The historian Peter Waldron (1997) suggests that this system led to widespread corruption. The autocratic system permeated Russian society from the Tsar himself to the lowliest rural tax collector, and every government official at every level knew that they could act without risk of consequence in their dealings as an agent of the state. For Alexander II, this might mean surrendering in a war without taking advice; for a rural bureaucrat, it might mean imprisoning a peasant without evidence.

### Orthodoxy and the role of the Church

Autocracy and the preservation of Tsarist authority represented the project at the heart of the Romanov monarchy. However, no regime could rest on politics alone: the Tsars needed to win the hearts of their people. Religion played the crucial role here. The Russian Orthodox Church had been established in the 15th century in a split from the eastern Byzantine Church. The Russian Church reflected the principles of the state, representing that Russia possessed a particular spiritual role in the Christian world. The Church was governed by the Holy Synod, chaired by a government minister, and the Tsar's family had to be members by law. The Tsar had absolute power over Church finance and appointments. The Orthodox Church made spirited efforts to convert people to Orthodoxy from other religions, motivated by the need to integrate new populations into the empire to serve the interests of both Church and state. Orthodoxy played a significant role in legitimising the imperial regime. Nicholas I oversaw the widespread construction of Orthodox churches across the empire and an extension of religious rituals in government, cementing the link between Church and state. Golden domes and minarets still dominate the skylines of many Russian towns.

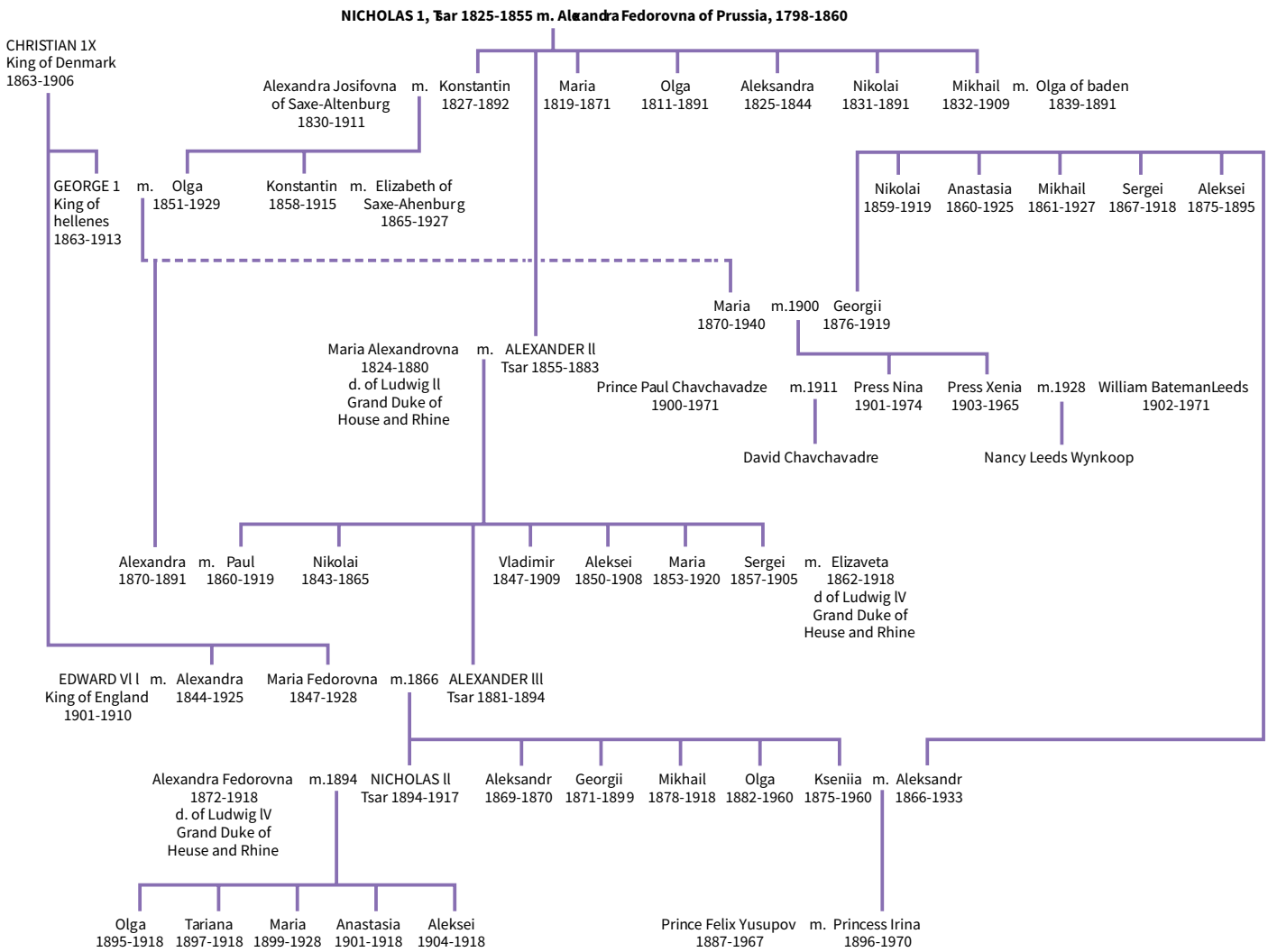


**Figure 1.1:** Alexander II c.1860

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Nationalism

On 26 December 1825, a group of aristocrats led by Russian army officers, along with about 3000 soldiers, staged a protest in Senate Square, St Petersburg, against Nicholas I’s assumption of the throne and in support of his elder brother, Constantine, who in fact had renounced his claim to the throne. The protest was brutally suppressed by Nicholas I, and the five ringleaders of the ‘Decembrists’ (as the group came to be called) were hanged. These events showed the Tsarist regime that it was not just the peasants they had to fear, but also elements of the aristocracy and the army – traditionally the regime’s closest allies. The Romanov tradition was to paint any threat to the regime as ‘un-Russian’. This most potent means of bringing people together under the authority of the Tsar was what became known as the doctrine of ‘Official Nationality’. The doctrine stood for the application of Orthodoxy and autocracy and suggested the Russian monarchy had a historic destiny to direct the development of its subjects. Linked to this was a belief that Russia and her people were distinctly different to Europeans.



**Figure 1.2:** The family tree above shows the House of Romanov from Nicholas I to the last Tsar, Nicholas II. The Romanovs had ruled Russia for almost 250 years by the time Alexander II came to the throne.

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Figure 1.3 shows a map that gives an impression of the size of the Russian Empire, highlighting the areas where some of the different nationalities lived. The historian Dominic Lieven (1999) has suggested that, of all the borderlands, Ukraine and Belorussia were most crucial to the empire<sup>2</sup>. They lay across the main invasion routes from the West, where Imperial Russia's most powerful and dangerous enemies were. They shielded the empire's capitals and its political and economic heartland.



**Figure 1.3:** The Russian Empire c.1850.

Russia was a state dominated by the rural world and this was fundamental to her identity. 'Slavophiles' embodied this belief, emphasising Russian uniqueness and rejecting Western socio-economic development. This view dominated intellectual thought until the 19th century, when a new ideology started to infiltrate Russia from the West. The Russian empire had expanded so much by the 1850s that people in the western states now lived 4500 miles away from those living on the empire's Pacific coastline. Ultimately, Russia could not remain immune from the wider processes of industrialisation that had been sweeping through Europe since the 1750s. 'Westernisers' (or '*progressives*' to use common parlance) started to argue that Russia needed to imitate Europe and industrialise, encouraging peasants to move to the cities. They argued that Russia was lagging behind due to 'Slavophile' (reactionary) beliefs. To what extent Russia should engage with European ideas was a dilemma Alexander II could not ignore when he took the throne in 1855.

When studying Russia during this period, it is important to note the European context. European states, above all Britain and France had begun industrialisation to varying degrees during the 18th century, but the process had begun to

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accelerate in the first half of the 19th century. Russia could not maintain her status as a major power without industrialising. To an extent, this problem plagued every Russian leader up to the end of this study in 1964.

### The political, social and economic condition of Russia in 1855

When Alexander II succeeded to the throne the nobility were almost exclusively responsible for the administration of the governance of Russia. The Tsarist government was made up of an Imperial State Council and 13 ministries, which oversaw areas such as education, internal affairs, the military, and the economy. The State Council was no more than an advisory body in reality, and was often referred to as a comfortable place for civil servants to retire to. The 13 ministries were often in competition with each other, and they relied upon the autocratic Tsar to authorise policies, as they reported directly to him. This meant the efficiency of government depended largely on the strength of the Tsar's commitment to governing. With no representative body, popular participation in politics was non-existent and there was no single institution to co-ordinate the work of government, which made governing a complex and tiresome task for the Tsar. In efforts to control his administration, Nicholas I asked for reports from the ministries every year. In 1849, it was recorded that the Ministry of the Interior alone produced 31,122,211 official papers, 165,000 of them 'urgent'. This cumbersome, bureaucratic machine meant that progress was at best slow and at worst non-existent. Alexander II had worked on the Imperial State Council for 10 years prior to becoming Tsar. He was acutely aware of the deficiencies of the system of government, as well as the calls for more representative government from 'Westernisers', who witnessed Western Europeans being granted participation in their 'enlightened' political systems and began to demand similar change in Russia.

This pattern was mirrored in local government, where institutions were largely disparate and inefficient. Local government existed on three levels: province, district and rural district. Russia was divided into 50 provinces, each province being divided into 20 districts. Each province had a governor who was directly responsible to the Tsar. He could deal with up to 100 000 documents a year if he completed his work diligently. Unsurprisingly, the quality and amount of work produced by governors varied greatly. No such chain of command existed in the districts, which were led by a 'marshal of the nobility', who oversaw approximately 200 000 people and was elected by fellow nobles. Although the system of government was incredibly inefficient, it did ensure that the nobility were loyal to the regime and exercised control in the provinces on behalf of the Tsar.

### The Third Section

The third element of Russian government, the 'Third Section', was responsible for political security. It conducted surveillance and gathered information on political dissidents, religious schismatics (objectors) and foreigners. It had the power to banish suspected political criminals to remote regions and also operated prisons. It was furthermore responsible for prosecuting counterfeiters of money and official documents, and for conducting censorship. The Third Section functioned in conjunction with the Corps of Gendarmes (formed in 1836), a well-organised military force that operated throughout the empire, and a network of anonymous