Russia in the 19th Century

Geography, social structure & political structure
Russia - 1900
The Russian Empire in 1913
as it was during the reign of Nicholas II
Geography & history

- Vast empire spanning two continents – Europe & Asia.
- West to east >4000 miles
  - USA could fit 2½ times, Britain nearly 100 times.
  - Night on one side of Russia / Day on the other.
- Communications difficult.
- Few paved roads.
  - Outside main cities, most roads = hard-packed earth.
  - Travel by road = slow, winter often impassable.
  - Longer journeys = rivers & rail.
    - Enormous growth of railways 1890s, however, by 1900 Russia only as much railway as Britain.
    - Most in European Russia.
    - Only line of communication across vast eastern expanse = Trans-Siberian railway.
Geography & history

• 1/6 of world’s total land – vast range of landscapes.
  • Northern Russia = Tundra.
  • South of tundra = Taiga – miles & miles impenetrable forest.
  • Russian steppes = vast grassland
  • South = desert
• Much of country = beautiful / little of it could be used for farming
• Main ag areas = European Russia.
• Beyond Ural mountains wild = frontier settlements like wild west.
• Size & diversity of empire made it difficult to govern.
Society

• 130 million people
• Most European Russia.
• Less than half pop. = Russians.
  • Rest = people conquered by Russians.
  • Empire built up over centuries.
  • Many did not speak Russian & were illiterate.
  • Many national groups resentful of Russian control
    • Russification
    • Diversity of cultures, languages & religions.

• Social classes:
  • Peasants = 84%
  • Urban works = 4%
  • Military = 5%
  • Govt. officials = 4%
  • Priests 1%
  • Nobility 1.5%
  • Merchants 0.5%

• 70% of pop. Members of official Orthodox Church.
  • 9% Roman Catholic & 11% Muslim.
Social structure

• Peasants:
  • = most of pop.
  • Life = hard.
  • Main food = grain into rye bread or porridge & cabbage soup.
    • Fish common, meat rare.
  • Harvests good = food to go around.
  • Harvests bad = starvation & disease.
    • 400,000 died 1891 (crop failure + cholera).
  • Ave. life expect. <40 years.
  • Reg. epidemics (typhus, diphtheria, syphilis)
Peasants

• Agriculture methods backward & inefficient.
• Main problem = land = not enough.
• Until 1861 most peasants = serfs (owned by their masters).
  • 1861 serfs were freed, allocated a share of land they could buy from govt.
  • Land often barely enough to survive + crippling debt to govt.
• Peasants angry landowners / nobles kept so much land after 1861.
• Situation getting worse by 1900.
• Pop. Increased 50% bet. 1860 & 1897.
Nobility

• 1% of pop. owned nearly 25% of land.

• Some extremely rich, large estates, employed people to run.

• Spent most of year in Moscow / St Petersburg.
The Middle Classes

• 1900, w devel. industry = new class of bankers, merchants, rich capitalists who owned industrial works.

• St Petersburg & Moscow = main centres commerce & textile ind.

• Link bet. rich businessman & govt. very strong.
  • Govt. gave them big contracts & loans.

• Life very good.
Clergy

• 0.5% pop. but part of hugely influential Orthodox Church – underpinned the Tsarist regime.

• Orthodox Church closely aligned with tsarist system.

• Deeply conservative.
The workers

- Life in back streets St Petersburg & Moscow & other cities very different for people in new industries.
- Living conditions poor.
- Cheap wooden lodging houses or large tenement buildings.
- Food poor.
- Vodka.
- Wages low
- Working conditions poor.
- Industrial centres away from cities, workers often in barracks next to factories.
- Many factories = 24hrs / day.
- Many workers = young male peasants forced off land.
- Large # women employed in textile factories Moscow & St Petersburg.
- Low level of industry @1900 but growing fast.
Political structure

- Tsarist Russia = autocracy
- Romanov dynasty.
- Nicholas II 1894.
  - Autocrat – absolute power, not elected.
  - Council of ministers to help rule but Tsar = important decisions.
  - Russia = so large = thousands civil servants from top officials down to tax collectors.
  - Bureaucracy = painfully slow.
  - Civil servants wages so low = bribery & corruption.
- No parliament to represent people’s views.
- Newspaper & books censored.
- Opposition not tolerated.
- Okhrana / Secret Police
- Strikes, protests or riots (often took place in times of famine) = soldiers used to restore order.
  - Stopped demonstrations with brutality.
Political structure

• Article 1 of the Fundamental Laws, 1832:
  ‘The Emperor of all the Russians is an autocratic and unlimited monarch; God himself ordains that all must bow before his supreme power, not only out of fear but also out of conscience.’
The spirit of change: Russia in revolution p.13-14.

• Remained isolated & untouched by many events such as French Rev. & provocative ideas.
  • Few people able to travel & therefore see inadequacies
  • Attempted coups/rev.s 1825, 1830-31 & 1863-64.
  • Some inflow of Western ideas though, spread by Russian intellectuals / intelligentsia.

• To most Westerners Russia seemed last refuge of true autocracy in 19th C Europe.

• Change came slowly in latter half of 19th C.
  • Structure of Tsarism attacked on many occasions, yet conserve. forces supporting Tsar & his govt. remained strong & in control.
Tsar’s - the rulers of russia

- Romanov’s – rulers of Russia for many centuries.
- 1900 – Tsar Nicholas II ruler – Autocrat.
  - Not elected but born into power. He, and most other Russians, believed that he had a divine right to rule - that he had been chosen by God.
  - Did not need to consult with any one else to make decisions, new laws or initiate new programs of reform.
  - No parliament - to represent the views of the people
  - Tsar - power base 10% of people - aristocrats - church - military - bureaucracy
  - Bureaucracy - civil servants - was massive - Russia so large it was a massive task to collect taxes and run country.
  - Tsar censored newspapers and books
  - Education was via church
  - Okhrana - secret police - used to stop protests or opposers to Tsar’s rule
  - Siberia - prison camps
Nicholas II - the last tsar

- Devoted family man
- Ruled by his wife - the Tsarina - German women named Alexandra
- Deeply religious
- Kind to those around him yet ruthless
- Anti-Jewish
- Good intentions but not a born leader
- No idea what the majority of Russian’s lived liked
- Had no idea of the problems of his people or how to cope with them.
Orthodox Church

• branch of Christianity
• religion of Russia as was the religion of the Tsars.
• closely linked to Tsar and supported his way of ruling.
• taught that Tsar undisputed leader of Russia, was the head of the Church & God’s chosen representative on Earth.
  • Peasants thought of Tsar as ‘little father’.

• Only education peasants could receive via church - learnt what the church and the Tsar wanted them to learn.
  • Church & Tsar controlled education - reading, writing and as a result knowledge.
The photographs of Russian chemist and photographer, Sergei Mikhailovich Prokudin-Gorskii, show Russia on the eve of World War I and the coming of the revolution. From 1909-1912 and again in 1915, Prokudin-Gorskii travelled across the Russian Empire, documenting life, landscapes and the work of Russsian people. His images were to be a photographic survey of the time.