

## Reform and Revolution in Russia

### Focus Questions

- What geographical and cultural factors made Russia different from the rest of Europe?
- What were the characteristics of Russian domestic and foreign policies?
- What types of reform movements occurred in Russia, and what were their results?

By the mid-1800s Russia had the largest territory and population of any European nation. Yet industrial development, which so strengthened the West, lagged in Russia. Most of the country's extensive natural resources lay undeveloped. Ports were blocked by ice for much of the year, or exits from the seas were controlled by other countries, leaving Russia virtually landlocked. This situation had led to many Russian attempts to win access to the Mediterranean, past Constantinople and the Ottoman-controlled Dardanelles. However, these efforts led to conflicts with the Ottoman Empire.

Unlike Great Britain or France, Russia lacked a homogeneous population. The huge Russian Empire included a great variety of peoples and national groups. Although the largest ethnic groups in the European part of Russia—the Belorussian or White Russian group in the west, the Ukrainians in the agricultural south, and the Great Russians in north and central Russia—were related groups descended from Slavic ancestors, each had its own language.

customs, and history. These main Slavic groups were also divided by vast geography. Scattered throughout the empire were numerous racial, national, and religious minorities speaking many languages. Many of these groups, such as the Poles and Finns, had been conquered by the Russians and disliked Russian rule.

### **Russian Domestic and Foreign Policies**

The liberal movement that influenced other European nations so strongly in the 1800s made little progress in Russia. The czar ruled the huge Russian Empire as an **autocrat**, one who holds absolute power. Although the czars tried to maintain autocracy, liberal political developments in Europe affected Russia.

Russia had struggled with the influence of the West from before the time of Peter the Great a century earlier. Nationalistic ideas appealed to the Russian minorities, especially to the strongly patriotic Poles and Finns. By the early 1800s, liberalism began to attract some of the educated members of the Russian aristocracy.

Faced with problems caused by liberal ideas and restless nationalities, the czars took harsh measures. To counteract liberalism the government strictly censored speech and the press and rejected all demands for a constitution. In the 1830s Czar Nicholas I began a program of "**Russification**." This program forced non-Russian peoples in the empire to use the Russian language, accept the Orthodox religion, and adopt Russian customs.

Russian foreign policy had two primary features. (1) In the Balkans, Russia promoted **Pan-Slavism**—the union of all Slavic peoples under Russian leadership. (2) Elsewhere, Russia sought to continue expansion, begun under the first czars, east into Asia and south toward the Ottoman Empire. Expansion southward, however, was halted with a defeat in the Crimean War in the 1850s. Russia lost crucial border territory.

### **Alexander II and Reforms**

Alexander II became czar in 1855. Although basically conservative and autocratic, Alexander cared about public opinion, and he responded, though cautiously, to the movement for freedom for all serfs. His actions were the first steps toward modernization for a country that realized its backwardness with its defeat in the Crimea.

Serfdom had taken a different form in Russia than it had in the rest of Europe. After the time of Peter the Great, serfs were bound to persons and not to the

land. They could not leave their villages or masters' homes unless permitted to do so by their owners or ordered to do so by government officials. Although unable to move freely, and largely under the control of their masters, serfs still held a few civil rights such as the right to sue in court.

Toward the middle of the 1800s, reform of serfdom became clearly necessary. Serfdom obstructed development by restricting the labor pool. Factory owners would benefit if the serfs were freed. The industrialists did not believe in liberal ideas; they simply needed workers for their factories. Some nobles who felt a great nation should not sanction the ownership of people also began to support a campaign against serfdom. Another group of government officials, most notably in the ministry of the interior, sought reform for the serfs and convinced Alexander II to consider abolishing this institution.

In 1861 Alexander II issued the **Emancipation Edict**, which freed all serfs. The czar had concluded "it is better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait until the serfs begin to liberate themselves from below." The terms of the edict compensated nobles for land, which peasants could buy in small tracts from the government.

Emancipation did not really improve conditions for the former serfs. Some of the land they had previously farmed was sold to them in tiny plots at high prices. Most freed serfs could not afford to buy enough land to earn the payments for the land, pay taxes, and still make a living. Therefore, they had to rent more land from their former owners—and rents were high. Some former serfs, unable to either buy or rent land, moved to growing towns and cities, where they became cheap sources of labor for factories.

Alexander II attempted other liberal reforms, looking to modernize his nation. Beginning in 1864 he allowed rural districts to elect *zemstvos*. These were councils, at the provincial and county levels, which were elected by all classes, including peasants. *Zemstvos* could levy taxes and controlled programs such as public health, education, assistance for the poor, local crafts, and some public works programs.

Alexander also reformed the courts. Civil and criminal courts were modeled after their European counterparts, and appeals courts were instituted, as were local justices of the peace. Delay and corruption declined in the court system. However, the ministry of the interior still had power beyond the reach of the courts in political cases.

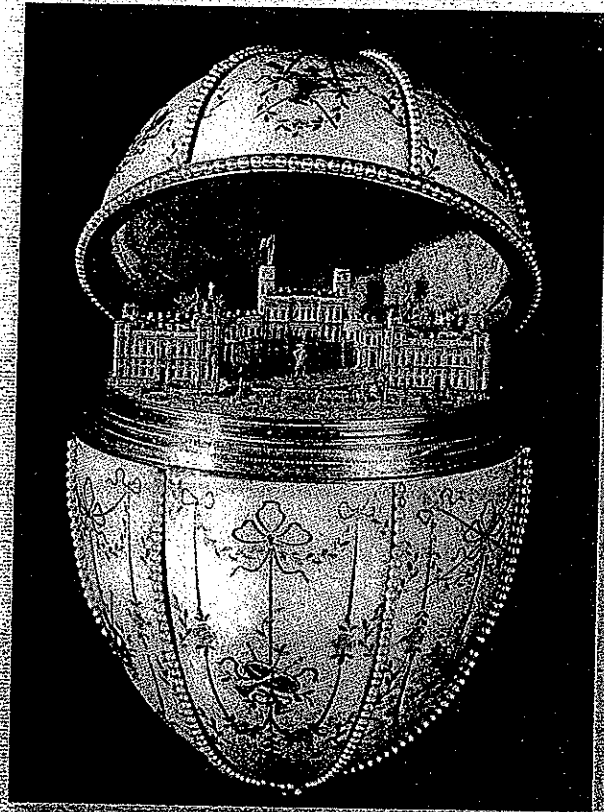


### Fabergé Egg

This unusual piece of art is an enameled gold egg containing a completely accurate model of the Gatchina Palace near St. Petersburg. Only five inches high, it even includes a tiny flag flying from the palace tower. It is decorated with pearls and diamonds. Historians think this egg was given to the mother of Czar Nicholas II on Easter morning, 1902. It was customary for the Russian royal family to exchange eggs like this one every Easter. An egg is an ancient symbol of rebirth or renewed life, expressed in Christianity as the resurrection of Jesus at Easter.

The Gatchina egg, as it is called, was created in the jewelry firm of Carl Fabergé in St. Petersburg. Founded in 1842, this company employed the finest jewelers and goldsmiths in all of Europe. These artisans also designed magnificent boxes, clocks, tableware, and jewelry. It was the series of eggs, however, that secured Fabergé's reputation. Most of the eggs were signed by Michael Perchin, who was one of the few native Russians employed by Fabergé.

The famed House of Fabergé was closed in 1918 by officials of the new government. In order to raise money, the government sold all but 10 of the eggs. Today, many of these priceless eggs are housed in private collections and museums.



The policies of reform did not please everyone. Conservatives opposed them and tried to convince the czar that such actions endangered the position of the ruler and the nobles, and thus the stability of the nation. Liberals considered Alexander's reforms to be mere first steps and pointed out the need for further changes. Radicals criticized Alexander even more strongly.

#### Radicals and Government Reaction

Several groups carried on radical political activity in Russia. Many middle and upper-class intellectuals became nihilists—from the Latin word *nihil*, meaning "nothing"—in the 1860s. They believed a just society could be created only by abolishing the existing political, economic, and social structures and building a completely new Russia.

In the 1870s another group, the Populists, urged their followers to live among peasants as teachers and doctors. Some believed that the large estates of the nobles should be seized and the land divided among the peasants. After the government arrested many Populists, some Russian radicals turned to violent action, splitting off to a movement called **People's Will**. These radicals used **terrorism**—bombings and assassinations by political groups—to try to force the government to grant their demands.

Radical activity gradually made Alexander II more conservative. The first attempt on his life was made in 1866, and after this attempt, he turned to repressive measures. Still, reforms continued. In 1870, major cities were granted limited elected government and in 1874 military reforms were instituted. After

repeated assassination attempts, which Alexander faced with great courage, he was killed by a bomb attack by People's Will in 1881.

The assassination of Alexander II ended liberal reform and led to an era of intensive repression. Alexander III and his successor, Nicholas II, used every available means to stamp out liberalism—censorship, control of the church and of education, spies and informers, even imprisonment and exile. They revived and intensified Russification in heavy-handed discrimination against minority groups, and sponsored massacres of Jews in riots called **pogroms** (POH-gruhmz). Many of the reforms of Alexander II were overturned, and Nicholas labeled liberal goals “senseless dreams.”

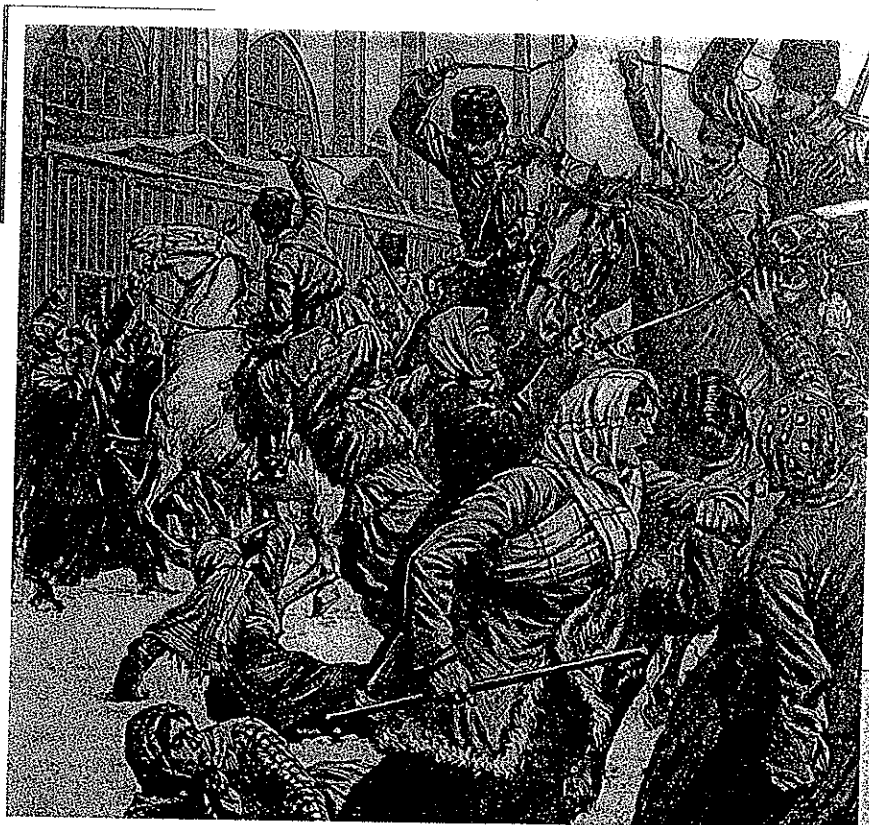
The attempt to preserve the old order met with much opposition—both overt and covert. The development of industry in Russia had produced a class of city workers who wanted the right to form unions and to strike. Liberals and radicals, more determined than ever to gain reforms, found an audience in these often-exploited workers.

The attempts of the Russian government to block all change produced an explosive situation. Terrorism increased. Socialists, who in 1898 had founded the **Social Democratic Labor Party** in imitation of the German Social Democratic Party, grew increasingly radical. The government's repression backfired.

### **The Revolution of 1905**

In 1904 and 1905, Russia went to war with Japan over territories in China and Korea. To the surprise of the world, the Japanese dealt the Russians a humiliating defeat. Russia's loss exposed a government that was corrupt and inefficient, as well as autocratic and oppressive. The defeat spurred discontented groups in the country to action.

On January 22, 1905, “Bloody Sunday,” the czar's troops shot at a group of unarmed strikers on their way to deliver a petition to him. The incident triggered the Revolution of 1905. Workers struck and held demonstrations. The street fighting that broke out was especially violent in non-Russian areas, and there were mutinies in the army and navy. Czar



**On Bloody Sunday, January 22, 1905, Russian troops fired shots at a group of peaceful demonstrators, thus beginning the Revolution of 1905.**

Nicholas II faced a crisis. Russian autocracy had to yield or perish. He reluctantly decided to yield.

The czar issued a decree called the October Manifesto, which promised individual liberties and provided for the election of a parliament called the **Duma**. After more bloody fighting, severe repression and executions stilled the revolution.

Because of its weakness after the Russo-Japanese War, the government had to confront its critics. But autocracy continued. The czar dismissed two sessions of the Duma because members insisted that the czar's ministers be responsible to the Duma. A 1907 electoral law increased the representation of large landowners and restricted the voting of others. The result was a more conservative Duma and one more cooperative with the czar.

The revolutionary movement of 1905 failed to overthrow the czar for three main reasons: (1) The army remained loyal and thus would not end the czar's regime. (2) The French, bound to Russia by military alliance, lent money to the government. (3) The many revolutionary groups were divided in their goals. Moderates feared radical demands and radicals disagreed among themselves.

The reactionaries learned nothing from the Revolution of 1905. The government often treated people with contempt, and bureaucrats openly broke laws that they were supposed to enforce. Using extreme repressive measures as before, the autocracy tried vainly to resist change and to preserve the thousand-year-old monarchy.

