

**Lectures on Russian History - Imperial Russia**  
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**The Moscow Period of Centralization (1480-1584)**

- The Moscow branch of the original ruling clan of Kievan Russia eventually succeeded in driving out the Mongols.
- The historian George Vernadsky gave the traditional view of what happened: "Thus at a glance the political history of Russia is sufficient to dispose of the myth of totalitarianism being inherent in the Russian mentality. It was not because of any alleged innate sympathy of the 'Russian soul' to autocracy that the Tsardom of Moscow came into being but out of the stern necessity of organizing a military force sufficient to overthrow the Mongol yoke and then of securing control of a territory vast enough for strategic defense"(17).
- There were other factors, including warfare amongst the Mongols themselves, and fighting amongst other potential enemies, including the Lithuanians, Poles and Germans, who might otherwise have posed a greater threat to Russia.
- In any event, Moscow, first mentioned in the chronicles in the year 1147 (and therefore a relatively young city) during this period rose to prominence among the old Russian city states, after a brief period when the city of Vladimir was the most powerful.
- This long rise to prominence by Moscow was paralleled by a centralization of authority in the hands of the Grand Prince, who, during the reign of Ivan III, came to be called the "Tsar."

**The Reign of Ivan IV ("The Terrible") (Reigned 1533-1584)**

- For a recent consideration of this topic, see Riasanovsky and Steinberg.
- Ivan IV ascended the throne, technically, at the age of three in 1533, but the country was ruled by Boyar regents who fought amongst themselves until 1547 when Ivan assumed control.
- Ivan IV completed the process of centralization and consolidation of power in the hands of the "Tsar" or emperor - a title first used by his predecessor Ivan III, and conferred on him by church authorities at his coronation.
- He is best known for initiating the process of expansion that would create the Russian Empire ruled over by his successors.
- Ivan IV's reign was characterized by early domestic reforms including a new legal code and regulations for military service on the part of the gentry and foreign policy successes, followed by increasingly bizarre and violent behavior at home and military failures abroad
- He apparently suffered from a severe curvature of the spine, for which he took medication and drank heavily to alleviate the pain
- There is also evidence, based on his behavior, that he suffered some serious psychological disorder

- He did have a violent temper and many of the stories of brutality are true, including an attack on his eldest son in a fit of rage in 1581 that resulted in his son's death.
- Another event in his personal life that apparently precipitated (or at least preceded) much of his worst atrocities was the death of his first wife, Anastasia, in 1563
- There is an ongoing argument about Ivan, which the historians Nicholas Riasanovsky and Steinberg sum up:
- "This image of Ivan the tyrant has been accompanied, however, by a great deal of debate among historians [...]. Was there a 'rational' first part of his reign defined by the pursuit of 'reform' followed by a deranged second part defined by 'terror,' or was terror a continuation of reform by more radical means? Can we compare Ivan IV's reign to that of other early modern state-builders and define his actions as a characteristically modern effort, if at times excessive, to overcome 'feudal fragmentation' (a term favored especially by Soviet historians), integrate diverse territories into a single state, and advance the centralization and systematization of government? Did the influence of boyar clans and customs remain strong, or did Ivan finally rid the state, as he seemed to want, of boyar influence? And what do we know, especially given limited and biased contemporary sources, of Ivan's personality, psychology, and thinking, even of many of his actions? In a word, was he essentially pathological or rational? It should be noted that Ivan's later honorific title, 'the Terrible,' is more ambiguous in Russian than in English: the term 'groznyi' denotes a complex and largely positive mixture of severity and awesome might, especially in battle, where a groznyi ruler strikes fear into the heart of Russia's enemies" (141).
- We can say for certain that his early reign was marked by a reorganization of the government and armed forces and territorial expansion in the east through military victories
- In doing all this Ivan furthered a sense of national identity that transcended the old allegiance to separate city-states
- The most important military victory, especially in this course, was the capture of the Tatar city of Kazan in 1552, which opened the Volga waterway to the south and Siberia to the east, i. e., made possible the acquisition of territories whose peoples we will study in this course.
- Ivan will probably continue to be remembered best for the excesses of his later reign.
- In 1581 he restricted the peasants' traditional right to move from one employer to another on St. George's day in late autumn, an important event in the development of serfdom in Russia, which became the cause that would unite Russian radicals and liberals until 1861
- He created what is called in both English and Russian the *Oprichnina*, which refers both to Ivan's powerful retainers and the land they received when the organization was created
- The *Oprichnina* helped Ivan to eliminate all real and perceived enemies among the leading Moscow boyars, the church, and powerful aristocrats from other cities such as Novgorod and Tver'

- While this was going on, Ivan also became over-ambitious in his military plans, especially in the west against the Baltic kingdom of Livonia
- The army suffered defeats and the sense of national security which Ivan had created early in his reign was severely weakened by the end
- In general, what had begun as an era of domestic reform and territorial expansion ended with a sense of national vulnerability and extremely low morale

### **The "Time of Troubles" (1584-1613)**

- The "Time of Troubles" was a succession crisis after the death of Ivan which lasted for some thirty years
- Ivan's son Fedor was a weak and ineffective ruler, and his other son, Dmitrii, was killed as a young boy in 1591.
- In his absence, the brother in law of Ivan's son Fedor became ruler. His name was Boris Godunov.
- Godunov was plagued at the time by rumors that he ordered the murder of Dmitrii, who was his one legitimate rival for the throne.
- Historical evidence suggests that Dmitrii was killed by accident, perhaps during an epileptic seizure, but the legend has grown, aided by, among other things, Mussorgsky's opera "Boris Godunov."
- Truth notwithstanding, Godunov was overthrown by his enemies, including the Poles and many Russian aristocrats.
- In rapid succession Russia was ruled by the first "False Dmitrii," the alleged son of Ivan who in reality had perished and whom the Poles supported, by an aristocrat named Shuiskii, and finally, in 1608, by another False Dmitrii, again with Polish support.
- There followed a period of famine and civil war which is still considered among the darkest periods in Russian history.
- Finally, in 1612, the Boyars were able to unite, to drive out the Poles who supported the False Dmitrii
- At the beginning of 1613 a National Assembly (Zemskii Sobor), consisting of representatives from various classes, was convened, and a nephew of Ivan IV, Mikhail Fedorovich Romanov, was chosen as Tsar.
- In an attempt to find new holidays to supplant the old Soviet holidays (which in turn had supplanted religious holidays) the Russian government has now declared November 4 "People's Unity Day" to commemorate the day that the Poles were driven out.

### **The First Romanovs (1613-1689)**

- The Tsars of this period are of less interest than their followers
- There was during this period an increasing interest in things western, or in other words, a nascent interest in precisely the things that would obsess Peter I
- This was also the period of the development of a lower level aristocracy (as distinct from the old Boyars), often called in English as in Russian the *Dvorianstvo*, consisting of government officials who were awarded noble status for services rendered, and small-scale landowners

- The first great figure to emerge in the Romanov era was Peter I "The Great" (Born 1672; Reigned 1689-1725)

### **Peter I "The Great"**

- Peter is known chiefly for the introduction of western technology, customs and culture to Russia
- Thus he engendered the bi-polar controversy of The Westernizers vs. The Slavophiles
- He forced certain customs on the nobles, such as the famous beard edict (requiring them to shave their long beards or pay a tax), western clothing, and also the custom of attending state functions with one's wife
- He established the modern Russian alphabet
- Established (in a small way) printing presses
- The first Russian newspaper was founded during his reign [*Vedomosti*, 1702]
- Many of the first Russian theaters were developed during Peter's reign and at his behest
- Peter constructed a fleet using western technology and organization
- He strengthened the military
- He instituted a draft
- He instituted promotion through merit
- He embarked on territorial expansion through military campaigns
- Such campaigns were almost constant during his reign
- Peter invited western scholars, especially in the areas of the physical sciences, to come and teach in Russia
- He founded the first institutions of higher learning in Russia [Petersburg Academy 1724]
- He insisted that all noblemen serve the state in either the military, judicial or civil service and instituted a series of 14 ranks for each branch
- He made it easier to become a noble through service
- He founded the Senate, an advisory council
- He founded the "Colleges," forerunners of ministries
- He weakened the power of the Orthodox church
- Finally, he founded the city of Saint Petersburg in 1703
- St. Petersburg was to be Russia's new, modern, European Russian capital, city of tremendous western-style architecture, birthplace of modern Russian poetry and art, but constructed on a swamp in an area that regularly experiences floods.

### **Personal Attributes & Peculiarities include:**

- Size and strength: David P. Willoughby [The Super-Athletes, London, 1970] writes: "When he reached maturity he stood 6 feet 8½ inches in height, and was so strong that he could break silver coins with his fingers" (p. 37)
- He was noted for his constant love affairs and heavy drinking
- He had a violent temper, manifested in cruel treatment of enemies and opponents

- He loved physically unusual people, whom he "collected" – including a small African boy, one of two brought to him by his emissaries, who became the great-grandfather of Russia's greatest poet, Aleksandr Pushkin (1799-1837)
- Peter was interested in medicine – attended autopsies & dissections, treated himself (which may have hastened his death)
- He traveled and lived incognito in western Europe, once (according to legend) enlisting in the German army after a night of drinking
- He served during campaigns, especially early on, as non-commissioned artilleryman, after he had disposed his troops and the battle had begun

### **The Eighteenth Century after Peter (1725-1801)**

- The traditional view is that there was a reaction against Peter's reforms in the thirty years after his death and before Catherine II, and that the government was largely concerned with palace intrigues rather than administration of the country
- In reality some of his reforms were continued and the process of Westernization in general continued
- It is interesting to note that the two longest-reigning rulers before Catherine were women: Anna (1730-1740) and Elizabeth (1741-1762), both daughters of Peter the Great
- Russia was thus ruled for most of the 18th century by women -- a rather progressive state of affairs that was ended after Catherine's death when it was decreed that only men could succeed in future

### **Catherine II "the Great" (born 1729, reigned 1762-1796)**

- Catherine was a German Princess who was brought to Russia at the age of 16 to marry the future Peter III.
- Peter III, a grandson of Peter I, ruled only six months when he was deposed by Catherine and ultimately assassinated
- There is a historical controversy as to whether he was in fact, as was long claimed, insane, or had the mind of a child.
- Catherine ruled for over 34 years
- At the beginning of her reign she was a great supporter of the European enlightenment
- She planned to introduce and in some cases actually began to introduce liberal reforms into Russia
- There were even rumors, inaccurate as it turned out, that she would free the serfs
- She was a great supporter of the arts
- She wrote in several languages and corresponded with leading Western European intellectuals of the time
- She was interested in education and increased the number of schools in Russia
- She increased educational opportunities for women
- She forged stronger ties with the aristocracy
- At the same time, she promised reforms that would improve the lot of the serfs.
- This period saw the incorporation of much new territory into the Russian Empire including a large part of Poland

- The Russians, Austrians and Prussians took advantage of the weakness of Poland at this time to sign three treaties dividing Poland and eventually eliminating it as a Sovereign state
- One result of the third treaty: there would henceforth be a far larger Jewish population in Russia than in the past
- Three events caused Catherine to halt her reforms:
  - The uprising of Emelyan Pugachev in 1773-1775
  - The American Revolution in 1776
  - The French revolution in 1789
- Catherine died unexpectedly of a stroke at the relatively young age of 67 in 1796
- She was succeeded by her son Pavel (Paul) I, who was himself murdered in a palace revolt in 1801
- He was succeeded by his own son, Aleksandr I

### **Aleksandr I (reigned 1801-25)**

- Like Catherine in the 18th c., Aleksandr first favored relatively liberal policies but then grew more conservative
- Aleksandr's reign coincided, of course, with Napoleon's invasion and the Russian victory of 1812, when the very severe Russian winter came early (as it would again in 1942) and the ill-prepared French troops were driven out
- The French reached Moscow, occupied it and (intentionally or otherwise) burned it to the ground
- The Russians ultimately fought Napoleon to a standstill in one of the largest battles of the 19th century, at Borodino some 70 miles from Moscow, on August 26/Sept. 7 1812
- The French were forced to abandon Russia in December, having lost perhaps as many as half a million men
- Many Russians would later consider this period and these events, which Tolstoy describes in *War and Peace*, to be the zenith of the Russian autocracy and gentry.
- Others (or at least some) at the time, however, did not concur, especially later in Aleksandr's reign, when the Russian victory did not bring anticipated domestic reforms
- When Aleksandr I died in December, 1825 there took place what has come to be called the "Decembrist Uprising"
- This was an abortive coup staged in December, 1825 by members of the nobility, mostly Army officers, who believed that their traditional rights had been weakened by the autocracy
- Some of the Decembrists may also have believed in an increase in personal liberty in Russia and perhaps the reform or elimination of serfdom
- An informant notified the government and there were troops on the square who arrested the Decembrists
- A few were executed, others were sent into exile in Siberia
- One sympathizer who was not arrested because he was quarantined on his family's estate and could not participate was the poet Aleksandr Sergeevich Pushkin (1799-1837).

### **Nikolai I (Reigned 1825-1855)**

- Aleksandr I was succeeded by his brother, Nikolai I
- The standard Soviet-influenced narrative of Nikolai I's reign is that his domestic policy was repressive and his foreign policy consisted of building a large but technologically outdated army that was defeated in the Crimean war at the end of Nikolai's reign
- This picture is not wholly accurate
- It is certainly true that Nikolai I's reign was conservative in comparison with other 19th century rulers and his suppression of intellectuals opened a gulf between these intellectuals and the monarchy which eventually led to the revolutionary movement
- It is also true that he never contemplated the reforms that would be undertaken by his successor, Aleksandr II
- None the less, in the wake of the Decembrist uprising Nikolai attempted to address some of the grievances of the Nobles; he expanded and improved the state bureaucracy, and he made some advances in education It is particularly inaccurate to make comparisons between Nikolai I and Stalin, as some do, to try and demonstrate an inherent Russian need for a totalitarian government

### **The Age of Reform under Aleksandr II (Reigned 1855-1881)**

- Nikolai I never made what increasingly came to be recognized as the most essential "reform" -- the abolition of serfdom
- Finally, the Russians at the end of his reign suffered defeat and huge losses during the Crimean war (1853-1855) against England, France, Sardinia and Turkey
- The best-known battle of the war, where the writer Tolstoy served and about which he wrote, was the siege of Sevastopol
- The Russians were forced to abandon the city, which was considered a national disgrace
- When the war ended and, simultaneously, Nikolai died, it was clear that reform was needed
- When Aleksandr II ascended to the throne he initiated such reforms -- the era is sometimes called "The epoch of reform"
- Aleksandr's greatest reform was the liberation of the serfs in 1861
- He is thus sometimes referred to as "The Liberator"
- The serfs were liberated and land was redistributed
- The nobles retained a portion of their estates and compensation for the land they lost, and the peasants had to pay some taxes on what they did receive
- The peasants were not, however, so dissatisfied as to question their allegiance to the Tsar', much less revolt against the government
- Indeed, the liberation would lead to the acquisition by the peasants of most land under private cultivation in Russia
- There were reforms in all spheres of Russian life
- Representative institutions both for the nobility and the peasants were set up with executive powers over local matters

- Juridical reforms were among the most important
- Judges were now appointed permanently and operated independently of the executive branch, and jury trials were instituted, which guaranteed due process for everyone
- Schools were set up throughout the country. The writer Lev Tolstoy not only opened and taught in his own school, but accepted an appointment as a local government official and in that capacity opened more than 20 schools in his home district.
- Universities were also allowed freedom over curriculum and teaching methods and were made more accessible to people of various classes and more accessible to women
- The military was reformed to allow appointment and promotion of officers on the basis of merit, not class
- Broad freedom of the press was granted and censorship of literature greatly reduced. It was in this period that the term "glasnost'," literally "openness," was first used to mean freedom of expression.
- In short, there were significant changes for the better
- The Russian government, nonetheless, continued to be the object of much criticism, at least in part because the reforms themselves allowed it
- The universities became radicalized.
- Open criticism of the government was permitted to be published
- Juries sometimes practiced jury activism by acquitting perpetrators of anti-government violence, including assassination, because they sympathized with the cause of the defendants.
- As a rule, the anti-government forces cited as their main cause the oppressed peasants
- Again, the peasants themselves, although they may sometimes have been dissatisfied with the distribution of land, did not wish to revolt, had faith in the Tsar', and in general rebuffed naïve attempts of the radicals to form an alliance
- The anti-government movement, however, continued to operate
- There were two main groups: the liberals, who believed in reform within the system; and the revolutionaries, including the Marxists, who wanted to destroy the old system altogether
- One small group of revolutionaries, who took the name *Narodnaia Volia*, meaning "People's Will" or "People's Freedom," in 1879 tried the Tsar in absentia, convicted him, and sentenced him to death
- On March 1, 1881, Aleksandr II was killed by a member of this organization

### **The Last Romanovs (1881-1917)**

- Aleksandr III, the son and successor of Aleksandr II, reigned 1881-1894, was an ineffective leader
- There was, naturally after the assassination of the Tsar, a period of reaction
- There was a suppression of the liberal and radical movements, a scaling back of reforms, pogroms against the Jews in the southern parts of the Russian empire

- There did occur during this period occasional local incidents of unrest among the peasants, but still there was no sustained uprising
- Marxist organizations during this period took root and began to grow.
- There was economic growth, but there was also a series of bad harvests and resulting hunger and disease.
- The worst occurred in 1890-91.
- When Aleksandr III died and his son, Nikolas II (reigned 1894-1917), ascended to the throne, there was essentially no change in government policy.
- In 1904, in an attempt to increase Russian military and economic strength in the far east, the Russians went to war with Japan.
- Because of logistical problems, the Russians could not sustain their war effort, and the result was disastrous: the loss of several battles, heavy casualties, and the destruction of the Russian fleet on May 27, 1905.
- The war was ended when the Russian Minister of Finance Sergei Witte signed a treaty in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, with US President Theodore Roosevelt acted as intermediary
- Lenin would later claim that this was the turning point that led to the Russian revolution.
- There was immediate reaction: between the years 1905 and 1907 there occurred what is often referred to as "the first Russian revolution."
- There was a series of strikes and civil unrest in various cities.
- The most famous event is referred to as "Bloody Sunday," January 22, 1905 in Petersburg
- A group of demonstrators, hoping to see the Tsar and discuss their grievances, were attacked by police.
- The number of dead was later said by the Bolsheviks to be in the thousands, although a figure of two hundred is likely more accurate, with 800 wounded
- After this incident, there were concessions made: legislative bodies appointed, suffrage (temporarily) granted, and land reform undertaken.
- A elected legislative body called the Duma was created that was supposed to have the right to approve or disapprove all new laws.
- Land reform was undertaken by Prime Minister Petr Stolypin with the goal of increasing yields and promoting individual initiative in the agricultural sector
- There were problems: The Tsar never fully recognized the rights of the Duma and even called for new elections (as was his right) when the Duma tried to exercise its authority.
- The reforms were not perfect – but they did represent a tremendous advance for the Russians and represented significant progress on the road to creating a modern political system.
- The revolutionaries and liberals, however, opposed the reforms, which they believed would reduce the chances of revolution
- This is a key point which the Soviet Union suppressed and even most Western historians eventually tended to forget.
- Historian Richard Pipes, author of several works on the Russian Revolution, makes the following points:

- "Russian Radicals, in some measure backed by liberals, opposed reforms because they threatened to prevent revolution, their ultimate objective. In 1906-7, several attempts were made to bring liberals into the cabinet; each time, they refused out of fear of being compromised. The radical intelligentsia incessantly appealed to the population to ostracize the government and have nothing to do with it. When the government did nothing, the intelligentsia accused it of passivity; when it made concessions, the intelligentsia felt it had the bureaucrats on the run" (See Richard Pipes, *Three "Whys"* 23-4).
- Pipes reports (*Concise History* 49) that "in the course of 1906 and 1907, terrorists killed or maimed 4,500 officials. If private persons were included, the total number of victims of left-wing terrorism rises to 9,000."
- It's important to note that the reforms of this era did produce tremendous successes. Pipes (*Concise History* 54) writes that "The Economy was booming. In 1913 iron production, compared with 1900, grew by more than 50 percent, while coal production more than doubled; the nation's exports and imports doubled as well ... the village was calm."
- The reforms ultimately were scaled back because of the violent reaction against them, and in 1914 the focus of the country changed completely when the Russians, as a result of a longstanding agreement with England and France, fulfilled their promise to open an eastern front against Germany within one month of the beginning of hostilities
- The Russians suffered tremendous losses at the Battle Of Tannenberg in East Prussia in October, 1914, and thereafter for three years, although the Russian people supported the war effort and the Russian armed forces did acquit themselves well on many occasions and win many battles.
- Ultimately, however, the leadership of the Tsar was questioned, in part because some members of the government felt that he, and in particular his wife, Alexandra, were too much influenced by a self-proclaimed faith healer from Siberia named Grigorii Rasputin.
- The Tsar's wife believed that Rasputin could heal or at least reduce the effects of hemophilia, a disease suffered by her son, Alexei.
- In February of 1917, with mass protests in Petrograd (formerly Petersburg) calling for a change of government, the Tsar stepped down in what has come to be known as the February Revolution.
- Richard Pipes writes:
- "It is a mistake to attribute the February Revolution to fatigue with the war. The contrary is true. Russians wanted to pursue the war more effectively, and they felt that the existing government was not capable of doing it, that existing political structures were in need of a major overhaul ... The tsar, of course, could have saved the throne if that were his prime objective. All he had to do was sign a separate peace, as Lenin would do in March 1918 ... Had he done so, say, in late 1916, bringing home millions of combat troops capable of quelling domestic disorder, the Germans might well have crushed the allies in France and Belgium, and the Russian Revolution would have been averted. But being a devoted Russian patriot and loyal ally, he would not even contemplate such action. And when he was told by his generals that the hostility towards him and his wife had

reached such a pitch of intensity that, for Russia to stay in the war, he had to abdicate, he abdicated" (*Concise History* 27-8).

- In the wake of the Tsar's abdication, a Provisional Government, made up of members of the Duma, was formed.
- This government was a coalition of liberals that excluded the radicals.
- The radicals formed what was known as the Petrograd Soviet, representatives of factories and military units who governed together with the Provisional Government but opposed many of its more moderate policies.
- The new government did not, as the radicals demanded, take Russia out of the war.
- There were continued calls for a new revolution to replace the Provisional Government.
- Among those who called for revolution was a man named Vladimir Lenin, leader of a party called the Bolsheviks.
- Lenin had lived in exile for many years but returned to Russia in 1917 with the aid of the Germans, who believed that he would take Russia out of the war.
- In April of 1917 Lenin published a series of theses, or proposals, that called for an end to the provisional government, transfer of power to the Soviet, and the elimination of private property in Russia
- The Russian army staged a campaign in June, 1917 that finally helped to turn public opinion against the war
- Russian deaths in World War I by this time approached the figure of 1.6 million
- In July the Bolsheviks attempted, but failed, to take over the government.
- In October (actually November) of 1917 the Bolsheviks, under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin staged a coup and took control of the government in the capital of Petrograd