

Russia in the 1800s

During the nineteenth century, Russia was one of the largest empires in the world, stretching from Alaska to Poland. Russia, unlike many other European empires, did not have overseas colonies, with the sole exception of Alaska in North America. Instead, the Russians continually extended their country by seizing lands that bordered their own. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Russian empire had expanded from a small state to a large empire with great land holdings in Asia as well as Europe. The men who ruled Russia during the nineteenth century were absolute rulers of the Russian Empire and their rule affected every aspect of Russian life.

Czar Alexander I ruled from 1801-1825. He was a great thinker and talker but a poor man of action. Alexander I eased censorship and promoted education, but after that his reforms were lacking. As Prince Clemons von Metternich of Austria said, "He stirred everything up, but built nothing." His major achievement was that he was a key figure at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. He also granted Poland a more liberal constitution. Because of some of his liberal policies, there was dissent among the poor. In the occupied lands of the Russian Empire, this dissent was increased by Alexander's speeches. But when Alexander I was actually faced with real dissent, he very quickly became a harsh and strict ruler and did away with all thought of liberal reforms.

Czar Nicholas I ruled from 1825-1855. He took over after the death of Alexander I. When he took over there was still widespread unrest in Russia because of the liberal reforms that Alexander I had talked about but never instituted. Czar Nicholas I was a strict ruler who tolerated no liberal movements. He had all liberals arrested, many of whom were shot or hanged. His motto was "submit and obey." Nicholas is primarily remembered for getting Russia into the Crimean War in 1854 by invading Turkey. But it was too late, the British and the French came to the aid of the Turks and Russia suffered a humiliating defeat, in which the Czar also died.

Czar Alexander II ruled from 1855-1881. He came to power and had to face the defeat of the Crimean War. The Crimean War made Alexander II realize that Russia was no longer a great military power. His advisors argued that Russia's serf-based economy could no longer compete with industrialized nations such as Britain and France. He admired the attempts at liberalization of which Czar Alexander I had talked and was determined to put them into action. Alexander II now began to consider the possibility of bringing an end to serfdom in Russia. The nobility objected to this move but Alexander told a group of Moscow nobles: "It is better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait for the time when it will begin to abolish itself from below." In 1861 Alexander issued his Emancipation Manifesto that proposed 17 legislative acts that would free the serfs of Russia. Alexander announced that personal serfdom would be abolished and all peasants would be able to buy land from their landlords. He freed the serfs in 1861 and gave them limited rights. In addition, he attempted other reforms. He had the same problem that Alexander I had. When he gave freedom, people wanted more. He had to put down the Polish revolt of 1863. From there on out, he was a harsh, strict ruler because he felt it was the only way to control the empire. Because of his new stringent rules, terrorists attempted to overthrow the government. In 1881, they succeeded in killing Czar Alexander II with a bomb.

Czar Alexander III ruled from 1881-1894. He was greatly angered by his father's death, so he put together a ruthless police force that succeeded in crushing the terrorists. The other chief activity during his reign was the gradual industrialization of Russia during the 1880s, much later than that of Europe. His reign, after the crushing of the terrorists, was primarily a calm one, although the seeds of liberal dissent were growing underground and attention was not paid to them. In 1894, Czar Alexander II died and was succeeded by his son Nicholas II. When Nicholas II took over, the seeds for revolution had already been laid.

Nicolas II tried to advance the Russian need for expansion. He built the trans-Siberian railway to help give more access to trading cities throughout Russia. His desire to expand and need for materials caused a war between Russia and Japan. The Russo-Japanese War of 1905 was an eye opening experience for Russia and the world. Japan defeated Russia and embarrassed the people of Russia. This made the people realize that they could not yet compete with the Western Powers. However, the loss caused widespread humiliation throughout Russia and demand for change began.

A revolution broke out in 1905 that was crushed by Nicholas II. This even was called Bloody Sunday and killed over a thousand people. The problems between the czar and the people would continue when Russia joined WWI. Russia was unprepared for war and was constantly defeated. The actions would lead to the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, ending the reign of the Romanov family.

Russian Czar	Years of Reign	Political/ Social Conditions or Changes	International or Military Events	New Vocabulary
Alexander I				
Nicholas I				
Alexander II				
Alexander III				
Nicholas II				

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Alexander's reforms did not satisfy liberals and radicals who wanted a parliamentary democracy and the freedom of expression that was enjoyed in the United States and most other European nations. The reforms of agricultural problems also disappointed the peasants. In some regions it took the peasants nearly 20 years to obtain their land. Many were forced to pay more than the land was worth and others were given inadequate amounts for their needs.

Stephen Graham: On Alexander III

To give land to the serfs meant to ruin the nobility and to give freedom without land meant to ruin the peasantry. The state treasury was impoverished by the vast expenses of war; it could not afford to indemnify either party. There lay the problem. Could the serfs be made to pay for their freedom? Could the serf-owners be granted loans on the security of their estate? Would not twenty-two million slaves suddenly set free combine to take matters into their own hands?

The position of most large owners was this. They lived in St. Petersburg or some other great city. They did not farm their estates. They had stewards who administered their property and collected their revenue. They had numbers of serfs paying a handsome annual tribute for their partial freedom, a tribute which the landowners' agents strove incessantly to increase. It was their slaves rather than their land that brought them income.

1. What effect did the Crimean War have on Russia?
2. What were some clauses of the Emancipation Manifesto?
3. According to Graham, why were landowners against ending serfdom?

The Emancipation Manifesto: To Free the Serfs of Russia

By the Grace of God WE, Alexander II, Emperor and Autocrat of All Russia, King of Poland, Grand Duke of Finland, etc., make known to all OUR faithful subjects:

Called by Divine Providence and by the sacred right of inheritance to the Russian throne of OUR ancestors, WE vowed in OUR heart to respond to the mission which is entrusted to Us and to surround with OUR affection and OUR Imperial solicitude all OUR faithful subjects of every rank and condition, from the soldier who nobly defends the country to the humble artisan who works in industry; from the career official of the state to the plowman who tills the soil.

WE thus became convinced that the problem of improving the condition of serfs was a sacred inheritance bequeathed to Us by OUR predecessors, a mission which, in the course of events, Divine Providence has called upon Us to fulfill.

WE have begun this task by expressing OUR confidence toward the Russian nobility, which has proven on so many occasions its devotion to the Throne, and its readiness to make sacrifices for the welfare of the country. WE have left to the nobles themselves, in accordance with their own wishes, the task of preparing proposals for the new organization of peasant life—proposals that would limit their rights over the peasants, and the realization of which would inflict on them [the nobles] some material losses.

The nobles, while retaining their property rights to all the lands belonging to them, grant the peasant's use of their household plots in return for a specified obligation; and, to assure their livelihood...grant them a portion of arable land. While enjoying these land allotments, the peasants are obliged, in return, to fulfill obligations to the noblemen fixed by the same arrangements. In this status, which is temporary, the peasants are temporarily bound.

At the same time, they are granted the right to purchase their household plots, and, with the consent of the nobles, they may acquire in full ownership the arable lands and other properties which are allotted them for permanent use. Following such acquisition of full ownership of land, the peasants will be freed from their obligations to the nobles for the land thus purchased and will become free peasant landowners...

...The authorities who prepared the new way of life for the peasants and who will be responsible for its inauguration will have to see that this task is accomplished with calmness and regularity, taking advantage of the time allotted, in order not to divert the attention of cultivators away from their agricultural work. Let them zealously work the soil and harvest its fruits so that they will have a full granary of seeds to return to the soil which will be theirs.

And now, Orthodox people, make the sign of the cross, and join with Us to invoke God's blessing upon your free labor, the sure pledge of your personal well being and the public prosperity.

Given at St. Petersburg, March 3, the year of Grace 1861, and the seventh of OUR reign.

Alexander II, Czar of Russia

1. According to this document, what were the serfs now allowed to do?
2. How do you think the serfs felt about the emancipation?
3. What groups would protest and why?