

## CROSS-REFERENCE

Less than half the total population of around 69 million people in 1855 was Russian. Read more in A Closer Look: Problems of governing the Empire on page 2.

## A CLOSER LOOK

## The French Revolution

The French had risen up against their absolutist King in 1789 and a republic had been set up in 1792. The French example of representative government (as already practised in Great Britain) was spread across Europe by Napoleon before 1812. French 'liberal' ideas ignited a demand for greater political freedom in the European states.

## KEY TERM

**Entrepreneur:** someone who invests money to set up a business despite the financial risks

**Cottage industry:** work done in the worker's own home or a small workshop, typically spinning, weaving and small-scale wood and metal work; occasionally whole villages specialised in a particular trade, such as making samovars for boiling water for tea

the West where the liberal ideas he most feared were spreading. He believed in strict autocracy and severe restrictions were imposed on Russia's other nationalities. While leading intellectuals argued for a civil society based on the rule of law, Nicholas tightened censorship and set up the secret police, or Third Section. His reign ended in military defeat in the Crimea, which finally brought the long-ignored need for change to the new Tsar's attention.

## The economic and social context

## KEY QUESTION

How and with what results did the economy develop and change?  
What was the extent of social change?

## The economic situation

When Alexander II came to the throne in 1855, Britain, Belgium, France and the states comprising Germany were already well advanced industrially. Mills, factories, coal pits, quarries and railways were transforming the landscape and trade was flourishing. However, the Russian economy remained mostly rural with a ratio of 11:1 village to town dwellers, compared with 2:1 in Britain.

There were good reasons for Russia's economic backwardness. Although the Russian Empire was vast, much of its territory was inhospitable (over two thirds lay north of the 50th parallel north), comprising tundra, forests and stretches of barren countryside, especially to the north and east. As a result, both size and climate placed severe strains on economic development. Although mid-nineteenth century Russia was Europe's main exporter of agricultural produce and possessed vast reserves of timber, coal, oil, gold and other precious metals, much of its potential remained untapped and communications between the different parts of the Empire were poor.

However the lack of progress was primarily due to Russia's commitment to a serf-based economy. The landowning aristocracy, the tsarist government and the army were all reliant on the **serfs**. This inhibited economic development by limiting the forces that drive change, such as wage-earners, markets and **entrepreneurs**. The serfs were poor. Most just about managed to survive on the produce they grew for themselves on the land made available by their landlords, and '**cottage industries**' provided the little extra cash they needed for special purchases and taxes. However, they often suffered with starvation in the winter, particularly in years of bad harvest, and systems of land management within the serf communes (*mirs*) meant that individual serf families worked scattered strips and were obliged to follow a communal pattern of farming. There was little incentive or opportunity, therefore, for them to develop into 'wage-earners'.

## A CLOSER LOOK

## What was serfdom?

Russian peasants (serfs) were men, women and children who were classified as the 'property' of their owners, rather than as 'citizens' of the State. Serfs could be bought and sold, were subject to beatings, and were not allowed to marry without permission. Serfs were also liable for conscription into the army. There were two main types: a little over half were privately owned, with around 30 per cent of these paying rent (*obrok*) and around 70 per cent providing labour (*barshchina*). The remainder were 'state serfs' who paid taxes and rent. Most serfs worked on the land in village communes (*mirs*) run by strict rules imposed by the village elders. Some performed domestic service.

Markets existed (and indeed were growing) although 'business' was mostly small-scale. The most common peasant purchases were vodka (for celebrations), metal tools and salt (to preserve food), which they bought in the nearest town, or at a fair. However, self-sufficiency meant that comparatively few goods were actually 'purchased' and in peasant markets, money was not the usual form of payment. Exchanges took place 'in kind'; for example some eggs might be given in return for a length of wool. In some areas, particularly near large cities, market forces were beginning to develop as peasants sought wage-work in nearby towns at slack times in the farming year, but for the vast majority, money was simply irrelevant and there was no **internal market demand**.

At the other end of the scale was the small **landowning elite**, who obtained most of what they needed from their serfs in the form of service and feudal dues. They were generally uninterested in how efficiently their estates operated. For many, serf-owning merely provoked idleness. So long as their bailiffs squeezed sufficient amounts out of the peasants for their own benefit, the aristocratic landowners saw little need to do more. There was no opportunity for **capital accumulation**, since income was generally falling. This was thanks to the rural population growth and the **agricultural changes** in Western Europe that had increased the competitiveness and productivity of the European markets. Many landowners had been forced into debt and had to take out **mortgages** on estates which had previously been owned outright by their families. Sometimes they even mortgaged their serfs, but despite their despair, they did not seek alternative ways of 'making money', because money as such was of little use in Russia's under-developed economy.

#### A CLOSER LOOK

##### Agricultural changes

Crop rotation, new fertilisers and developments in agricultural machinery had all helped to transform Western agriculture.



Fig. 3 A peasant woman tilling the soil

#### KEY TERM

**Internal market demand:** the desire and ability to buy the products of manufacturing within the country; if a country's inhabitants are poor, there will be little internal demand.

**Landowning elite:** those who owned land and who were a privileged minority in Russian society

**Capital accumulation:** building up money reserves in order to invest

**Mortgage:** this involves borrowing money by providing a guarantee; in this case a landowner's serfs provided the guarantee for a state loan, and if the borrowed money and additional interest was not repaid, the State could seize the serfs

#### A CLOSER LOOK

##### Serf poverty

The serfs' working and living conditions were, by Western standards, primitive. It was normal for corn to be cut by hand with sickles and for peasants to share their huts with their animals. In such circumstances, it is perhaps unsurprising that most peasants were illiterate but deeply religious, inclined to superstition and deeply hostile to change.

## KEY QUESTION

What was the extent of social and cultural change?

## KEY TERM

**Urban artisan:** a manual worker in a town who possessed some skills, e.g. a cobbler or a leather-maker

**Intelligentsia:** the more educated members of Russian society, including writers and philosophers with both humanitarian and nationalist concerns; many opposed the State for various cultural, moral, religious, philosophical and political reasons

## ACTIVITY

According to Extract 2, what were the consequences of the absence of a middle class in Russia?

## The social context

Socially, Russia was, as Service suggested in Extract 1, starkly divided between the privileged land-owning elite and the serf majority; the non-productive and the productive classes. The former consisted of the clergy, nobility, civil and military officials, army and naval officers and, at the very top, the royal court. In addition to the serfs, there were some **urban artisans**, manufacturers and merchants within the ranks of the 'productive classes', but the striking feature of mid-nineteenth century Russian society was the absence of any coherent 'middle class', as was becoming increasingly dominant elsewhere in Europe. There were a small number of professionals (doctors, teachers and lawyers, for example) some of whom comprised an educated '**intelligentsia**', but these were often the sons of nobles.

## EXTRACT 2

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the late survival in Russia of serfdom, an institution that in Western Europe is associated with medieval times and had begun to decline from the end of the thirteenth century. By tying the bulk of the population to the land and preventing the movement of a free labour force, it acted as an impediment to the development of a middle class. This social gap had a profound effect on political as well as economic development. It accounts for the relative weakness in nineteenth-century Russia of moderate liberal political opinion. It may also explain the lack of sympathy shown by thinkers at both ends of the political spectrum for entrepreneurial activity, the lack of practicality in much of their thought – which tended towards the visionary rather than the concrete – and their disdain, even contempt, for prosperity and material gain.

Adapted from Derek Offord, *Nineteenth Century Russia: Opposition to Autocracy*, 1998

The word 'class', with its connotation of 'economic status' is actually a rather modern term to use of nineteenth-century Russian society, which was still based on birth, land and service. As in the past, in 1855 legal barriers still limited social mobility. Serfs were liable for dues, as demanded by past custom, to their masters (from whose bond it was almost impossible to escape). They also paid direct and indirect **taxes** to the government. The nobility and clergy, however, were exempt from the payment of any direct monetary taxes.

## A CLOSER LOOK

## Taxes

The government was financed from taxes and dues. The main direct tax, paid by all except the merchants, was the poll tax, literally a 'tax on heads', which had been introduced in 1719 in order to cover the costs of maintaining Russia's large army. It was levied, at the same rate, on every male peasant in the Empire, no matter what his circumstances. This, together with the *obrok* paid by state serfs in lieu of land and service dues, made up 25 per cent of 'ordinary' government income. Indirect taxes (on services and goods) included a tax on salt, and, even more importantly, on vodka. This had grown during the nineteenth century to represent 30 per cent of ordinary government income by 1855, suggesting that a change was already underway towards a more 'commercial' source for government revenue. Overall, the taxes hit hard at the peasantry who, together with the urban workers and tradesmen, provided around 90 per cent of Imperial finance.



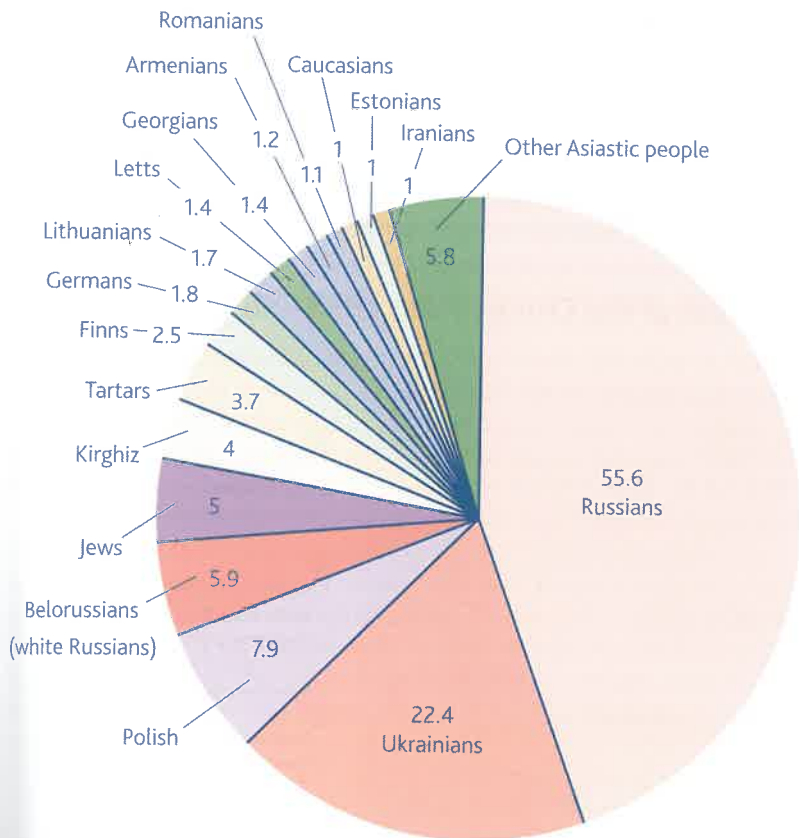


Fig. 4 Ethnic groups within the Russian Empire, as given in the first national census of 1897 (population in millions)

### EXTRACT 3

Most of the structures present in mid-nineteenth century Russia were still typical of the pre-modern world. A small ruling group, unified by the structures of autocracy, lived off resources mobilised directly from a large agrarian population through the system of serfdom. Most of the peasant population lived lives little different from those of the Middle Ages. The family, the household and the village were the crucial institutions of rural life. Largely self-sufficient peasants used traditional ways of working the soil, and levels of productivity were little higher than those of the Middle Ages. However, new forces were already beginning to undermine the traditional patterns. In some areas, market forces were beginning to transform village life, while the government's revenues came increasingly from commercial sources. At the upper level of society, the increasingly westernised outlook of Russian elites undermined the autocratic political culture of Russia's ruling group. The government became aware of how threatening these various changes might be to its own power only in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Adapted from David Christian, *Imperial and Soviet Russia*, 1986

So, while Russia was still considered a 'great' power in Europe because of its size and huge army, politically, economically and socially it remained undeveloped and 'backward' in comparison with the West. Small changes were taking places but, as yet, these had been insufficient to promote extensive modernisation.