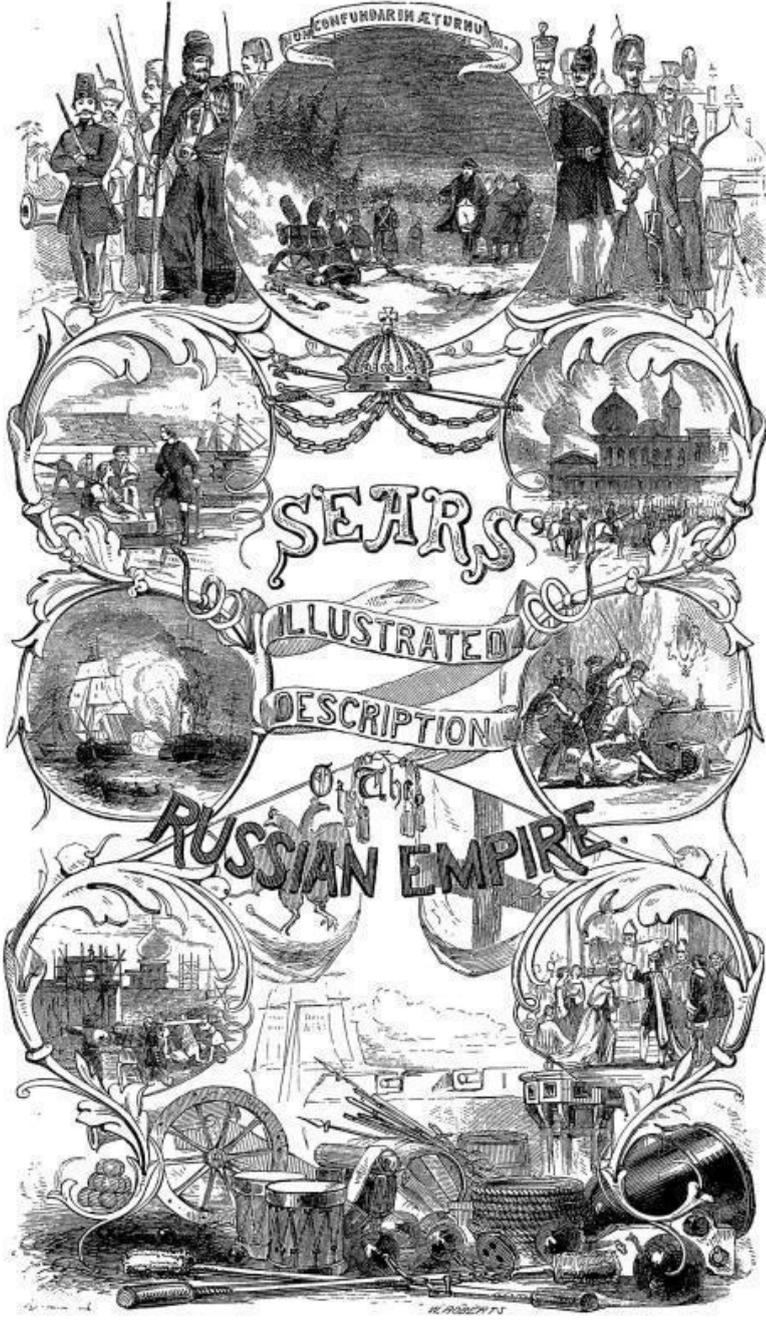


Russia in 1855:
Political context



Russia was an autocratic empire ruled over by the Tsar – an absolute monarch. Absolute means that the Tsar had unlimited, God-given power over the 21 million square kilometres of the Russian Empire (twice the size of Europe). The Tsar was regarded by the Orthodox Church as the embodiment of God on earth – the Russian Empire was his property, and the Russian people were his children. Russians were taught to be loyal to the Tsar as part of their religious duty, and as part of this, they had to accept their lot in life.

The Tsar ruled the country via imperial edicts (official orders – known in Russia as *ukazy*). He was advised by ministers, but they were chosen by the Tsar, and could do nothing without his permission. His main source of advice came from the Imperial Council (also known as the Chancellery, with 35 to 60 nobles specifically picked by the Tsar to provide expertise); the Council of Ministers (8-14 ministers in charge of different government departments); and the Senate (this was supposed to oversee the whole government, but by 1855 was largely redundant).

This regime relied on the provincial nobility for support. Nobles often served as provincial governors, and civil servants were usually paid noble officials. There were 14 levels of civil servants, ranging from the ministers in the Council, to minor positions, such as collecting taxes or organising post in the provinces. The civil service was riddled with corruption, and there was no dialogue between the top and the bottom – those at the bottom were just told what to do.

The Tsar's official position as Head of the Orthodox Church gave him greater power. He worked closely with the Patriarch of Moscow, who provided the Tsar with spiritual guidance, and the Over-Protector of the Holy Synod, a government minister appointed by the Tsar to run Church affairs. The appointments of archbishops and bishops were under the control of the Tsar, as were Church finances.

In addition, the Tsar had the world's largest army at his disposal (some 1.5 million conscripted serfs who were each forced into service for 25 years, and had to live in a harsh military colony with their families). The huge army (and smaller navy) absorbed 45% of the government's annual spending. Although the higher ranks of the army were prestigious commissions, life in the lower ranks was tough. The army could be used to fight wars or put down rebellions. The Tsar also had a personal army of mounted Cossacks – an elite regiment who both provided a bodyguard for the Tsar and a police reinforcement.

Orthodox Church



As an autocratic country, Tsarist Russia had developed into a police state, which limited freedom of speech, freedom of the press and travel abroad. Political meetings and strikes were forbidden, and censorship existed at every level of government. The 'Third Section' was the Tsarist secret police, who operated on the words of informers, and were able to indiscriminately raid and arrest. Following the French Revolution, Tsar Alexander I considered setting up an advisory representative body but never put this into practice. His brother (Nicholas I), who ruled after 1825, completely rejected this idea, and used force to repress an uprising in December of that year. He was particularly concerned about liberal, Western ideas spreading to Russia, which might threaten autocracy there. This encouraged his creation of the 'Third Section' and a tightening of censorship.