

Notes- The Great Reforms in Russia

In the 1850s Russia was a poor agrarian society with a rapidly growing population. Almost 90% of the people lived off the land and industrialization developed very slowly.

The peasant serf was little more than a slave and by the 1840s in Russia serfdom had become a central issue for the government. The slow pace of modernization encouraged the growth of protest movements (varied from Marxist calling for a socialist revolution to middle class intellectuals seeking a liberal constitutional state).

The Crimean War was also important in showing the need for modernization for Russia. The war convinced Russian leaders that they fell behind the industrialized west. Also, the disastrous war made the need for reforms greater due to the chance of massive peasant rebellions. Tsar Alexander II realized that they needed rapid social change and modernization.

In 1861, Alexander II abolished serfdom in Russia. About 22 million emancipated peasants received citizenship rights and a chance to purchase land. However, they had to pay very high prices and because the land was to be owned collectively, each peasant village was jointly responsible for the payments of all the families in the village. Collective ownership made it difficult for individual peasants to improve agricultural methods or leave their villages. Therefore, old patterns continued and really limited the reform.

A lot of Alexander II's reforms were also "half-way" measures.

Russian efforts to promote economic modernization was more successful. Transportation and industry, both vital to the military, were transformed in two industrial surges. The government encouraged and subsidized private railway companies. The railroads enabled Russia to export grain and earn money to finance further development. Industrial suburbs grew around Moscow and St. Petersburg and a class of modern factory workers began to grow. The industrial development and the growing proletariat helped spread Marxist thought and spurred the transformation of the Russian revolutionary movement after 1890.

Russia began seizing territory in the far eastern Siberia, on the border with China; in Central Asia, north of Afghanistan; and in the Islamic lands of the Caucasus. This excited Russian nationalists and super patriots. Alexander II also suppressed nationalist movements among Poles, Ukrainians, and Baltic peoples.

Alexander II's reforms never went far enough for liberals and radicals. In 1881 a member of a small anarchist group "People's Will" assassinated the tsar. The new tsar was Alexander III. From 1890 to 1900 industrialization surged ahead for the second time, led by the financial minister Sergei Witte. Witte believed that industrial backwardness threatened Russia's greatness. Under his leadership, the government doubled the network of state-owned railways to thirty five thousand miles. Witte established high protective tariffs to support Russian industry and he put the country on the gold standard to strengthen Russian finances.

Witte used Westerners to catch up with the West. He encouraged foreigners to build factories in Russia. He believed the inflow of foreign capital will be the only way that Russian industry will be able to supply Russia with abundant and cheap products.

The Russian Revolution of 1905

By 1903, Russia had established a sphere of influence in Chinese Manchuria and was eyeing northern Korea, which put Russia in conflict with the goals of Japan. Tsar Nicholas II, who replaced his father in 1894, ignored diplomatic protests and the Japanese launched a surprise attack in February 1904. After Japan scored victories, Russia surrendered in 1905. The Russian fleet was annihilated.

Again, military disaster abroad brought upheaval at home. A lot of discontent present-

- Business and professional classes had long wanted a liberal, representative government
- Urban factory workers were organized in a radical and still-illegal labor movement
- Peasants had gained little from the era of reforms and suffered from poverty and overpopulation
- The empire's minorities and subject nationalities such as the Poles, the Ukrainians, and the Latvians continued to call for self-rule

With the army occupied in Manchuria, all these currents of discontent converged on revolution in 1905.

Sunday, January, 1905

A massive crowd of workers and their families converged peacefully on the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg to present a petition to Nicholas II.

Troops open fire, killing and wounding hundreds. Will be known as Bloody Sunday.

The Bloody Sunday massacre produced a wave of indignation that turned many Russians against the tsar.

By the summer of 1905, strikes and political rallies, peasant uprisings, revolts among minority groups, and mutinies by troops were sweeping the country. The revolutionary surge culminated in October 1905 in a paralyzing strike that forced the government to surrender. The tsar issued the October Manifesto, which granted full civil rights and promised a popularly elected Duma (parliament) with real legislative power. The manifesto split the opposition. The middle class embraced it, which helped the government repress the popular uprising and survive as a constitutional monarchy.

Before the first Duma in May 1906, the government issued the new constitution, the Fundamental Laws. The tsar retained great powers. The Duma, elected indirectly by universal male suffrage with a largely appointive upper house, could debate and pass laws, but the tsar had an absolute veto. As in Bismarck's Germany, the tsar appointed his ministers, who did not need to command a majority in the Duma.

The predominately middle class liberals, the largest group in the newly formed Duma, saw the Fundamental Laws as a step backward. Cooperation broke down and after months of deadlock, the tsar dismissed the Duma. The laws were rewritten with great weight on the conservative propertied classes.

The tsar then pushed through important agrarian reforms designed to break down collective village ownership of land and encourage more enterprising peasants, meant to encourage economic growth. In 1914, on the eve of WWI, Russia was partially modernized, a conservative constitutional monarchy with a peasant-based but industrializing economy.