

1 Russia 1855–1964: A synoptic overview

Key Issues

- How far did Russia's government change from 1855 to 1964?
- How did Russian society and the economy change in the period 1855 to 1964?
- How important were individual Russian rulers in bringing change to Russia from 1855 to 1964?

- 1.1 Russia in 1855
- 1.2 The reign of Alexander II, the Tsar Liberator, 1855–81
- 1.3 The coming of the communist state
- 1.4 Key themes in Russian history 1855–1964

1.1 Russia in 1855

In 1855 Russia faced national humiliation. It was in the middle of a war on its own soil against Britain, France, Piedmont-Sardinia and the Ottoman Empire. The Crimean War (1854–56) saw the forces of these four powers besiege the southern Russian naval base of Sebastopol, and by 1855 the Russian forces were on the brink of defeat. In 1855 Tsar Nicholas I died, to be replaced by Tsar Alexander II – who became known during his reign as the ‘Tsar Liberator’. Alexander II was determined to modernise Russia to prevent such an event happening again. From 1855 until his death, at the hand of assassins in 1881, Alexander II brought about fundamental social and political reform to Russia.

Throughout its history, from 1855 to 1964, Russia saw periods of major social, political and economic change instituted from above. In the twentieth century, there were similar periods of fundamental change, brought about by the Soviet leaders Lenin and Stalin.

In 1855 Russia was one of Europe's five Great Powers. It stretched from Poland in the West to Alaska in North America. It covered approximately 20 per cent of the world's land surface. Although vast in size, it was the most politically and economically backward of Europe's major states. The ruler of the Russian Empire was the Tsar (Emperor) who had complete political power. There was no national parliament or any form of elective government. The Tsar chose the government and determined government policy. He was head of the armed forces and was regarded as the head of the main religion, the Russian Orthodox Church. The vast majority of the Russian population – 80 per cent – were serfs, the personal property of their owners. In 1855 Russia had more in common with medieval England than the rest of Europe.

Serf: A person who is the personal property of their owners.

1.2 The reign of Alexander II, the Tsar Liberator, 1855–81

Ukase: A decree (law) introduced by the Tsar.

Alexander II brought about a revolution from above during his reign. In 1861 he issued an Imperial ukase which emancipated the serfs. This was

Zemstva: Elected local government in rural areas created in 1864.

Peasant: An agricultural labourer who rents land. The vast majority of serfs became peasants after 1861.

even more significant than the freeing of slaves within the United States that took place just a few years later (1863–65). In one imperial act, Russian landowners lost an important part of their property – their serfs. The government compensated landowners, and in return the serfs had to pay for their freedom through redemption payments over 49 years. Alexander II also introduced important political reforms, such as elective local government (**zemstva** and town dumas). By the time of his death in 1881 Alexander II had transformed Russia.

In the 1890s the Russian government began a period of rapid economic growth. This ‘Great Spurt’ towards economic modernisation was orchestrated by the Finance Minister, Sergei Witte, and its centrepiece was the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway. Witte’s economic modernisation of 1893 to 1903 was followed by another period of economic reform under Prime Minister Prince Peter Stolypin (1907–10). Stolypin gave financial support to **peasants** to buy their own land and aided peasant migration to the new lands of Siberia. By 1914 Russia seemed to be well on the road to becoming one of Europe’s major economic powers.

1.3 The coming of the communist state

From the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, however, to the mid-1920s Russia went through a period of crisis. World War was followed by revolution and Civil War. Under Vladimir Lenin (1917–24) and Josef Stalin (1924–53) Russia again went through a ‘revolution from above’.

After a brief period of democracy, Lenin established a communist **dictatorship**, which was to last until 1991. Under Stalin, Russia was again transformed socially and economically. Through a programme of forced **collectivisation** of agriculture, Stalin destroyed the independent Russian peasantry between 1928 and 1939.

In the same period he embarked on a policy of rapid industrialisation, and by the outbreak of the Second World War Russia had become one of the world’s major industrial powers. The strength of its economic power was shown during the Second World War, when Russia defeated Nazi Germany in the ‘Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union’ (1941–45). By 1945 Russia had become one of two superpowers which dominated world affairs. In 1949 Russia successfully exploded its first nuclear weapon and from 1957 became the leading world power in space exploration with the launch of Sputnik.

Therefore, from 1855 to 1964 Russia had been transformed from the position of Europe’s most socially and economically backward state into a global economic superpower.

The period 1855 to 1964 was also characterised by political repression. From 1855 to 1906 Russia had no national parliament or officially recognised political parties. As a result, opponents of the Tsarist **autocracy** had to operate outside the political system, and some resorted to political terrorism. In 1881, a group of radicals, called ‘People’s Will’, assassinated Tsar Alexander II. In 1887 the same group attempted to assassinate Tsar Alexander III, and by the early twentieth century it seemed that political reform would take place only through revolution. In 1905 revolution engulfed Russia. Among its many causes were Russia’s defeat by Japan in a war in the Far East – which undermined support for the government – and peasant unrest due to taxation and the poor harvest which affected large areas of European Russia. An important element in the revolution was the call for political reform and, although the revolution failed to topple the Tsar, it did lead to the creation of Russia’s first elected national parliament, the Duma. Control over the government, however, remained firmly in the hands of the Tsar.

Dictatorship: Government by a person or group who hold political power without democratic consent.

Collectivisation: The merging of individual peasant farms to create large state-owned farms.

Autocracy: Government by one person.

The end of Tsarism was brought about by military defeat in the First World War. By early 1917 Russia was on the brink of defeat at the hands of the German and Austro-Hungarian armed forces. In February 1917 a spontaneous revolution led to the fall of the Tsar and his replacement by a republic which supported the introduction of democracy. From February to October 1917, Russia experienced a period of liberal political reform under the Provisional Government. But this brief period was brought to an abrupt end with the Bolshevik seizure of power. Under Lenin, the Bolsheviks reintroduced political repression from above. Political parties and a free press were banned. Concentration camps for political opponents were established and opponents were arrested and imprisoned by a new secret police, the Cheka. By the time of Lenin's death, in 1924, Russia had a dictatorship more severe and oppressive than anything experienced under the Tsars.

What Lenin had created, his successor – Stalin – took to extremes. In the Great Purges of 1934 to 1939, Stalin launched a terror campaign against the entire Russian population. The secret police, known at the NKVD from 1934, imprisoned millions, and murdered hundreds of thousands. No one seemed to be immune from this government-sponsored terror. Members of the Bolshevik/Communist party and leaders of the armed forces were all subject to Stalin's purges. By 1939 Stalin was the undisputed, all-powerful ruler of Russia in a way that any Tsar would have envied.

1.4 Key themes in Russian history 1855–1964

Therefore, the two major themes of Russian history from 1855 to 1964 were radical reform from above, instigated by Russia's rulers, and political repression. However, for a brief period, from February to October 1917 it seemed that Russian history was going to follow a different path. In February 1917 Tsar Nicholas II abdicated, bringing to an end over 300 years of rule by his family, the Romanovs. From February 1917 Russia seemed to be following a new political course – one towards western-style parliamentary government. However, this experiment towards democracy was short-lived. It was brought down by a variety of factors. Russia's decision to continue fighting in the First World War was deeply unpopular. Also the fall of the Tsar saw a breakdown of government in the countryside, with peasants taking land for themselves. In many ways Russia was in a state of anarchy from February to October 1917. By October it seemed that the Provisional Government that had ruled Russia since the fall of the Tsar would be replaced. In that month, in a military coup, the Bolshevik Party seized power and declared the creation of the world's first communist government. Faced with massive opposition within Russia and intervention by foreign powers such as Britain, France and the USA, the Bolsheviks established a political dictatorship. Once established this dictatorship lasted until the fall of the USSR in 1991. However, attempts were made to 'lighten' communist control. The first came in 1956, when Soviet leader Khrushchev 'denounced' Stalin at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU). From 1956 the worst excesses of Stalinist rule were removed. These included the excessive use of concentration camps (Gulags) for political opponents. Yet, when Khrushchev fell from power, in 1964, the communists were still firmly in control of Russia. It was still a one-party state without a free press and with central control of both politics and the economy.

1. Draw a timeline from 1855 to 1964, highlighting the periods when Russia experienced rapid political, social and/or economic change.

2. In 1964, in what ways had Russia changed since 1855, and in what ways was it still similar?

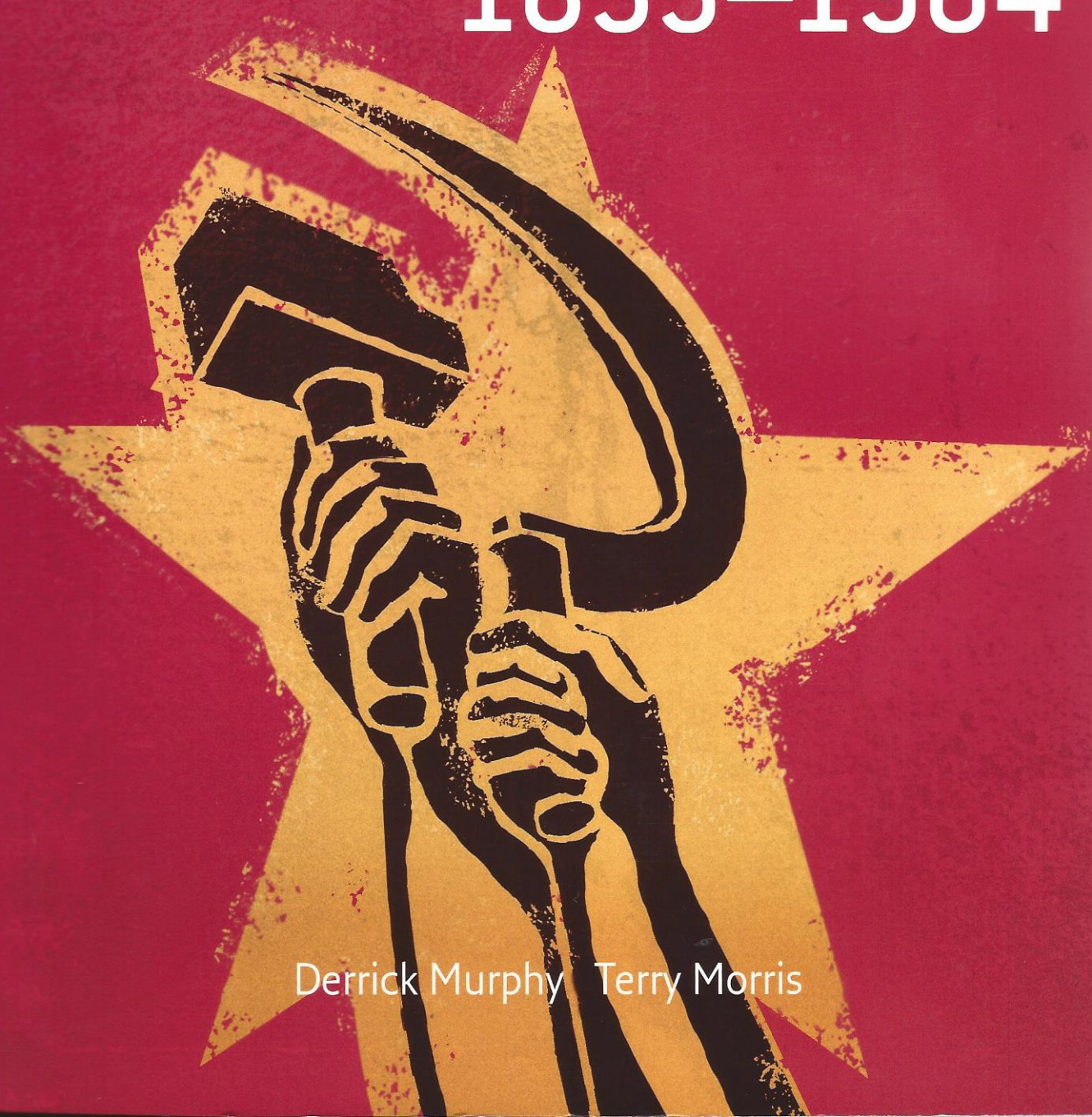
3. Who do you regard as the ruler who brought most change to Russia in the period 1855 to 1964? Explain your answer.

 Collins

Flagship History

RUSSIA

1855–1964



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