

19TH CENTURY RUSSIAN HISTORY

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Decembrist Revolt, Russia's Intelligentsia, Emancipation of Serfs

Introduction

Between the 1780s and the mid-19th century Britain became the world's first industrial power, with other countries on the Continent, such as France, attempting to follow its lead. Industrialization gave the modernized armies of Europe an increasing technological edge over Russia. The democratic ideals of the French Revolution were also spreading across Europe at the same time. While political reform broadened the social base on which western European governments were founded, Russia pursued the opposite course. Educated Russians, attracted to Western political ideas, increasingly came to oppose the autocratic system under which they lived in the absence of reform.

Russia was unable to respond to this multiple —economic, technological, social, and political —threat.

Frustrated by Russia's lack of change, a number of young nobles and a group of army officers and civilians committed to Enlightenment values formed secret political societies to overthrow Alexandr I. After Alexandr I's untimely death, they launched a revolt on December 14, the day Alexandr I's brother Nicholas I was to take the throne.

The Decembrist revolt was the first revolutionary attempt carried out by educated members of the Russian elite who wanted political and social change. Most of the Decembrists had fought in Europe during the Napoleonic Wars and had learned about Western political ideas and seen social conditions which were better than those that existed in Russia.

The supporters included some of Russia's leading literary figures, including Alexandr Pushkin and Alexandr Griboyedov.

The majority of those who supported the Decembrist movement were exiled to Siberia. Five leaders of the revolt were sentenced to death, and over 100 were exiled to Siberia.

The impact of both European ideas and the Decembrists revolt were the start of organized revolutionary resistance to the tsarist regime. Such resistance would take many forms and experienced numerous failures in the next century, but it did not end until the monarchy was overthrown in 1917.

In the first half of the 19th century Russian thought was strongly influenced by French and German Romanticism. Some Russian Romantics, particularly the Slavophiles, reflected the German philosopher Hegel's idea of the historical evolution of the human spirit. The influence of these ideas, together with Russia's expanding imperial presence, stimulated a modern spirit of nationalism and the idea that Russia possessed a unique mission.

The second quarter of the 19th century witnessed the marked beginning of the golden age of Russian Literature. This era, which enriched both Russian and all of Western culture was marked by the major works of A.S. Pushkin, M. Yu. Lermontov, N. Gogol, I.Turgenev, L. Tolstoy and F. Dostoevsky.

The other major development was political, to the degree that political expression was allowed in Russia. This involved a new segment of Russian society that was a direct development of

the spread of education and Western ideas known as the intelligentsia. Today the term has a broad meaning, covering all whose interests lie in the realm of ideas and the arts. However, in 19th-century Russia *intelligentsia* referred to a much narrower group: educated, socially aware individuals whose main priority in life was to promote beneficial changes in Russian society. They were inspired by European ideas, especially those connected with German romanticism and idealism, which had reached Russia by the 1830s.

The intelligentsia was at first made up of noblemen, but they were joined by people from the lower classes as education spread, the *raznochintsy*, which in Russian means "people of various ranks." Unlike the nobles, many *raznochintsy* had known poverty and hardship. They were far more alienated from conventional Russian values and were more radical in their opinions. Russia's intelligentsia were divided into two groups: Slavophiles and the Westernizers.

Westernizers continued to criticize Russian Orthodoxy, advocated improving education, enacting constitutional government, and stressed the importance of individual freedom, science, and rationalism.

Conservative Slavophiles argued that Russia had to find solutions based on its own traditions. Following the lead of German idealism, they argued that each nationality was unique. Russia's uniqueness came from three institutions: the tsarist autocracy, the Russian Orthodox Church, and the peasant commune. Russia's troubles began when it abandoned its spiritual and cooperative traditions and began to imitate the rationalism of the West. Slavophiles opposed serfdom, but not the institution of the tsar. However, they were against everything that their tsar Peter I had done in the name of westernization for Russia. For them Peter I was Russia's greatest enemy.

Serfdom was increasingly viewed as immoral by Russia's intellectuals. However, the nobles did not want to give up their serfs, fearing they would not survive without them. Alexander II understood the destructive effects of serfdom on his country - in economic terms, forced peasant labor was highly inefficient. Many of the landed estates operated at a loss, and members of the gentry were often in debt. In 1856 he advocated the abolition of serfdom and moved immediately to abolish it. Alexander II issued his *Emancipation Edict* (March 3, 1861), granting the serfs their freedom.

Reading Assignments

Evtuhov, C., Frank, D.G., Stites, R., *The Age of Resoration: Russia in Europe, 1815-1830*, A History of Russia, Peoples, Legends, Events, Forces, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, New York, 2004, p.329-346.

Evtuhov, C., Frank, D.G., Stites, R., *Nicholas I: Monarchy, Society, and Empire, 1825-1855*, A History of Russia, Peoples, Legends, Events, Forces, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, New York, 2004, p.347-370.

Evtuhov, C., Frank, D.G., Stites, R., *Russian Society and Daily Life in the Twilight of Serfdom*, A History of Russia, Peoples, Legends, Events, Forces, Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, New York, 2004, p.371-387.

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Ely, C., *The Question of Civil Society in Late Imperial Russia*, A Companion to Russian History, edited by Abbott Gleason, Blackwell Publishing, 2009, p. 225-242.

Morson, G. S., *The Intelligentsia and its Critics*, A Companion to Russian History, edited by Abbott Gleason, Blackwell Publishing, 2009, p. 261-278.

Wachtel, A., *Russian Modernism*, A Companion to Russian History, edited by Abbott Gleason, Blackwell Publishing, 2009, p. 279-294.

Questions

What was the impact and long-term consequences of the Decembrist Revolt in the history of Russia?

What role did the intelligentsia play in Russian society and autocracy?

Why were Western values foreign to Russian culture? Why did they inspire political revolts in Russia?