

# RUSSIAN HISTORY - GOVERNMENT

## Overview

Beginning with the first Kievan state, and following the transition from paganism to Eastern Orthodoxy adopted from Byzantium, Vladimir I began to unite the fragmented small states into one state, with one religion and one language, abandoning the earlier system of rule, and adopted the Byzantine system of government. Vladimir I's successors followed in his footsteps, eventually creating an autocratic monarchy that continued until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. However, the problems and dissatisfaction created by this form of government accumulated, leading to the Bolshevik revolution in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. While the new Soviet regime resolved some of the problems of the autocratic monarchy, its totalitarian nature and state-controlled economy created its own set of problems. Gorbachev's attempts to reform the Soviet system in the 1980s set off a chain of events that the regime was unable to control and which resulted in the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the creation of the Russian Federation.

## ANCIENT PERIOD

All prehistoric nomadic tribes lacked a formal government, remaining tribal in structure. They were initially ruled by their chieftains and later by kings.

Initially, early people were organized in tribal groups, but these tribal groups were not ethnic in character. Not until the Neolithic period does it appear that tribal groups united to form larger units that would become the basis for later ethnic groups.

In addition, these prehistoric communities were composed of autonomous groups and villages, and did not organized themselves into any form complex enough to be regarded as a state. However, the formation of sedentary groups resulted in social organization at the level of chiefdoms with a fair degree of social stratification.

By the time of the Scythians, social organization was far more complex. Although pastoralists, the Scythians created alliances formed from a large number of tribes, and had their own armies made up primarily of pastoral nomads. Scythian ruling dynasties were above the tribes, giving them the ability take advantage of the resources - military and economic - of many small groups, and to coordinated their activities. Over time, as the Scythians adopted a more sedentary lifestyle and became more assimilated into local agricultural populations, their system of government became more established. Despite these developments, the Scythian dynasties lacked the permanence or the bureaucratic traditions of a true state. These strong, homogenous tribal alliances were comprised of Thracians and Proto-Slavs in the West, Finnish tribes in the north-east, and the ancestors of the Adyghe people. This was the earliest class state system ruled by an aristocracy and divided into regions where the inhabitants were engaged in agriculture and cattle breeding.

As for the later Sarmatians, they were organized not on the basis of individual ethnic tribes, but rather on the basis of tribal confederations. This was a result of their assimilation of various other ethnic groups in the process of their long movement to the west.

Regarding the early Slavs, there is not a scholarly consensus on either the way in which the Proto-Slavs lived or how they were ruled. Some claim that they were sedentary, living in the forests and swamps of eastern Europe, while others state that they were nomadic. As for how they ruled themselves the theories range from monarchy to primitive democracy.

## POST CLASSICAL PERIOD

### Rurikid Dynasty:

**Kievan State:** In its earliest stage it was the Varangians (Vikings) who acted as catalysts for the political development of the dispersed, warring East Slavic tribes by establishing tribal unions. It was the Rurikovich (of Varangian origin) who established the first Russian dynasty, and the Rus princes and high ecclesiastical officials of separate principalities exercised their authority in a central aristocratic, administrative district.

It was Vladimir I who chose Orthodox Christianity as Russia's official religion, a decision that had a decisive influence on the development of the political structure of the Russian state. A political system had evolved in Kievan Russia by the 11<sup>th</sup> century in which Kiev was the center of princely authority, legitimate rulers were those who descended from the Rurikid dynasty, and succession was based on seniority.

The Kievan political system was authoritarian, but many institutions had democratic characteristics. The office of Prince was Kiev's major political institution. The Prince, in addition to his military leadership, provided justice, headed the Orthodox Church, and administered the government via the *druzhina* (retinue). The *veche* was a popular assembly, the highest legislative and judicial authority to resolve major issues.

**Mongol Period:** During the first century of the Mongol conquest (1240), the Rus principalities served as effective tax collectors. By collecting tribute from other Russian princes, the central state strengthened its political position.

**Moscow (Muscovite) State:** Moscow had increased its power and prestige by establishing good relations with the Mongols, proving that they were reliable tribute payers and upholders of order in order to obtain a *yarlyk* that authorized their rule. The Mongol Khans ruled Russian territory via Russian princes, and sent their envoys to supervise the collection of tribute.

The Moscow Grand Prince, to rule his principality, summoned his boyars to periodical gatherings (Boyar Duma) when important decisions needed to be taken. Concentrating power and gaining the consensus of the other princes and boyars became the paramount priority for the Grand Princes. Up until the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, Moscow still had a nominal overlord, the Khan of the Great Horde. This ended when disunity came to an end and all the principalities were integrated into a single patrimony, that is into the Moscow state. The Russian Orthodox church also emancipated itself from Byzantium, and Moscow became the ecclesiastical center.

**Oprichnina and Zemshchina:** During the reign of Ivan the Terrible, in order to demonstrate that he was the undisputed ruler of Rus, and that the princes and boyars were his subjects, the tsar adopted the title of Tsar of all Russia. Ivan the Terrible's unhealthy life increased his paranoia and brutality, and in order to reduce the Chosen Council's (advisory council) power, dominated by the boyars, he threatened that he would abdicate to the Council. He left Moscow and began to live in Alexandrovskaya Sloboda, agreeing to return only if the boyars granted him absolute power and placed no obstacles to his absolute rule. He then divided his realm into two separate states. He organized a state, the *oprichnina*, that constituted his personal domain and which he administered as he wished. The rest of Russia was ruled by the *zemshchina*, the Boyar Duma. In his domain, he exiled the boyars and appanage princes sent them to their new territories, and gave their ancestral lands to his servitors, the *oprichniki*. The 6,000 *oprichniki*, who dressed in black and carried a dog's head and broom on their horses to symbolize their mission of hunting down and sweeping away the tsar's enemies, began to arrest, torture, imprison and execute all traitors.

For seven years Ivan IV carried out this oppression against his own people. Thousands of boyars lost their lands and their lives. Many innocent people died, especially in towns that were thought to be sheltering traitors. In Novgorod alone, in just five weeks in 1570, the *oprichniki* killed an estimated 40,000 people. Two years later, in 1572 Ivan IV abolished the *oprichnina*, and executed most of the leaders of the *oprichniki*.

Ivan the Terrible, by killing his son and heir in a fit of rage and leaving only a sickly son, Fedor, as his successor, brought an end of the Rurikid dynasty. Moscow descended into civil war, a period known as the *Time of Troubles*.

## EARLY MODERN PERIOD

**The Time of Troubles (Smutnoe vremya):** During the *Time of Troubles* which followed the death of Boris Godunov in 1603, pretenders appeared, and rival boyars created a weak government and autocracy. The Rurikid dynasty had come to an end, leaving the Empire without leadership.

Russia faced dynastic struggles, famine, uprisings, and invasion by Polish and Swedish armies. This chaotic period ended in 1613 with the appearance of a new dynasty, the Romanovs.

### **The Romanovs:**

In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Russia's autocratic form of government, while cruel and oppressive by European standards, enabled Moscow to control its vast domains. The royal family, the court, and the administrative bodies preserved their essential nature in that they provided central coordination to mobilize people and distribute resources in the provinces. *Mestnichestvo*, an elite lineage hierarchy, determined entry into the administrative bodies, but afterwards promotion was based on merit. The Boyar Duma and *Zemskii Sobor* (Town Council) were not that powerful, and uninstitutionalized, but they sometimes played a very important role in the formation of state policy.

One of the institutions that was neglected for centuries was serfdom. By the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Russian serfdom, which had developed gradually over a period of about 150 years beginning in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, developed into an increasingly harsh system.

**Westernization:** When Peter the Great ascended to the throne, he began his reign with the modernization of the Russian government based on techniques used in Europe. By creating the modern Russian state, he introduced significant changes in important institutions, founded the modern Russian army, built Russia's first major industrial base, and forced the country's elite to adopt certain Western customs and habits.

Peter I's most important administrative reforms were financial, which were designed to collect more revenue from the Russians to finance his wars. He taxed everything, and even introduced a head tax (soul tax) from every male peasant. Anyone who resisted his orders were punished by a political police known as the *Preobrazhensky Prikaz*.

Those who suffered the most from the Peter's policies were the peasants. Peter paid for his expensive projects by raising their taxes drastically, and serfdom was strengthened and made even more oppressive.

Despite his reforms, he came from an autocratic political tradition, believing that autocracy alone could establish and guarantee the power and greatness of Russia. Thus, he believed that the nobility should serve the state and that his subjects should accept without question the state's demands and restrictions. He wanted to create what he called a 'regular state', adopting European patterns of government, with Sweden and England as his preferred models.

Peter replaced founded colleges to replace the old chanceries, with responsibilities for specific areas such as foreign affairs, the army, the navy, and state revenue, and wanted to ensure that professional, qualified officials ran the colleges and the government. Nobles were required to have training and skill to work for the state, and promotions were based on merit and experience. His *Table of Ranks* was created for military, civilian, and court service in 1722, and introduced a promotion system based on personal ability and performance instead of birth and genealogy. However, none of these measures worked as planned, since Russia lacked trained officials to run the bureaucracy.

Peter also instituted church reform by abolishing the Patriarchate and replacing it with an administrative board called the *Holy Synod*, where senior bishops were appointed by the Emperor. As a result, the church became a constituent component of the state.

**The Enlightenment:** Catherine attempted to change the social and cultural structure of the monarchy to give it a legal foundation similar to the 18<sup>th</sup> century European legal monarchy. She corresponded with leading thinkers of Europe's Enlightenment such as the French philosophers Montesquieu, Voltaire and Diderot, and issued her *Nakaz (Instruction)* in the hope that it would be a major Enlightenment achievement. Her *Nakaz* was compiled to be used as a guide for an elected Legislative Commission she created to write a new law code, but she never gave the Commission the right to limit her power. Although Catherine the Great was a proponent of Enlightenment principles, she firmly believed that Russia required autocratic rule, and left serfdom, an institution condemned by the Enlightenment, untouched. Instead, she extended and strengthened serfdom, and left serfs with no legal protection against abuse.

In order to prevent rebellions and recognizing the danger at the provincial level, Catherine II decided to create new local government institutions, provinces and districts, in which the nobility would play a major role. This decision was promulgated in the Statute on Provincial Administration in 1775 and the Law on Provincial Police in 1782. The reforms abolished the huge provinces and divided Russia into 41 (later 50) smaller provinces, each headed by an appointed governor. Each province was further sub-divided into 10 districts.

She also issued the Charter to the Nobility (1785) in provinces, districts and cities which granted them the rights to keep their property, exempted them from corporal punishment, and allowed them to set up their own assemblies and appoint local officials. This form of local government in the provinces, districts and cities lasted until 1917.

Her son Paul reintroduced government centralization by restoring some of the central departments abolished by Catherine the Great. The Senate remained the supreme judicial authority. He reversed the policy for nobles enshrined in the *Charter of the Nobility* that was introduced by his mother by abolishing most of their privileges. He also increased taxes on noble estates, insisted on much tighter discipline in the army and included the section that made nobles immune from corporal punishment. By issuing a decree that restored the serfs' right to petition the Tsar, reducing their work load during weekdays, and prohibiting the sale of serfs without land he made powerful enemies. In 1797, he introduced a decree affecting the territories belonging to the state, and the village.

## NINETEENTH CENTURY

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the country was still ruled by autocratic monarchs who referred to themselves as 'Emperor and Autocrat of all Russia'. Alexander I created functional ministries, permitted the senate to have some supervisory powers over the government bureaucracy and judicial powers to issue decrees subject to the Tsar's veto. He also reaffirmed his autocracy by making it clear that his autocratic powers would remain unchallenged and unquestioned. His advisor, Mikhail Speransky compiled a comprehensive administrative law designed to change arbitrary autocratic government, and to establish the Russian state on the rule of law as steps toward a genuine constitutional regime. He also promoted the idea of merit in state service through compulsory exams. However, many of the nobility resented his egalitarian approach to the system, and Alexander I also showed no interest in Speransky's restructuring, fearing that his power would be limited by legislature, and dismissed him in 1812. One of the positive developments during Alexander I's reign was a law he passed in 1803 that encouraged landowners to free their serfs.

### **Decembrist Revolt and State Measures:**

The Decembrist revolt was the first revolutionary attempt carried out by educated members of the Russian elite who wanted political and social change. They had committed themselves to Enlightenment values and had formed secret political societies to overthrow Alexander I. The revolt was launched after Alexander I's unexpected death in 1825, on the day Alexander I's brother Nicholas I was to ascend to the throne.

Nicholas I, traumatized by this event, decided to change the existing administrative system. He personally scrutinized his brother's administrative reforms and the demands of the Decembrists, and then made some modest improvements in the administration. The legislative, judicial and executive bodies in the government were to be separated. In 1826 Nicholas I established a private bureaucracy with several sections: his Majesty's Own Imperial Chancery; the Second Section of the Chancery which was dominated by Speransky who compiled a 48-volume compilation of Russian law, the laws dealing with government and social structure in 1833; and the Third Section which symbolized Nicholas' whole regime. The Third Section administered a new political police who gathered information about the opponents of the regime, watched state institutions and political prisons, handled censorship, and arrested and exiled the revolutionaries. The government also introduced strict control on education, limiting lower-class children to elementary-level education and reducing the autonomy of universities. Incompetent, poorly educated and poorly paid officials could not implement the laws properly and began to take bribes to support their families. A reform of local government was instituted in 1837. Considerable power was granted to the governors, and the local police were strengthened. In 1838 a network of local *Provincial Messengers* were established in the provinces. The most important of his reforms was to set up a committee to deal with serfdom, and lay the groundwork for limited emancipation.

**Abolition of Serfdom:** After Nicholas I's death, tsar Alexander II, the liberator, attempted to carry out some political reforms. The first was the idea of liberating the serfs. The Tsar, retaining his full autocratic powers, well-educated and well-prepared, recognized the need for land reform and the abolition of serfdom "from above" before it abolished itself "from below". The emancipation edict issued in 1861 freed the serfs from personal slavery, but did not make a free grant of land - serfs had to pay for any land they received. Therefore, the peasants felt cheated by the whole system.

His reforms also included local government reforms, approved in 1864, which permitted each district to set up a *Zemstvo* (local council). These councils provided local education, health, transportation and taught new agricultural techniques. However, the right to elect members to these councils was restricted to the privileged classes. Although the central government lacked both the human resources or the will to fully carry out this reform, the reform still improved conditions in rural Russia considerably. Alexander II also carried out a series of judicial and military reforms despite powerful opposition.

After Alexander II's assassination by a revolutionary, the assassins were ruthlessly hunted down and executed, and his son, Alexander III sought to limit local autonomy. He instituted a series of strict measures that eliminated many of his father's reforms. Alexander III, influenced by his personal tutor, the procurator of Holy Synod, Konstantin Pobedonostsev who rejected parliamentary democracy, defended the old alliance between Tsarism and Orthodoxy.

## TWENTIETH CENTURY

**October Manifesto and Creation of Duma Monarchy:** The Bloody Sunday movement and the first revolution of 1905, both of which took place in the aftermath of the disastrous Russo-Japanese War, led to the tsarist government making significant changes to the existing system of government. In the revolution of 1905 masses of workers and peasants led by intellectuals revolted against the autocracy and demanded the rule of law and a constituent assembly. Despite the failure of the revolution of 1905, when combined with strikes, demonstrations, economic problems, famine, military defeat and high casualties in the war tsar Nicholas II was pressured to initiate some reforms and make some serious concessions to his people. He issued his *October Manifesto*, drafted by his minister of finance Sergei Witte, which announced the creation of a *State Duma*. The Manifesto promised the people of the empire basic civil rights. Later, the freedoms granted in the manifesto were canceled. The tsar still made executive decisions when the Duma was not in session, had the right to dissolve it anytime, and veto any legislation. The First Duma was dissolved because they demanded radical land reform, and the Second Duma suffered a similar fate. Russia had a real parliament, but the country continued to experience revolutionary and counterrevolutionary violence.

**Stolypin's Agrarian Reforms:** After the Duma's dissolution, the minister of the interior Peter Stolypin introduced a plan to create a prosperous landowning class. Stolypin's agrarian reforms also gave the

peasants opportunities to leave their village to set up separate farms. This reform allowed peasants to purchase land through the Peasant Bank and to migrate to Siberia and Russian Central Asia from overpopulated provinces. By 1916 about half of all peasant households had left their communes and owned their land privately.

However, Russia went through a famine in 1906-1907, in 1911 discontent in factories and universities resurfaced, and new problems appeared as industrial politics became increasingly important.

**World War I:** During WWI Nicholas II took the command of the army in 1915 and left control of the government to the tsarina and Rasputin, a self-proclaimed holy man. Rasputin and the tsarina shifted ministers without reason, did not know how to exercise governmental power, and the Duma and the government were left without national leadership. The Duma immediately formed a *Progressive Bloc* led by the Kadets and Octobrists parties which advocated a government capable of winning public confidence, demanded political amnesty, religious freedom, and freedom for trade unions. Premier Goremykin rejected this attempt to limit the autocrat's power, and in 1916 the relations between the Duma and the executive organ worsened when Duma deputies accused the government and the tsarina of conspiring with the Germans.

Meanwhile, by early 1917 there were 7 million dead, wounded, captured and missing in the Russian army, and Moscow and St. Petersburg were desperately short of food. Strikes were widespread and Nicholas II did nothing to stop them; in March 1917, revolutionaries brought down the autocracy, the Romanov Dynasty. The country fell into the hands of liberal and moderate elites who quickly organized the Provisional Government, ending three hundred years of Romanov autocracy.

**Provisional Government and Petrograd Soviet:** The Provisional Government was to exercise authority until a democratically elected Constituent Assembly could establish a permanent regime. The Government granted full freedom of speech, press, assembly, and religion, and equality to all citizens. Provincial governors were abolished and local governmental officials were elected. Restrictions on minority groups were lifted. However, the Provisional Government's intention to remain in the war, unreliable concessions, and weakness led to the formation of an alternate center of power, the Petrograd Soviet, a proletarian organ. The Petrograd Soviet, unlike the Provisional Government, demanded an immediate end to the war; confiscation of private land; the destruction of the bureaucracy, the army and the police; and the cession of all state power to the workers' soviets. The Provisional Government began to lose the battle in the factories, in the countryside and in the army. The Bolsheviks gained control in most of the urban soviets, and expelled the Provisional Government. However, when the Bolsheviks failed to win a majority of seats in elections for the Constituent Assembly and Lenin forcibly dissolved the assembly, indicating that their intention was one-man, one-party rule, they found themselves at war with their various opponents.

In 1922 the Bolsheviks proclaimed the formation of the Soviet Union which was organized into a type of ethnic federal system, and Lenin urged all of the 15 republics to create a system of national republics, equal in status, and allowed them limited autonomy. But during Stalin's rule these republics were subject to the authoritarian control of the central government.

**Totalitarian System:** During Stalin the government was highly centralized, and all other parties and cultural organizations were all closed. The political system was run by the Communist Party, the Politburo and the government ministries. The monolithic state supervised and controlled the lives of all of its citizens; any opposition was significantly diminished and via purges Soviet citizens disappeared or were eliminated. The legal basis of the Soviet political system was the Constitution of 1936, but it meant little in practice. The central government retained full power, and all nationalities had their territories and cultural institutions, but the All Union Communist Party, dominated by the Russians, ran everything. The government exercised an intense Russification and assimilation policy, and forced collectivization and industrialization.

**De-Stalinization:** After Stalin's death in 1953 none of his successors gained his arbitrary power. Khrushchev preserved the main features of the Soviet system, but denounced Stalin's crimes, loosened control over Soviet satellites, and urged a return to Leninism and collective leadership. He increased the party's authority over the technocrats. He reduced political control in all spheres of life to encourage the

citizens to have a stronger commitment to socialism through greater participation in the system. Despite his efforts, he earned the enmity of other Party members, and the Presidium demanded his resignation.

**Gerontocracy:** Andropov and Chernenko maintained the old Soviet system by relying on their past experience, and advocate no reforms. However, this policy produced no beneficial results for the Soviet Union, because conditions within the country had changed and it needed to be reformed.

**Gorbachev's Democratization:** Mikhail Gorbachev became the General Secretary in 1985, and introduced a series of political and economic reforms to improve the stalled Soviet economy, and bring more flexibility to the government. In order to revive the economy, Gorbachev introduced *perestroika*, meaning restructuring. *Perestroika* allowed more freedoms in the market economy, but also allowed opposition groups to speak out against government policy. However, Gorbachev's democratization and liberalization set a series of events into motion that, in some ways, played an important role in the fall of communism, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and the calls for independence from the Soviet republics.

### Discussion/Questions

- 1- How did Russia recover from the *Time of Troubles*? Why did Russia find itself in the middle of two wars during the time of recovery?
- 2- What were the outcomes of Peter the Great's reforms? How did the state structure change under his Westernization process? What was the relationship between the church and the state?
- 3-How was Russian society affected by Enlightenment ideas?
- 4-Why was Catherine the Great unsuccessful in applying Enlightenment principles to the Russian administration?
- 5- What were the impacts and long-term consequences of the Decembrist Revolt in the history of Russia?
- 6- Why was a reformist tsar, Alexander II, assassinated by a revolutionary?
- 7- How did the Age of Enlightenment affect Russian intellectuals?
- 8- What was the social impact of revolutionary ideas in Russia?
- 9- Which political movements that evolved in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century affected Russian society?
- 10-Why did the Provisional Government fail against the Petrograd Soviets?
- 11- What were the political impacts of Gorbachev's democratization?

### Reading

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