

# EASTERN EUROPEAN GOVERNMENT

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## POSTCLASSICAL PERIOD

### Eastern Europe in the Postclassical Period

**The issue of Christianity** Government in both eastern and western Europe in the postclassical period was strongly affected by the rise of Christianity. But the political implications of Christianity are not easily summarized, with challenges somewhat different from those involved with Islam. Christianity was launched separately from the Roman state and was recurrently persecuted by the state, from the crucifixion of Christ onward. Deeply pacifist originally, Christians normally refused to serve in the Roman army. Gradually the church began to build a structure separate from the state. However, in 313 the Emperor Constantine famously accepted Christianity and began to treat it effectively as a state religion, among other things interfering directly in doctrinal controversies. Christians for the most part welcomed the shift, now free from persecution and benefiting from state sponsorship – adherence grew rapidly. Military service was now accepted (a change the Emperor insisted upon). From this point onward Christian leaders might welcome state support, including effort to repress religious dissent, and, in turn, actively defended the state essentially as readily as did Muslims. But the notion of separate goals, and a separate set of precedents, persisted as well, occasionally intruding on affairs of state and even provoking occasional resistance (though Christian leaders, like their Muslim counterparts, normally urged obedience unless the state was egregiously flouting religion).

**Orthodox Christianity** These complexities were less marked in Eastern Europe than in the West. Eastern Orthodoxy resisted the sway of the Roman papacy – the institution most clearly capable of standing separate from the state – and in the schism of 1054 renounced papal authority altogether – one of the main causes of the rift. Orthodox church structure remained somewhat apart from the state, but the gap was narrow. In the Byzantine Empire, the most powerful government unit in the region through the postclassical period, the government appointed top church officials, essentially operating as a theocracy. Imperial law stipulated that subjects must be Christian, with others regarded as “mad and foolish persons” and heretics (though in fact there were many of them, including a Jewish minority, throughout the imperial period). Christianity was one of the key cultural props to the Empire, and the government saw protection and financing of religion as a basic function. In the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries the government became directly involved in an iconoclast controversy, periodically seeking to ban the worship of icons but then pulling back amid popular protest; ultimately a settlement restored the position of icons. The government also sponsored many religious buildings, including the great Sophia cathedral.

**Byzantine government** Despite the contention that this empire was simply a continuation of Rome (the idea of a separate Byzantine label occurred after the fall of the empire; previously, it was simply called the Roman Empire), in fact administration changed considerably. (Among other things, Greek replaced Latin as the official language of state.) Emphasis on the emperor and his divine appointment increased; a senate institution remained but was powerless. Regional units, or *themes*, were regularized and their leaders wielded both civil and military functions. Byzantine bureaucrats proved fairly adaptable, though they depended heavily on support from the imperial court. Jobs in the upper bureaucracy constituted a clear path to aristocratic status, though there was competition from the existing nobility as well. (Despite the label “byzantine” applied to unwieldy bureaucracy, it is not clear that the actual administration was particularly cumbersome.) In terms of functions, besides religion, the Empire emphasized its role in

jurisprudence; Justinian, an early emperor, issued an extensive revision of the Roman law code, which had great staying power. Much attention went to warfare, both aggressive, as the empire tried but failed to recapture more Roman territory, and then defensive. Diplomacy gained a new role as the Empire struggled, often quite successfully, for survival: a “Bureau of Barbarians” oversaw relationships with other states as well as information-gathering and outright spying. The appointment of diplomatic envoys, and the reception of representatives from other states, constituted one of the important innovations of the Empire, later influencing diplomatic practices in other parts of Europe. The state also regulated internal and foreign trade, and maintained a monopoly on the issuance of coinage. A great deal of attention was devoted to provisioning the capital, Constantinople, seeking to keep down the price of grain – along with religion and diplomacy, perhaps the government’s most distinctive function.

**Legacy** Byzantine government practices and claims influenced other states in the Balkans – often in direct rivalry with the empire. The ultimate defeat of the empire by the Ottoman Turks, during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, led obviously to a major religious change, but the Turks also maintained a number of administrative practices. In the long run, however, the most important imperial aftermath involved the development of the Russian monarchy.

**Government in postclassical Russia** Government in what is now western Russia and Ukraine – or Kievan Rus’ – was a new phenomenon as Slavic peoples settled to agriculture and trade increased. The state operated from the 9<sup>th</sup> century until the Mongol conquests of the 13<sup>th</sup>, constituting a loose and fairly loose federation of various Slavic and other groups under the Rurik dynasty. At its height in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries the monarchy was able to decree Christianity as the official religion and issue the region’s first law code. Though kings like Vladimir claimed considerable powers (he was the convert to Christianity who ordered his subject to follow suite), royal rule depended on collaboration of regional nobles and a number of municipal governments (one of which, Novgorod, ultimately split away as an independent republic). Byzantine influence showed, however, not only in conversion to Orthodox Christianity and close church-state relations, but in claims to royal authority and ultimately to the idea of empire – though this would emerge more clearly after the Mongol period when Russian rulers, now centered in Moscow, took on the title tsar, or Caesar.

### Study questions

1. How did the government implications of Christianity and Islam compare?
2. What were the most distinctive government features of the Byzantine empire?
3. How was the Russian state different from the Byzantine during the postclassical period?

### Further reading

Michael Angold, *The Byzantine Empire, 1025-1204: a political history* (Longman, 1997)

Steven Runciman, *The Byzantine Theocracy* (Cambridge University Press, 2004)

## EARLY MODERN PERIOD

### Early Modern Russia

**Expansion** From the effort to remove Mongol control, a new Russian state formed around the princes of Moscow, one of whom would soon claim the title of Caesar (tsar). This was an expansionist state, focused particularly on pushing into Central Asia – where, along with Chinese and Ottoman gains – nomadic peoples were subject to formal governments for the first time. But military expansion also took Russia westward, where it would soon become a factor in European affairs. And expansion also moved east, reaching the Pacific. The result, gradually, was one of the great land empires in world history, which raised obvious questions about territorial government. Russia began to border other great powers, such as the Ottomans, China and east-central European states like Poland. This heightened the state’s focus on military strength and recurrent expansion.

**Tsar and aristocracy** In the Caesarian tradition, tsars claimed great power. Control over the Orthodox Church was a major source of support, and periodically the government sought to introduce a variety of

religious reforms. But the tsar also claimed a legacy from the khans, to appeal for support from the Muslim minority. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century onward, the government also issued important codes of law. However, in fact, the great empire was governed in a rather decentralized fashion, with great reliance on the nobility as sources of bureaucrats and military leaders, but also local rule through serfdom. Serfdom had spread initially as peasants sought landlord protection from the Mongols, but now it became more extensive, giving landlords political as well as economic control. Nobles progressively gained greater rights to punish recalcitrant serfs, while overseeing local courts of law. Overall, Russian government involved a careful tension between tsarist claims and military control, and the power of the aristocracy. Recurrent quarrels occurred, as tsars sought to punish powerful nobles or nobles revolted; but on the whole the aristocracy accepted an obligation for loyal state service, particularly in the military, in return for controlling their estates. The central government had some loyal professional bureaucrats as well, while a council represented the aristocracy informally. Great attention was devoted to taxing peasants and merchants, who were carefully regulated. Finally, from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century onward, the tsar developed a secret police force, later called the Okhrana, to identify and suppress opponents of the regime, often through torture. This was a pattern that would continue in Russian government through a variety of subsequent regimes.

**Later reforms** At the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Peter the Great introduced a series of reforms, often labeled modernization. He introduced new controls over the aristocracy, among other things requiring them to adopt Western dress and hairstyles. He cut back the old council, relying on a new, smaller body instead. And he recruited more bureaucrats from the small middle class, reducing reliance on aristocratic service. He also sought to improve the training of the aristocrats themselves, requiring education in mathematics and other subjects. And he further subordinated the church. His model was Western absolutism, and he did regularize the definition of some government offices. He also launched a new scientific academy and the first universities in Russia. With all this, government structure was not modified too fundamentally. Aristocrats' powers over serfs expanded still further, including the possibility of capital punishment. Emphasis on military expansion continued, with often frantic efforts to assure necessary tax revenue. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century Catherine the Great would continue cultural outreach to the West, but she also set up a censorship system to regulate access to Western books, seeking to avoid the increasingly controversial political ideas stemming from the Enlightenment.

### Study questions

1. In what ways did the government depend on the aristocracy?
2. What were the main functions of the Russian state?
3. What was the main thrust of Peter the Great's government reforms?

### Further reading

Nicholas Riasanovsky and Mark Steinberg, *A History of Russia* (9<sup>th</sup> ed., Oxford University Press, 2018)

Lindsey Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great* (Yale University Press, 1998)

## 19TH CENTURY

### 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russia

**Outside the West, Latin America and the empires** The big government question for countries outside the direct orbit of early industrialization, revolution, new independence or colonial status was: what had to be changed to counter growing Western power, in order to preserve some measure of freedom of action. (Or for some: how could major change be avoided, so that basic political and social traditions could be preserved.) Debates over reform measures and their limitations provide a common thread to political developments in Russia, the Middle East, China and Japan – though the specific patterns varied widely. Russia sought to avoid the reform debate in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, despite some internal pressure, but then turned to a mix of change and repression which, among other things, set the stage for the nation's participation in World War I and the ensuing revolution.

**Overall** The first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw little fundamental change in Russian government, with a concerted effort to maintain conservative policies in the face of growing liberalism in Western Europe. Traditional attempts at military expansion continued, mainly at the expense of the Ottoman Empire; but Western nations increasingly sought to limit the gains. Loss in the Crimean War forced a major policy review, leading from 1861 to a two-decade reform period in which a number of changes were introduced, in structure and policy alike. Fundamental shifts were limited however, and the reform period came to a close in 1881, leading to a final period of renewed repression.

**Conservative bulwark** The government largely sought to maintain the status quo after the Napoleonic wars. A rising by liberal nobles was put down in 1825, and Polish nationalist agitation was suppressed. The practice of exiling or imprisoning political dissidents expanded. In 1849 Russia polished its conservative bona fides by intervening against a revolution in Hungary, on behalf of the Habsburg monarch. The tsar continued to maintain fundamental power, aided by his ministers; governorships administered the various provinces. Control over top appointments in the Orthodox church continued. However, Russia's tradition of military expansion was increasingly complicated by British and French opposition, eager to avoid too much Russian intrusion into the Middle East. Gains against the Ottoman Empire were frequently modified in great power conferences. In 1854 the French and British intervened against the latest Russian move, winning a difficult regional war in the Crimea.

**Reform era** Loss in war convinced Russian leaders that changes were needed, if only to keep pace with the West. Serfdom was the key target, as reformers had long urged: and even tsarist ministers now agreed that a more flexible labor force was needed. The system was abolished in 1861, but with payment requirements that continued to antagonize the peasantry; the regime was committed to defending the aristocracy, even amid change. Other reforms affected the legal system: punishment were scaled back and an independent judiciary established on a Western model (however, this independence was subsequently curtailed). Abolition of serfdom required major innovations in local government, since the aristocracy no longer controlled the peasantry directly. Local and provincial councils (*zemstvos*) were elected, with a weighted class voting system that gave disproportionate power to the aristocracy and wealthier townsmen. The councils exercised considerable power over taxation, public works, schools and medical care in their areas, providing some real political experience to new categories of Russians. Overall, the government also began to encourage school expansion, which however proceeded slowly, and sponsored major projects such as railroad development, including the ambitious trans-Siberian railway. The economic minister began actively to promote industrialization, with considerable success.

**After 1881** Most of the reforms were vigorously opposed by conservative factions, including the established bureaucracy which resented intrusions on its domains. Then in 1881 the anarchist assassination of the tsar brought the reform era to a halt. Police repression increased. The government pressed for replacement of regional languages with Russian, and tolerated violent attacks on groups such as the Jews. Zemstvo powers were curbed by the provision that any actions were subject to veto by the provincial, state-appointed governors. Support for industrialization continued, however, under the energetic Sergei Witte, who at one point served as prime minister. Russia's foreign policy woes continued, despite successful alliances with France and ultimately Britain plus some territorial acquisitions at China's expense. The Russians lost a war against rising Japan, in 1905, which led to a significant revolution. Briefly, the tsar had to agree to an elected parliament (Duma) with legislative powers; however, he retained the power to dismiss the body, and within a few years the autocratic system was in effect reestablished. Russian dependence on foreign policy success, to compensate for the loss to Japan, led it to support Serbia (a fellow Slavic nation) in its nationalist dispute with the Habsburg empire in 1914, which in turn brought Russia into World War I.

**Evaluation** Clearly, under pressure, the Russian system was capable of some significant initiatives. However, it sought to avoid major changes at the top, ultimately even restricting concessions to local government; and it aligned itself solidly with the unpopular aristocracy. Most historians believe that its balancing act was doomed even before 1914, particularly when it pulled back from the political changes briefly induced by the 1905 Revolution while also failing to address the ongoing concerns of the peasantry. Heavy reliance on the secret police kept the lid on for a time, but the government could not rise above the additional pressure generated by the hardships of the world war.

## Study questions

1. Why was Russia incapable of introducing a parliamentary monarchy?
2. What were the principal changes achieved during the reform decades?
3. To what extent did the government cause its own revolutionary demise?

## Further reading

Hans Rogger, *Russia in the Age of Modernisation and Revolution, 1881-1917* (Routledge, 1983)

Alexander Pulanov, *Russia in the Nineteenth Century: autocracy, reform and social change, 1814-1914* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005)

## 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

### Soviet Union, and Russia/ Eastern Europe

**Revolution and early steps** The Russian Revolution of 1917 ended the tsarist regime for good, another huge move in the establishment of new republics. Despite a period of civil war as the revolutionary government consolidated, the new regime took quick steps to expand government functions in several ways. New clinics provided medical care, especially for pregnant women and children, as the state began to take new responsibility for health. School systems expanded at all levels, as the government aimed for universal educational requirements. True to communist principles, the state also seized businesses and private property, aiming at government direction of the economy. Faced with resistance, the regime stepped back, and in the New Economic Policy provided greater leeway for some private enterprise. Vigorous discussion occurred also about changes in law, including immediate provisions for gender equality and greater access to divorce. Finally, older personnel were replaced by new communist loyalists, some from worker or peasant backgrounds. Throughout the Soviet period, many people of humble origin managed to rise to positions of political power – including the last major leader, Mikhail Gorbachev.

**The Soviet regime: form of government** The constitution of 1924 set up in principle of federation of republics, designed to represent the major regions and nationalities. Beneath them were local soviets based in towns, villages and factories. Each constituent republic sent representatives to the All-Union Congress of Soviets, in theory the sovereign legislative body. It was however dominated by the Communist party, which in turn received its direction from the central Politburo in Moscow (restored as capitol city). The 1936 constitution replaced the Congress with the Supreme Soviet. It also established an array of human rights and democratic procedures in principle, including regular national elections based on full universal suffrage. Rights included a variety of social measures such as care in old age, housing and cultural benefits – not included in the standard Western rights category – along with proclamations of freedom for religion and press. In practice the regime tightened Party control and that of its General Secretary, Josef Stalin. As to standard freedoms, Soviet law stipulated that “before these freedoms can be exercised, any approved writing or assembly must be approved by a censor or licensing bureau” – to assure ideological leadership. The constitution was widely cited in propaganda as a pinnacle of democracy. In its later stages, after Stalin’s death in 1953, the Soviet system was also noteworthy for negotiations and disputes within the Politburo around selection of sometimes rather lackluster successors, a weak point of the system particularly by the 1970s.

**Functions** Under Stalin, from the late 1930s onward the state seized control of the entire economy. It issued detailed Five-Year plans, focused primarily on advancing industrial growth, which did indeed proceed rapidly. The state directed factories, setting production quotas. It ran the major department store chain. It seized the land from peasant proprietors, establishing collective farms again under Party direction and with production goals; this measure required brutal suppression of peasant resistance. The Party also regulated cultural life, producing many public monuments and supporting a new Socialist Realist style that glorified workers and peasants. More modern artistic styles were outlawed as Western and decadent. Although scientists received many benefits, they too were regulated for orthodoxy. In schools, workshops and propaganda the regime worked to reduce religious adherence, though it was somewhat cautious in dealing with the Muslim minority. As in Nazi Germany the government also

arranged vacations spots for workers, particularly along the Black Sea coast. The overall result was probably as total a state as had yet been constructed.

**Repression** Along with masses of positive propaganda and injunctions against enemies of the state, the communist system revived and greatly expanded the tsarist network of secret police. Police informants were even stationed in hotels to monitor visitors; foreigners were carefully accompanied by official guides. The regime made wide use of Siberian prison camps for political dissidents. And it executed large numbers of real or imagined opponents outright, particularly under Stalin, who conducted a number of purges even within the Party, often after elaborate forced public professions of guilt. After Stalin's death the system loosened somewhat, with fewer executions but more confinements to psychiatric hospitals.

**Foreign policy** Policy in the 1920s and 1930s was somewhat circumspect, though the regime harbored major grievances about East European territories that had been lost in the postwar settlement. Eager to oppose Nazi Germany, which had vowed eastward expansion, the Soviets tried to win Western cooperation in the 1930s but finally gave up and formed a brief alliance with Hitler, hoping to regain territory in Poland and elsewhere, only later to engage in the major national struggle of World War II. Postwar, the Soviets set up a buffer zone of controlled communist states in Eastern Europe, most of whom adopted government structures and policies similar to those of the USSR. (Between the wars, most East European nations, in a roster of newly-independent states, had fallen back to conservative authoritarian regimes after brief experiments with parliamentary democracy.) Cold War conflict with the United States brought massive investment in new weaponry, including a new space program, as well as ambitious diplomatic initiatives in other parts of the world. Often accused of aggressive tendencies, the regime was actually fairly cautious, engaging only in one (abortive) military effort in Afghanistan. However, it did intervene forcefully to retain its hold in Eastern Europe, putting down several protest movements in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia.

**Collapse** Despite huge successes in industrialization and in improving public health and educational levels, the regime was in trouble by the mid-1980s. Military expenditures were an inordinate burden in a still-industrializing economy. Bureaucratic control limited economic initiative, and production quotas led to no small amount of deceptive reporting. Hoping to shake things up a new General Secretary in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev, sought to allow somewhat greater political openness and freedom, while decentralizing economic decision making. New armaments agreements with the United States reduced Cold War tensions. But the new measures overall simply opened the door to new protests, particularly in the East European states which began, in 1989, to declare independence – with no Soviet response. A military coup against Gorbachev failed, but he resigned in 1991 and the Soviet Union itself broke up.

**Post-Cold War Eastern Europe** Most of the new or newly-freed East European states became parliamentary democracies, and many ultimately joined the European Union. Only Belarus held out under "Europe's last dictator". However, by the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century some East European states – most notably, Hungary and Poland – demonstrated more autocratic tendencies, reducing freedom of the press and judiciary, commandeering the major media, and limiting political protest. Opposition to immigration and to gay rights, along with greater support for religion, marked the new approach – making the region something of a political question mark. In the Balkans, the collapse of another communist regime led to a number of small new states and considerable military and ethnic conflict in the 1990s, still not fully resolved in the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Post-communist Russia** Reduced in territory and resentful of its lost power, Russia suffered through considerable economic hardship and political uncertainty in the 1990s, as it established, technically, a democratic system with competing political parties. Many state businesses were sold off, creating however a new economic oligarchy. Under a new president, Vladimir Putin, from 1999 onward the regime became steadily more authoritarian while technically preserving democratic forms – one of the great examples of what seemed to be a new style of elected authoritarians capable of generating considerable public support. Control over the major media and use of the secret police were combined with attacks on political opponents, with many jailed or murdered. No longer communist, the regime touted its role as a bastion of Christian conservatism, supporting the Orthodox Church, limiting gay rights, supporting a conservative family structure with new laws making protest against domestic abuse more difficult. Military spending went up (at the expense of pledges toward economic development), and the

regime began engaging in new (often highly popular) foreign policy ventures – particularly in the Middle East – while also seizing the Crimea from Ukraine. Not a few observers were reminded of elements of the pre-Soviet Russian political tradition.

### **Study questions**

1. What were the main functions of the Soviet state?
2. What were the main accomplishments of the Soviet system? What were the principal weaknesses?
3. What have been the main features of East European (including Russian) states since the fall of communism?

### **Further reading**

Joseph Rothschild and Nancy Wingfield, *Return to Diversity: a political history of Eastern Europe since World War II* (4<sup>th</sup> ed., Oxford University Press, 2007)

Ted Grant, *Russia, from revolution to counterrevolution* (Well Read Publications, 1997)

Robert Service, *History of Twentieth-Century Russia* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Harvard University Press, 2001)