

HUMAN RIGHTS IN RUSSIA

Contents

19th Century
20th Century

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Reform movements: Russia

The issue Four major societies – aside from the Americas – remained technically free from Western imperialism in the long 19th century, though under great pressure from military and economic interference. All four, recognizing the peril, introduced some reforms, designed to promote greater economic and political strength at home and, to an extent, to appease Western critics. On the whole, human rights were not a major, durable part of the agenda, as opposed to other types of change. But there were some exceptions, and the patterns of change and continuity had implications for rights issues not only at the time, but later on. This chapter deals with Russia, but it will warrant comparison with the cases presented in the following two chapters as well.

Russia: the advent of reform Russian leaders wanted nothing to do with the growing Western interest in rights, from the 18th century until the later 19th – though many Russian intellectuals and reformers were attracted. Liberal movements were brutally repressed – for example, the Decembrist revolt of 1825 -- with many leaders exiled or imprisoned. Between 1861 and the 1880s, however, the tsarist government sponsored a number of significant reforms, beginning with the abolition of serfdom. Given Russia's long cultural connections with the West, it was not surprising that some rights implications were included in the reform effort. Notably, for example, new law codes dramatically reduced the severity of punishments for many crimes, cutting back on impositions of the death penalty. At one point, over 150 crimes had been subject to capital punishment, but by the 1890s even execution ns for murder were becoming infrequent. Equality under the law and a right to a jury trial was stipulated in 1864. The abolition of serfdom loosened restrictions on the peasant majority, but in this case redemption payment obligations continued to constrain many villagers; while the Emancipation document promise “full rights” to former serfs over time, in the short run the property rights of the nobility gained precedence. the contrast with the more complete abolition of serfdom in the West, in the revolutionary era, was interesting. And, even at the height of the reform movement, some of the more individualistic rights favored by liberals, such as freedom of speech, were not emphasized.

Conservative reaction In 1881 the reformist tsar was killed by an anarchist bomb. The reform era ended. Censorship was extended, and the secret police moved against any sign of political opposition. Religious tolerance was replaced by official backing for Orthodox Christianity and minorities, such as Jews, were widely persecuted. At the same time, a conservative ideology expanded emphasizing the superiority of Russia's community values and political obedience over the chaotic individualism and political instability of the West (a rhetoric that would in some ways return in the early 21st century). Rights principles were not entirely forgotten: a 1906 measure established equality of access to the civil service, ending noble privilege, referring to “equal rights” in this domain. Russian feminists used the same rights language as their Western sisters. But the idea of individual rights against the state did not take deep root in the Russian experience.

Study questions:

1. What rights features emerged amid the various reforms of the 1860s and 1870s?
2. Why and how did imperial Russia ultimately shy away from a rights commitment?

Further reading:

Olga Crisp and Linda Edmondson, eds., *Civil Rights in Imperial Russia* (Oxford University Press, 1989).

Chapter 15a: Reform Movements: the Ottoman Empire

20TH CENTURY

Communist revolutions and Human Rights

Overview To many, particularly in the West, the communist regimes that took shape at various points in the 20th century, beginning with the Russian Revolution of 1917, are best known for repression of human rights. There is little question that Soviet regimes particularly from Stalin to the mid-1980s, and more recently Chinese communism, have worked to repress political dissent. Press freedoms have been curtailed amid the dominance of state- or party-controlled media. Many dissidents have been taken prisoner. Religious freedoms have been curtailed, though not always entirely eliminated. These are important points, that still shape deep differences in regional approaches to human rights. However, the communist story deserves attention for other reasons as well. First, despite repression, communist constitutions often purported to respect human rights – an interesting concession if mainly rhetorically. Second, despite repression, regimes have varied, with some interesting experimental interludes. Third and most important, beginning with the Soviets, communists have sought to add to the list of human rights, emphasizing collective social and economic gains. Their redefinitions have had real impact on global definitions over time.

Constitutions Soviet and Chinese communist constitutions often paid lip service to the kinds of human rights valued in the West – including the right to vote, quickly extended to women. Thus the Chinese periodically referred to “freedom of speech”. Soviet documents stipulated “freedom of conscience”, interestingly indicating that this included the right not to believe in any religion (which was of course the stance preferred by the Communist Party). Freedom of inquiry was assured to scientists and artists. People should also have the right to criticize the government, and “persecution for criticism is prohibited”. Most documents stayed away from freedom of the press, which was interesting. Particularly under the Soviets and also in Mao’s China, freedom of movement outside the country was strictly regulated. And all individual liberties proclaimed in principle were in fact subject to the effective political monopoly of the Communist Party. This aspect of communist rule can easily be dismissed as callous hypocrisy, given the police controls actually established. Still, it was interesting that there was a felt need at least to acknowledge these rights on paper.

Respite Government and party control varied in severity. In Russia, the early 1920s were marked by an atmosphere of experimentation, with much discussion of new kinds of marriage arrangements and other innovations designed to spur greater freedom in some respects. On a more limited basis, controls softened somewhat after Stalin’s death in 1953, and even more obviously in the transitional period under Gorbachev in the late 1980s. Similarly, the atmosphere in China varied at times, with some limited relaxation after the Cultural Revolution and then again early in the 21st century, when some observers thought that, informally, greater latitude was developing for freedom of thought. Finally, the promise of some intellectual freedom for scientists was not entirely hollow, given the enthusiasm for scientific research and opportunities for interaction with colleagues from other parts of the world. And it is important to note the insistence, in communist law, on legal equality, with greater attention to equality of rights and opportunities for women. Indeed, during the interwar decades Soviets boasted their superiority over Western gender systems, where women were still pushed toward domestic roles.

Social rights The most important contribution of communism in practice to global human rights discussion involved the emphasis on a variety of what might be called collective rights. From the mid-1920s onward Soviet constitutions made it clear that the most important rights were those involved in ending economic injustice – “the economic exploitation of man by man”. Documents emphasized the goal of “free development” for each individual, but this was to be achieved far less by individual political or intellectual rights, more by rights to participation in collective welfare. Thus constitutions proclaimed rights to access to leisure, health care and education. Similarly in China after Mao, and particularly amid the industrial successes of the early 21st century, opportunities to rise out of poverty and share in collective economic advance were the key goals. Some of this alternative rhetoric was hollow, and of course many Westerners prefer to linger over the absence of assurances about the more classic individual rights. But

this alternative vision was not entirely divorced from reality, and it clearly put pressure even on Western leaders to expand their definition of rights. This would show for example in the increasing inclusion, even in Western statements, of a “right to education”, or in Franklin Roosevelt’s dramatic commitment to “freedom from want”.

Conclusion Communist regimes must surely be known primarily for their establishment of new levels of authoritarianism and repression of political dissent. However, the principle of rights was not systematically attacked – in contrast to fascism – and innovations in social rights were significant, with global implications as well.

Study questions:

1. Why did communist regimes not simply ignore human rights statements completely?
2. How did the idea of social rights compare to Western rights priorities?
3. How could Soviet leaders argue they were more committed to women’s rights than their Western counterparts?

Further reading:

Albert Szymanski, *Human rights: the USA and USSR compared* (Lawrence and Hill, 1984).

Leon Boim, “Human Rights in the USSR,” *Review of Socialist Law* 2 (1976): 173-87.

Merle Goldman, *From Comrade to Citizen: the struggle for political rights in China* (Harvard University Press, 2007).