

## The consolidation of Russian conservatism, 1881-94...

**Tsar Alexander III**      **1881-1894**

### *The return to reaction*

**Reactionary ministers:** The bomb that destroyed Alexander II also destroyed the careers of his more liberal ministers. Loris-Melikov was replaced as minister of the interior by Nikolai Ignatiev, who later gave way to Dmitri Tolstoy! **Alexander III's policy was Autocracy, Orthodoxy and Russification.** It has been said of him that he set out to undo all that his father had done. The greatest influence of his political policies came from his former tutor (who also came to serve his eldest son, Nicholas, as a tutor) and trusted adviser, **Konstantin Pobedonostsev**. Pobedonostsev's sympathies lay with Autocracy against democracy, with Orthodoxy against all other sects, and with Russians against all other nationalities of the Empire. "Alexander III," wrote Hugh Seton-Watson, "was a true Russian. He knew his people. He would not sacrifice the truly Russian principle of autocracy." One of the victims was Lenin's elder brother. He was hanged in 1886 for plotting to kill the Tsar. The universities, the press and the law courts were strictly supervised. Konstantin Pobedonostsev - appointed to Procurator of the Holy Synod (the lay supervisor of the Orthodox Church) used his authority to crush free thought and to browbeat minority religions, especially Jews, who were herded into ghettos.

**Restrictions against the zemstvos to restore the position of the nobility:** The new ministers tried to restore the Russian nobility to the position of strength and influence that it had held before the emancipation. In July 1889 the office of justice of the peace was abolished in local government and a new office, that of **Land Commandant** (*Zemsky Nachalnik*) was created. Land Commandants were imposed on the peasantry: they had to belong to the nobility (this was the essential qualification for this office). The Land Commandant also sat in the zemstvo which now became more dominated by the landowners. He had senior administrative and judicial power in the locality, over-riding the authority of the *zemstvos*. To restrict the power of the partly elective *zemstvo* became a prime target for the reactionaries. Laws of 1890 and 1892 restricted the popular vote to the zemstvos. Not only did the proportion of peasant votes become reduced but they could not vote for zemstvo deputies anymore. They were presented with a list of candidates from whom they could choose. The local governments often found their proposals obstructed and undermined by the objections of a government who fundamentally opposed the principle of elected assemblies.

**Restrictions against higher education:** The minister of education I. V. Delyanov proposed legislation against the "dangerous" advance in education. In 1884 came a *limitation of the administrative autonomy* and in 1887 *the tuition fees were raised*. This was useful methods against anybody from the lower classes - they could not afford the new fees. Raising tuition fees was also a useful method in primary and secondary education... Only the parish elementary schools under the influence of the local clergy were allowed any real expansion. 1897 the illiteracy rate was a staggering 79 per cent! (This is a bit of a paradox since Russia at the same time produced such talents as Pavlov, Chekhov, Tolstoy, Gorky, and Tchaikovsky...)

**Russification:** The **policy of Russification was to attempt to suppress the local characteristics to all the Tsar's subjects**. In the census of 1897, the Russian Empire had a total population of a little bit more than 125 million people. The Russians was a minority of 45% of this total population. The Ukrainians were about half the size - 22.4 million people. They were followed by the Poles (7.9 million), White Russians (5.8 million), Jews (5.2 million), Tartars (3.4 million), Germans (1.8 million), Armenians 1.2 million), and Georgians (0.8 million) + other smaller groups (about 25 million people). Against the Tartars and Georgians, the Orthodox Church played a leading role. The Georgian Church and Islamic groups put up fierce resistance and the problems of separatism was still very much alive in 1917.

Even in areas who previously been loyal to the Tsar, efforts of Russification started. This included areas as Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Armenia. The effect was the opposite - cries for independence and resistance. In Finland these measures came late. It was Nicholas II that deprived the Finnish Diet of nearly all their legislative power 1899. Under the Russian governor-general Nikolai Bobrikov all opposition was ruthlessly suppressed (Nicholas II had granted him dictatorial power in 1903). 1904 Bobrikov was assassinated. This could have led to repression, but the Russo-Japanese war was not successful and in 1905 the revolution broke out. Temporarily the Finns got the old constitution back (through the November Manifesto).

The worst blows fell upon the Empire's long-suffering Jewish population. Alexander III's regime combined the "official" religious anti-Semitism of the Orthodox Church with crude popular hostility. The official propaganda reasons were that the Jews participated in the Polish rebellion and with the assassination of Alexander II (Hessia Helfmann - one of the assassins was Jewish). Pobedonostsev pronounced that a third of the Jews in Russia must die, a third emigrate and a third assimilate. The government permitted and even encouraged pogroms. Robbery, violence and murder became common. Between 1881 and 1905 over 215 incidents took place. On top of this the government took legal measurements; No new Jewish settlers were allowed in rural areas, Jews were forbidden to trade on Christian holy days which, as they already closed on Jewish holy days, made it hard for them to compete with non-Jewish rivals. Strict quotas for Jews were set in schools and universities. In 1886 in Kiev and in 1891 in Moscow all "illegal" Jews were expelled. "Legal" settlers were also harassed. Several Jews emigrated under these conditions. Other became members of the Zionist movement (militant nationalists) or revolutionaries. In 1897 the Jewish socialist **Bund** was formed. This organization came to play an important role in the development of revolutionary socialism in Russia. ***In the long run, the policy of russification obviously became more dangerous than the nationalism that it set out to combat!***

**Economic development:** The reigns of Alexander II and Alexander III formed a period of overall industrial development. During the 1870s the Russian economy benefited from the increase in railroad building and from the policy of low tariffs. The development of Russia's railroad was huge in quantitative terms and it showed new economic logic; The Russians linked major areas of industrial production to important markets and they linked their areas of agricultural production with the ports of the Black Sea. In 1883 the Batum-Baku railroad linked the Caspian with the Black Sea which increased the oil production greatly (two of the financiers of the oil production in Baku were the Swedish Nobel brothers!). In 1891 the construction of the Trans-Siberian railroad started (finished - except a short part - in 1904). Tariffs began to rise in the late 1870s. This protective policy culminated in 1891 with the "great protective tariffs". It especially had a beneficial effect on the domestic coal and pig-iron production. In 1892 Sergei Witte became minister of finance. Protective tariffs, foreign capital and placing the Russian currency on the Gold Standard was Witte's measures which proved to be successful. The result though resulted in large parts of Russian industry being owned abroad (especially in Paris). The economic historian W.O. Henderson wrote "*Of the Russian economy was still backward in some respects, it was also true that vigorous state action, foreign capital and foreign machinery had given Russia a powerful impetus on the road to industrialization*". Lenin was less impressed. He wrote 1899 "*If we compare the present rapidity of development with that which could be achieved with the modern level of technique and culture, the present rate of development of capitalism in Russia really must be considered slow*".

### ***Foreign policy of Tsar Alexander III.***

**France again - the French "entente":** In 1887 Alexander III refused to renew the **Three Emperor's Alliance** (in 1881 The League of the Three Emperors changed name). This threatened Bismarck's diplomatic policies. He managed to receive a bilateral, completely secret agreement with Russia, known as the **Reinsurance Treaty 1887**. The refusal of the new German Kaiser Wilhelm II to renew the treaty in 1890 renewed Russia's international isolation. An agreement to curtail the activities of Russian nihilists in France was followed by the more important step of opening the French money market to Russian borrowing. Slowly, between 1891 and 1894, the military understanding all important to France began to take shape. Meetings between the respective chiefs of staff resulted in an agreement on joint military action. The Tsar finally consented to regard this as the basis of an official **Franco-Russian alliance (January 1894)**. Russia undertook to attack Germany if that country attacked France, or aided Italy in an attack on France. France was similarly committed if Germany attacked Russia, or aided Austria-Hungary in such an attack.

**Alexander III dies:** In 1893 Alexander III fell unexpectedly ill when influenza led to kidney trouble. On 1 November 1894, Alexander died. His son Nicholas was only 26 years old (he was born 1868). Nicholas had lived an easy life as a young army officer, in the company of a ballet dancer. A week after Alexander died Nicholas married Princess Alix of Hesse-Darmstadt, his own choice and originally opposed by his family because she was German. When Nicholas heard his father was dead he said "*What am I to do? I am not prepared to be Tsar. I know nothing of the business of ruling*".