

# The consolidation of Russian conservatism under Nicholas I

Tsar Nicholas I                      1825-1855

## *The autocratic reign of Tsar Nicholas I. Why?*

1. **Reaction on the Decembrist Revolt of 1825** (Russian officers who in December 1825 tried to overthrow the autocracy of the tsars and establish political and social reforms. The officers attempted to take advantage of the confusion following the death of Alexander I. The uprising broke out in St. Petersburg on December 26 and was quickly suppressed.)
2. **His personal revulsion** against the spread of radical ideas in Europe (increased with the deposition of Charles X by the French in 1830, by the Polish revolt of 1831 (A strong reaction against the attempt to westernize Poland) and by the uprisings all over Europe in 1848).
3. **Support from the Orthodox Church.** Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century the Orthodox Church, with its message of faith in God and unquestioning submission to God's will, was the major support of the Tsarist regime. The Tsar also held the position as titular "Head of the Church"
4. **The Russian Constitution of 1832** "Collected Laws of the Russian Empire". According to the Constitution;
  - a) The Tsar made all final decisions to Russia's government, army, economy and foreign relations. The other bodies of government were just administrative or advisory
  - b) The three bodies of administration and advices were;
    - (i) The Imperial Council (or His Imperial Majesty's Private Chancery. The Third Section of this Chancery was in charge of state security, standing at the centre of a complex web of censorship and surveillance)
    - (ii) The Committee of Ministers (8 )
    - (iii) The Senate
5. **A Paternal system.** "The Tsar is a father. His subjects are his children, and children ought never to reason about their parents." This opinion is also a reason why the government so strictly was in the hands of the Tsar.
6. **Nationality - slavophiles.** A conviction that Russian social organization, religion, government, culture and philosophy were superior of the system of western Europe; "slavophiles" against "westernizers". Russia and the Tsar also saw it as a duty to protect the Slavs against all external threats. The effect of Western liberalism and nationalism which resulted in the Polish revolt 1831 is an example of this. It was ruthlessly suppressed and resulted in the abolition of many important elements of Polish national identity. The Polish constitution was withdrawn, the universities closed, and the Russian language was more vigorously imposed in Polish public life. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russia also saw itself as the protector of the Slavs and the Orthodox Christians in the declining Ottoman Empire. This view would lead to problems...
7. **The Serfdom.** Even though Tsar Nicholas I recognized serfdom as "in its present situation in our country is an evil, palpable and obvious to all, but to attack it now would be something still more harmful." (1842). The serfdom supported the autocratic system, not only because the state owned 19 million "state peasants", but also because of the allegiance of the serf to the landowner. This was combined with the allegiance of the landowner to the Tsar to constitute the whole political hierarchy upon which the stability of Russia seemed to depend.
8. **Lack of industrial development.** This prevented the development of an urban middle class, or of an urban work force. This preserved the rigid system of serfdom.

## *Foreign policy of Tsar Nicholas I.*

### 1. EUROPE:

- a) **Russo-Turkish war 1828-29.** Russia espoused the cause of the Greek revolutionists to form an independent state. A Russian fleet joined the British and French vessels which destroyed the Turkish fleet in the battle of Navarino (1827). In the resulting Russo-Turkish War of 1828-29, Turkey was defeated. The treaty of Adrianople gave Russia suzerainty over the tribes of the Caucasus and gave the emperor a protectorate over Moldavia and Wallachia with accompanying rights of interference in their domestic affairs as the protector of Christians living under Turkish rule. Russia also achieved free passage for its ships on the Danube River and through the Straits of Bosphorus. After this war Russia became a friend of Turkey, for Nicholas did not wish to see the fall of a long-established dynasty in Constantinople.
- b) The **Polish Revolt of 1830-31** was a mixture of international influence (from France especially), Polish nationalism and an attempt to introduce western more liberal ideas. The Revolt was crushed, and the Polish constitution was abrogated, it became more and more ruled by St. Petersburg bureaucrats, its universities were closed, and the Russian language was imposed in official institutions.
- c) **Russo-Turkish agreement.** In 1833 Russia acquired virtual control of the Dardanelles by agreement with Turkey. This agreement was the Sultans way of showing gratitude since Russia had aided Turkey by sending its Black Sea fleet against Egyptian rebellions.
- d) **Wallachia 1848** (Rumania). In 1848 there was another revolution in Paris which led to upheavals all over Europe. Tsar Nicholas I now became known as the "gendarme of Europe". He warned the revolutionaries "*Give heed, O ye peoples, and submit, for God is with us!*" Russian troops helped the Turks suppress a revolutionary government that had formed in Wallachia under the impression of the events in western Europe.
- e) **Hungary 1849.** Nicholas I also send in the Russian army to enable the Emperor of Austria to suppress a revolt of Hungarian revolutionaries in 1849. Hungarian nationalists demanded a formation of a Hungarian ministry. This ministry was put into office and it then severed practically all ties with Austria. Extreme Magyar nationalism, expressed in part by a decree making Hungarian the official language of the State, rapidly alienated the Slavic section of the population. In May 1849 the Austrian emperor Francis Joseph succeeded in arranging a military alliance with Tsar Nicholas I. Austria and Russia "won" but the Russian army lost 10,000 men in this campaign (9000 died from disease...).
- f) **Crimean War 1854-1856.** After a quarrel about the respective rights of Orthodox and Catholic priests in the Holy Places under Turkish rule had been settled, Russia demanded the right to "protect" Christians in the Turkish Empire. To emphasize this demand, Russian troops entered the Danuban provinces, and this led to a Russo-Turkish conflict. The Russian fleet annihilated the Turkish navy at Sinope. French and British ships moved in to prevent a possible Russian landing near Constantinople, and then, in 1854, France and Britain declared war.

### 2. ASIA:

- a) **Persia 1826-28.** Not content with the previous conquest of Georgia and Azerbaizhan from the Persians, Russia claimed still more territory from the Shah. The latter's counterattack was defeated, and in 1828 a peace treaty brought Persian Armenia into the Russian Empire.
- b) **Influence** over Dagestan and the Caucasus consolidated in the 1830s and 1840s, control over the Uzbeks and the Kazakhs in the same decades, and the establishment of influence in the Far East, typified by the foundation of the aptly named Vladivostok ("Lord of the East") in 1861.

### *Any signs of change during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I.*

1. The **Decembrist revolt** was one early attempt to change the old Russian autocratic system. The Decembrist conspirators were of liberal inclination, and their background was Russian freemasonry and the Russian army. The Masonic lodges, where men were treated as equals irrespective of their official rank, in effect were semi-secret societies where those of similar views could meet and make plans. Although Alexander I banned all freemasonry, it was too late to prevent some of the masons forming new and completely secret societies with revolutionary aims. Prominent among those who realized that drastic changes were needed were Russian army men, especially those who had been in the army of occupation in France. They had observed conditions in France, where there were no serfs, where there was relative freedom of speech and of the press, where there were regular judicial processes, where there was a constitution of sorts, and where new ideas circulated and were openly discussed. The Decembrists failed because they were divided among themselves, had made no real preparations for their revolt, refused to make use of discontent among the masses, and were mentally prepared in advance for a glorious failure.
2. Liberal ideas were driven underground and found expression mainly in **literature** and in the rarified discussions of intellectuals. Alexander Pushkin, Russia's greatest poet, was personally censored by the Tsar! Some delivered their criticism more indirect; Nikolai Gogol exposed provincial corruption in his play *"The Government Inspector"* (1836) and satirized the institution of serfdom in his novel *"Dead Souls"* (1842). Several new magazines were published during the reign of Nicholas I (224 new magazines in the years 1826-54).
3. **Higher education** was another institution where liberal ideas were discussed. The number of **university** students doubled between 1836 and 1848. This was predominantly due to the government's desire to educate an administrative élite, but inevitably a proportion of this élite learn to think for themselves. We could see the emergence of *"enlightened bureaucrats"* (mentioned by W. Bruce Lincoln). The revolutions of 1848 and the poor performance in the Crimean War saw a reaction in Russia. Nicholas I fought any hint of liberalism at home. In higher education was this constituted by the appointment of a new minister of education. P. Shirinsky-Shikhmatov duly raised school fees, reduced the number of university students (from 4,600 in 1848 to 3,600 in 1954), and suppressed the study of such dangerous subjects as philosophy and European constitution law.
4. David Saunders concluded *"the Tsar knew that changes had to be undertaken but was determined not to allow them to be promoted by any movement or group beyond the control of the government. He believed that reform could be achieved by the government acting alone."* In this respect there was not much difference, after all, between the mentalities of Nicholas I and of Alexander II.

## **CRIMEAN WAR**

**Crimean War 1854-1856.** Russian interests after 1815 focused on the Balkans and on the straits (Bosporus and the Dardanelles) leading from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. The Turkish subjects of the Balkan countries were mostly Slavs and Orthodox, and the Russians therefore saw themselves as their natural protectors; because Turkey lay athwart Russia's link with the Mediterranean it seemed essential that Constantinople should be amenable only to Russian influence. But France, Austria and Prussia also had imperial ambitions in the Balkans or in the eastern Mediterranean, while Great Britain was opposed to any further Russian aggrandizement anywhere and regarded the maintenance of a Turkey independent of Russia as equally essential. The allies saw the aggressive policy of Tsar Nicholas I toward the Sultan and the Ottoman Empire as an obstacle to the realization of Russian imperial domination of southeastern Europe.

After a quarrel about the respective rights of Orthodox and Catholic priests in the Holy Places under Turkish rule had been settled, Russia demanded the right to "protect" Christians in the Turkish Empire. To emphasize this demand, Russian troops entered the Danubian provinces, and this led to a Russo-Turkish conflict. In 1853 Russia gained control of the Black Sea by sinking the Turkish navy at Sinope. French and British ships now moved in to prevent a possible Russian landing near Constantinople, and then, in 1854, France and Britain declared war, while Austria just insisted on the withdrawal of Russian troops replacing them with her own. Britain and France then invaded the Crimea and defeated the Russians at the battle of Alma (1854). The war then developed into a costly contest over the possession of Sevastopol, whose value was more symbolic than strategic. After a year's siege the Russian army withdrew from this fortified base, and peace followed in 1856. The Russians had to accept the terms of the Treaty of Paris in 1856, undertaking to keep no navy on the Black Sea and to maintain no bases on its shores (the Black Sea clauses). The greatest loss though was the humiliation! Russia was not the dominant power of Europe anymore. Russia's vast military strength had proved to be an illusion, partly because of the lack of a modern system of communication. Russia could never muster more than 60,000 of the more than one million soldiers. According to J.S. Curtiss the cavalry officers, especially the senior officers, were almost entirely to blame for the poor showing of their men in the Crimean War. Their horses, fed on oats and beer, were magnificently glossy and plump but when, at one annual maneuvers, Nicholas ordered the cavalry to do everything at the gallop, 700 horses died in one day from unaccustomed exertion. A.J.P Taylor supports the view of the military incompetence. "Destroyed the myth and the reality of Russian military power." The Crimean War had a big impact in Europe except the changed view of Russia's military capacity;

- It was the end of the "*Congress System*" that had existed since Vienna 1815. No major war had occurred between 1815-1854
- It weakened the two traditional guarantors of the status quo in Europe; Austria and Russia. Britain, although a victor in the Crimean War, eventually lost her continental role after the poor handling of the Italian unification, the Polish upraise (1863) and the Schleswig-Holstein dispute 1864
- It cut the link between Austria and Russia
- The balance of power in Central Europe was destroyed.
- The change of balance gave a unique opportunity to a new generation of statesmen with revisionist aims; Napoleon III (France), Cavour (Sardinia - Italy) and Bismarck (Prussia - Germany)
- Two countries were unified; Italy (1861) and Germany (1871). The formation of Germany ruined the balance of power in Central Europe
- Short wars with specific objectives became favorable
- The eastern question became a constant irritant inflaming relation between Austria-Hungary and Russia