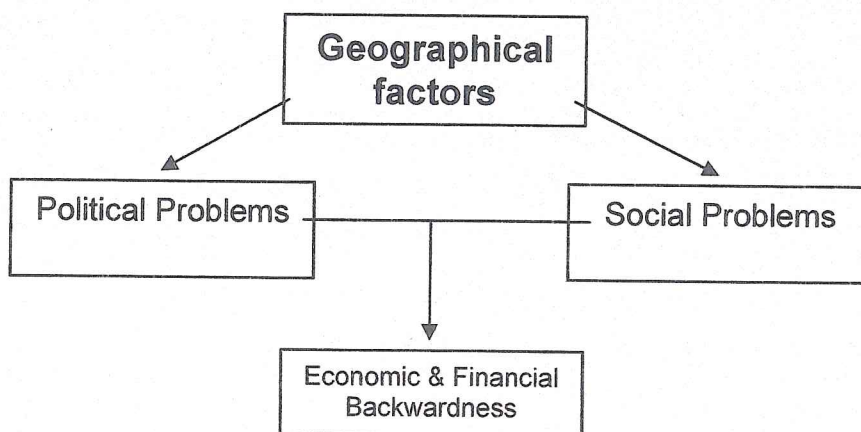


Background: Russia in 1855 – Teacher Copy

Introduction

- In 1939, Winston Churchill described Russia as a "riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma".
  - Even today, Russia remains mysterious, powerful and unstable.
  - In the 1990's, it started its unfinished journey from communist dictatorship to liberal democracy.
  - Before then, it lay at the heart of the USSR, whose superpower rivalry with the USA brought the world to the edge of nuclear annihilation.
  - The USSR had been created following the Revolutions of 1917, and led by Lenin and the murderous tyrant Stalin, who killed over 20 million of his own people.
  - And the Revolutions of 1917 had seen the overthrow of the Tsars (emperors), who had ruled Russia for 300 years.
- Our first key question is whether the historical path outlined here was inevitable, or whether the Tsars could have peacefully modernised Russia and thereby avoided revolution and all of its attendant horrors.

Key points: Geography, Autocracy and Serfdom



Fundamental Issue: Geography

Topography & Population

- Largest country in the world: occupies 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the world's land surface, making it 91 times larger than Great Britain
- 6000 miles long from the Baltic to the Pacific; 3000 miles wide from the Arctic to the Persian coast
- Not even European: most of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Russia lay in Asia.
- 60 million people in 1855; doubled by 1897
- Over 200 different nationalities, speaking c.100 different languages - only half the population was ethnic Russian!

Natural Resources

- Blessed with iron ore and coal and oil – but these are not well exploited
- Only 10% (the "Black Earth" regions of the south and north) are suitable for farming
- The rest has a climate ranging from Arctic tundra to scorched desert, with everything in between

Communications

- Chronic – roads were mud tracks, rivers often frozen;
- none of her three great sea ports (Archangel, St Petersburg and Azov) were ice-free all year.
- Only 1600 km of railway (Britain had 15,000)

Research Task: What policies did the Tsars have for handling the different nationalities in their Empire?

- Superficially, the Tsar respected the status quo by leaving local traditions and institutions intact and giving national minorities special legal status; even the hated Jews were given taxation privileges
- Nevertheless, he also pursued a policy of "Russification" – Russian nobles were encouraged to settle in conquered territories and the Russian language was used in schools
- As a result, Muslim provinces declared Jihad and Poles revolted both in 1830 and in 1863
- Tsars therefore hardened their attitude in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century

Discussion point:

Do these nationality problems mean that multi-cultural societies are something to be avoided?

= Political Result: Autocracy

- **An autocratic military state was the political consequence of the size and instability of Russia**
- Ruled by the Tsars, of whom the following concern us:

Alexander II	"Tsar Liberator"	1854-1881
Alexander III	Reactionary	1881-1894
Nicholas II	Reaction and Revolution	1894-1917

- The Tsar was described in the "Fundamental Laws" of 1832 as an "autocratic and unlimited monarch"

- This means that he ruled as sole and supreme leader, supposedly appointed by God.
- To help him do this, Russia was divided into 50 provinces, each subdivided into 20 districts.
- At the centre (St. Petersburg) sat the Senate. This supervised both the Imperial Council (a weak Parliament which could comment on but not initiate legislation) and the Committee of Ministers (a cabinet whose members could be hired and fired at will by the Tsar).
- The Third Section was the secret police which turned Russia into a police state. Even the phrase "free air" was banned as it sounded too revolutionary!

**Research Task: In what ways did the Russian Orthodox Church strengthen autocracy in Russia?**

- Orthodox Church not independent of state – controlled by the Holy Synod, headed by a government minister
- Twice a year the Church declared a curse on those who did not acknowledge that Tsars were divinely appointed!
- Tsar has absolute power over appointments
- A powerful form of control – promotes blind obedience
- 90 or so religious holidays a year – helps keep support high with the serfs!

**= Social Result: Serfdom and the Mir**

**• A system of oppressive serfdom was the social consequence of the size and instability of Russia**

- 50% of the population were serfs - peasant farmers given a plot by their landowner in return for goods or services.
- Some paid their owners each year with money or produce (these people were called *Obrok*); others gave labour services to the lord for 30-40 days a year (*Barschina*).
- In effect, they were slaves. They could be sold, married and flogged at will by their masters; average life expectancy was only 35, with only 50% of children surviving beyond the age of 5
- The *Mir* was the village commune which was the lifeblood of a peasant community – it organised farming activity and had its own assembly; peasants could not even leave the estate without its written permission!

**Research Task: What was the relationship between the Army and the Serf system?**

- The army was 1,400,00 strong in 1855 and the bedrock of the country's stability.
- Officers were from the nobility, but the ranks were conscripted from the serfs for 15 years compulsory service – wives declared widows and allowed to remarry!
- Soldiers were given freedom when service completed, but not given a pension or land!
- As a result, morale was low throughout the army
- Crimean War highlighted its terrible lack of morale and organisation
- Any reform of the army would require a reform of the Serf system

**Other classes:**

**Nobility**

- 1 million. Most powerful were the top 1000, called the Grand Seigneurs.
- Not as powerful as could be imagined – estates were divided on death between all male heirs, which ruined estates

**Bourgeoisie (middle class)**

- Small, due to backwardness of the economy
- Only 1% of population in school by 1855; only 3,500 in university; illiteracy ran at 95%

**Proletariat (industrial working class)**

- Only 1% of the population lived in cities in 1855. Forced off the land due to population growth, exploited

**Overall Effect – Economic and Financial Backwardness**

- Geographic problems, backward social and political structures and a massively expanding population made the economy backward and stagnant.
- Serfs aren't free to leave the land to work in cities; the banking system is undeveloped
- Nobility and clergy exempt from direct taxation; serfs carried 90% of the burden and so can't buy manufactured goods
- Not only backward, but declining. In 1800 she is the biggest producer of pig iron; by 1855 Britain is producing 10 times as much
- Expenditure on military and on servicing loans totalled 62% of total expenditure

**Key Questions**

- What were the most serious problems faced by the Tsarist regime in 1855? (connect, link, prioritise)
- How would you suggest that each of these be dealt with?
- Why had the Russian Empire nevertheless not collapsed by 1855?