Romanov Dynasty

The Romanov Dynasty had ruled Russia since 1613. Michael Romanov took the title 'Emperor and Autocrat of all Russia'. The Emperor of Russia became known as the Tsar (Czar) and imposed autocratic rule - government by one man. Unlike in other European countries, the Tsars of Russia did not take advice from an elected parliament. The country was run by a ten man ministerial council. Each minister was both appointed and dismissed by the Tsar.

Alexander II became the sixteenth Romanov tsar in 1855. He attempted to bring in some political reforms. This included permitting each district to set up a Zemstvo. These were local councils with powers to provide roads, schools and medical services. However, the right to elect members was restricted to the wealthy.

Reformers in Russia wanted the same democratic rights as those enjoyed in other European countries. In 1876 a group of reformers established Land and Liberty. As it was illegal to criticize the Russian government, the group had to hold its meetings in secret.

In October, 1879, a new group, the People's Will was formed. Soon afterwards the group decided to assassinate Alexander II. They made several failed attempts on his life but were successful at killing several of his senior officials.

In January, 1880, the People's Will contacted the Russian government and claimed they would call off the terror campaign if the Russian people were granted a constitution that provided free elections and an end to censorship. On 25th February, 1880, Alexander II announced that he was considering granting the Russian people a constitution.

A year later Alexander II had still not published details of his reforms. The People's Will therefore decided to carry out their threat and the Tsar was assassinated by Ignatei Grinevitski on 1st March, 1881.

Alexander III now became the seventeenth Romanov tsar. He immediately cancelled his father's plans to introduce a representative assembly and announced he had no intention of limiting his autocratic power.

During his reign Alexander followed a repressive policy against those seeking political reform and persecuted other Jews and others who were not members of the Russian Orthodox Church. Alexander also pursued a policy of Russification of national minorities. This included imposing the Russian language and Russian schools on the German, Polish and Finnish peoples living in the Russian Empire.

Despite several assassination attempts Alexander died a natural death on 20th October, 1894. He was succeeded by his son Nicholas II who attempted to continue his father's policy of suppressing those advocating political reform.
**Russian Trade Unions**

By the end of the 19th century there were over 2 million industrial workers in Russia. At this time the Russian industrial employee worked on average an 11 hour day (10 hours on Saturday). Conditions in the factories were extremely harsh and little concern was shown for the workers' health and safety.

People who attempted to form trade unions were likely to be imprisoned or sent to Siberia. Strikes were illegal and the Russian government would often call out the Russian Army to deal with workers during industrial disputes.

In 1901 Sergei Zubatov, chief of the Okhrana (secret police) in Moscow, used secret agents to set up the Mutual Assistance League of Workers in the Mechanical Industry. His agents became the leaders of this union and they attempted to persuade the workers not to make demands for higher wages and better working conditions. This proved unsuccessful and by 1903 the union had to be disbanded because its members had began to take part in strikes.
Russia in 1900

In 1900 the Russia Empire covered nearly 23 million square kilometres. Only a quarter of it was in Europe and the rest in Asia. The majority of the 128 million population were Slavs, but there were over 200 different nationalities. Several of these groups wanted regional autonomy and this was the cause of a constant source of political conflict. There were also 5 million Jews and around 23 million Muslims living in the Russian Empire. The government's policy of russification (forbidding the use of local languages and the suppression of religious customs) created a great deal of resentment.

St. Petersburg was the largest city in the Russian Empire with a population of 1,260,000. Other large cities included Moscow (1,040,000), Warsaw (680,000), Odessa (400,000), Lodz (310,000), Riga (280,000) and Kiev (250,000).

Most of the people living in the Russian Empire were members of the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1721 the Orthodox Church became a government department called the Holy Synod. It was run by the Chief Procurator, an official appointed by the Tsar. Completely under the control of the government, the Orthodox Church played an important role in the various russification campaigns.

The Tsar also had the power to grant hereditary titles. These usually went to men who had achieved high rank in the armed forces and the civil service. It 1900 it was estimated that there were about 1.8 million members of the nobility in Russia.

Around 85 per cent of the Russian people lived in the countryside and earned their living from agriculture. Russian peasants had been serfs until the passing of the Emancipation Act in 1861. The nobility owned the best land and the vast majority of peasants lived in extreme poverty.

In 1893 Nicholas II appointed Sergi Witte, a successful railway executive, as his Minister of Finance. He encouraged the expansion of the Trans-Siberian Railway and organized the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway. Witte played an important role in helping to increase the speed of Russia's industrial development and by 1900 there were around 2.3 million industrial workers in Russia.

Conditions in Russian factories were well below those enjoyed by industrial workers in Europe. They worked on average an 11 hour day (10 hours on Saturday). Conditions in the factories were extremely harsh and little concern was shown for the workers' health and safety. Trade Unions were illegal in Russia and industrial workers found it difficult to improve their standard of living. Strikes were also prohibited and when they took place the Russian Army was likely to be called in to deal with the workers.
First... Russian Serfs

By the end of the 16th century the Russian peasant came under the complete control of the landowner and during the middle of the 17th century serfdom became hereditary. Their situation became comparable to that of slaves and they could be sold to another landowner in families or singly.

By the 19th century it was estimated that about 50 per cent of the 40,000,000 Russian peasants were serfs. Most of these were the property of the nobility but large numbers were owned by the Tsar and religious foundations.

The Crimean War made Alexander II realize that Russia was no longer a great military power. His advisers argued that Russia's serf-based economy could no longer compete with industrialized nations such as Britain and France.

Alexander now began to consider the possibility of bringing an end to serfdom in Russia. The nobility objected to this move but as Alexander told a group of Moscow nobles: "It is better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait for the time when it will begin to abolish itself from below."

In 1861 Alexander issued his Emancipation Manifesto that proposed 17 legislative acts that would free the serfs in Russia. Alexander announced that personal serfdom would be abolished and all peasants would be able to buy land from their landlords. The State would advance the the money to the landlords and would recover it from the peasants in 49 annual sums known as redemption payments.

Then... Russian Peasants

Alexander's reforms did not satisfy liberals and radicals who wanted a parliamentary democracy and the freedom of expression that was enjoyed in the United States and most other European states. The reforms in agricultural also disappointed the peasants. In some regions it took peasants nearly 20 years to obtain their land. Many were forced to pay more than the land was worth and others were given inadequate amounts for their needs.

By 1900 around 85 per cent of the Russian people lived in the countryside and earned their living from agriculture. The nobility still owned the best land and the vast majority of peasants lived in extreme poverty.
The Okhrana (Secret Police)

In 1880 the Russian Police Department established a special section that dealt with internal security. This unit eventually became known as the Okhrana. Concerned by the attempts by Russian workers to form trade unions, Okhrana units were formed in the industrial centres of St. Petersburg, Moscow and Warsaw.

The Okhrana was under the control of the Minister of the Interior. Okhrana agents worked under cover and their main task was to expose political crimes before they were committed. To do this agents joined political organizations that were campaigning for social reform. Some of these undercover agents reached positions of leadership in these organization. This included Evno Azef, head of the SR Combat Organization and Roman Malinovsky, a member of the Bolshevik Central Committee.

Sometimes Okhrana agents joined revolutionary groups to spy on their members and eventually became converted to the cause. They then became double-agents who provided information to both Okhrana and the revolutionaries. Two of these double-agents were responsible for the assassinations of two Ministers of the Interior.

In 1895 Sergei Zubatov was appointed as head of the Moscow section of Okhrana. He gradually introduced several modern methods of detection including photographic files, a systematic registration of suspects and a squad to deal with acts of terrorism.

Zubatov also used his agents to set up the Mutual Assistance League of Workers in the Mechanical Industry. His agents became the leaders of this trade union and they attempted to persuade the workers not to make demands for higher wages and better working conditions. This proved unsuccessful and by 1903 the union had to be disbanded because its members had began to take part in strikes.

In some cases, revolutionaries were arrested and then offered the opportunity to become a double-agent. First they had to sign a detailed confession of their activities and a statement of repentance. The prisoner was then pardoned and released to spy on his comrades. The confession would be used against the agent if he ever tried to change his mind about working for the Okhrana.

The Okhrana also recruited members of illegal organization, as paid informers. In 1912 over 26,000 people in Russia were receiving money from the Okhrana. The average informer received 100 rubles a month, a sum that was well above the average industrial wage at the time. Evno Azef, Okhrana’s leading undercover agent, was paid over 2000 rubles a month.

Some of the organization that Okhrana were interested in were illegal and were based outside Russia. To deal with revolutionaries living in exile, Okhrana sections were also established in major European cities such as Paris and London.

After the October Revolution an examination of police files suggested that around 26,000 people were killed without trial by the Okhrana.
**Revolutionary Terrorism**

In 1869, two Russian writers, Mikhail Bakunin and Sergi Nechayev published the book *Catechism of a Revolutionist*. It included the famous passage: "The Revolutionist is a doomed man. He has no private interests, no affairs, sentiments, ties, property nor even a name of his own. His entire being is devoted by one purpose, one thought, one passion - the revolution. Heart and soul, not merely by word but by deed, he has severed every link with the social order and with the entire civilized world; with the laws, good manners, conventions, and morality of that world. He is its merciless enemy and continues to inhabit it with only one purpose - to destroy it."

Some reformers favoured a policy of terrorism to obtain reform and on 14th April, 1879, Alexander Soloviev, a former schoolteacher, tried to kill Alexander II. His attempt failed and he was executed the following month. So also were sixteen other men suspected of terrorism.

The government responded to the assassination attempt by appointing six military governor-generals that imposed a rigorous system of censorship on Russia. All radical books were banned and known reformers were arrested and imprisoned.

The most infamous terror group was the People's Will and it was set on assassinating Tsar Alexander II. In November 1879, they attempted to use nitroglycerine to destroy the Tsar train. However, the terrorist miscalculated and it destroyed another train instead. An attempt to blow up the Kamenny Bridge in St. Petersburg as the Tsar was passing over it was also unsuccessful.

The next attempt on Alexander's life involved a carpenter, Stefan Khalturin, who had managed to find work in the Winter Palace. Allowed to sleep on the premises, each day he brought packets of dynamite into his room and concealed it in his bedding.

On 17th February, 1880, Khalturin constructed a mine in the basement of the building under the dining-room. The mine went off at half-past six at the time that the People's Will had calculated Alexander would be having his dinner. However, his main guest, Prince Alexander of Battenburg, had arrived late and dinner was delayed and the dining-room was empty. Alexander was unharmed but sixty-seven people were killed or badly wounded by the explosion.

After a year of careful planning, the People's Will was set to strike again. On 1st March, 1881, Alexander was travelling in a closed carriage. An armed Cossack sat with the coach-driver and another six Cossacks followed on horseback. Behind them came a group of police officers in sledges. On a street corner, the People's Will threw bombs at the Tsar's carriage. The bombs missed the carriage and instead landed amongst the Cossacks. The Tsar was unhurt but insisted on getting out of the carriage to check the condition of the injured men. While he was standing with the wounded Cossacks another terrorist, Ignatei Grinevitski, threw his bomb. Alexander was killed instantly and the explosion was so great that Grinevitski also died from the bomb blast.