

IMPERIAL RUSSIA 1801-1905



TIM CHAPMAN

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Imperial Russia 1801–1905

Imperial Russia was at the height of its power and influence in the nineteenth century, and seemed set to dominate Europe after the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo in 1815. However this threat came to nothing. Despite the efforts of successive Tsars, the country remained backward and bureaucratic. When at last change occurred, it was through the work of the revolutionaries during the 1917 Revolution.

Imperial Russia 1801–1905 traces the development of the Russian Empire from the murder of ‘mad Tsar Paul’ to the reforms of the 1890s that were an attempt to modernise the autocratic state. Each Tsar’s reign is analysed in turn:

- Alexander I (1801–25)
- Nicholas I (1825–55)
- Alexander II (1855–81)
- Alexander III (1881–94).

The political, economic and foreign policy of the Tsars is discussed, as well as Russia’s cultural developments, particularly in literature. The fascinating events of the Crimean War and the emancipation of the serfs are set in the context of the main themes of the period. The reign of Nicholas II is also introduced with the background to the Russian Revolution.

Imperial Russia 1801–1905 is essential reading for all students of the topic and provides a clear and concise introduction to the contentious historical debates of nineteenth-century Russia.

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Imperial Russia 1801–1905

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Contents

	<i>List of tables</i>	vi
	<i>List of figures</i>	vii
	<i>List of illustrations</i>	viii
	<i>Preface</i>	ix
1	Russia in 1800	1
2	The reign of Alexander I (1801–1825)	12
3	The reign of Nicholas I (1825–1855)	45
4	The reign of Alexander II (1855–1881)	79
5	The reign of Alexander III (1881–1894)	123
6	Epilogue, Russia 1894–1917	137
	<i>Glossary</i>	142
	<i>Further reading</i>	144
	<i>Index</i>	146

Tables

1.1	Comparison of Russian and west European urban centres, <i>c.</i> 1800	6
2.1	Summary of Russian foreign policy, 1799–1807	21
3.1	Summary of the six Sections	52
3.2	Major works of Russian literature under Nicholas I, 1825–55	62
3.3	Major events in Polish history, 1722–1863	65
3.4	Casualties in selected battles of the Crimean War	74
4.1	Summary of the reforms for serfs and peasants, 1801–55	83
4.2	Simple diagram of the emancipation process	91
4.3	Land-holding in Russia by <i>c.</i> 1880	95
4.4	Russian universities, 1801–81	103
4.5	Major works of Russian literature under Alexander II, 1855–81	104
4.6	Timing of major reforms, 1855–75	107
4.7	Industrial expansion in the reign of Alexander II	108
4.8	Development of unrest after the emancipation of the serfs	118
5.1	Land-holding in Russia by 1905	130
5.2	The expansion of trade in the reign of Alexander III	132

Figures

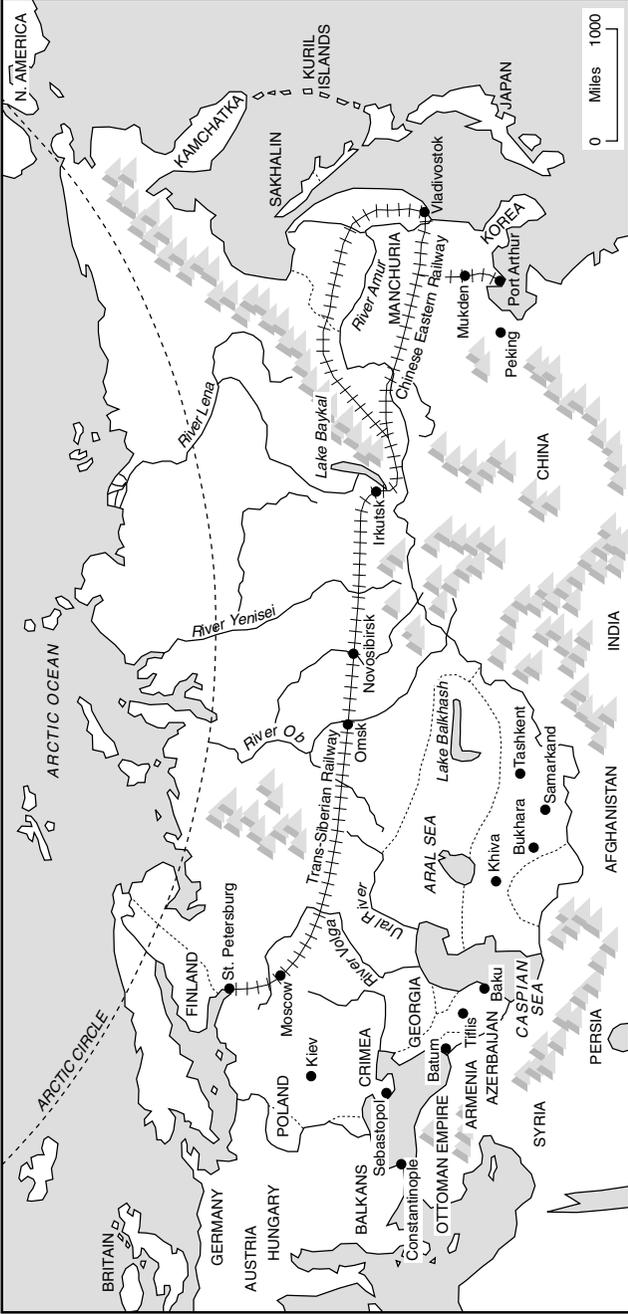
1.1	The Romanov family tree	8
2.1	Summary of the influences on Tsar Alexander I, to 1801	14
2.2	Structure of the Russian government and bureaucracy, <i>c.</i> 1803	17
2.3	Diagram of Speransky's draft constitution, 1809	24
4.1	Flow chart of the progress towards the emancipation of the serfs, 1855–61	88
4.2	Summary of the results of the Emancipation Decree, to 1881	96
4.3	The structure of local government in Russia from 1864	100

Illustrations

1	Map of Imperial Russia	x
2	The French Retreat over the River Berezina, 26 November 1812	31
3	The Insurrection of the Decembrists at Senate Square, St Petersburg on 14 December 1825	46
4	The Crimean War 1854–56: Siege of Sebastopol, Russians blow up remaining fortifications before evacuating the city on 19 September 1855	73
5	Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra	138

Preface

This book is not based on primary research but tries to synthesise the work of other scholars who have unravelled the history of Russia. I am therefore indebted to countless historians on whose work I have relied. Any errors regarding the evidence or the arguments put forward, however, remain my responsibility alone.



Map of Imperial Russia

Russia in 1800

Russia has not been like other European states in modern history. On the political edges of Europe until the eighteenth century, it experienced neither the Renaissance nor the Reformation, and developed eastwards towards the Pacific across barbarous and desolate territory to make it an Asiatic power as well as a European one. It consisted of a country that conquered an empire in which its colonies bordered each other and so relied on a vast military strength to keep control rather than on sea power as west European empires had. Its sheer size, in terms of land mass and population, separated it from other states too as it faced different problems in communications and in mobilising resources. And, until the twentieth century, this slow moving giant used a different calendar and even today it uses the Cyrillic alphabet rather than the Arabic letters used in western Europe.

All of this has made Russian history more difficult to understand. In the mid twentieth century, Winston Churchill remarked that '[Russia] is a riddle wrapped up in a mystery inside an enigma'.¹ Even without the complications of Marxist ideology to make Russia more complex, there remain major problems for the historian of the nineteenth century. First, the legacy of Marxist writings in Russian history remains with its exaggerated emphasis on economic progress and class conflict. Second, there continue to be difficulties in finding good sources of information from a nation that remained mostly illiterate until the late nineteenth century. Thus, from a historiographical perspective as well, Russia has remained quite different.

Political structure

In 1800 Russia was an autocracy and as such was governed by an autocrat who took the title of 'tsar' meaning emperor. His power to rule was absolute as there was no parliament, no critical press and very little by way of public opinion. His status was confirmed by the Orthodox Church which assured the people of his divine right to rule on behalf of God, and Article I of the fundamental laws stated 'The Emperor of all the Russias is an autocratic and unlimited monarch. God commands that his supreme power be obeyed out of conscience as well as fear'. Thus, there was little need to issue laws other than by decree and the tsar was the final judge of all policies. His main tasks were to defend Russia from foreign attack and to maintain order within the frontiers and this was something that the Romanov dynasty had been doing since 1613.

In practice, however, the tsar was not entirely free to do as he chose. He was akin to the chief noble whose power was limited by that class and during times of crisis or

misrule he could be extremely vulnerable. The Russian system of absolutism was tempered by assassination. Usually, it was the nobles that carried out the task (in their own self-interest) but not always. Thus, Catherine deposed Peter III and then consented to his murder in 1762. Tsar Paul was strangled by army officers acting on nobles' instructions in 1801 and Tsar Alexander I was blown up by a section of the educated élite that claimed to be acting on behalf of the ordinary people in 1881. The nobles expected privileged treatment for their support of the tsar and they got this in the form of exemption from personal taxes and ownership of serfs. The reluctance of nineteenth-century tsars to free the serfs reflected their fear of provoking the nobles' wrath.

The concentration of power in the hands of the tsar was designed to assert Russian control over a vast and unwieldy empire which he did not have the economic or technological resources to enforce by means other than fear and deterrence. Only by demanding total obedience to himself, endorsed by the Church and backed up by a brutal army, could the tsar hope to keep together an empire that stretched from Poland to the Pacific, from the Arctic Circle to China. It was Russia's enormous size that gave it strength in the nineteenth century but it was also this basic fact that was its main weakness. It was never easy to control a large, sometimes restless and often remote population. And the nobility were only committed to the tsarist system while it functioned successfully since it upheld their rights as lords of their own estates and gave them considerable local power.

To help him in his rule, the tsar usually enlisted the support of a small number of advisers drawn from the nobility. One of these might emerge as a chief minister periodically, as Speransky or Arakcheyev did under Alexander I, but their hold on power was always precarious and entirely in the gift of the tsar; just as they were responsible to him so they were dependent on him. As many as ten to fifteen further advisers might be used, possibly as the heads of government departments, but equally there could be as few as four or five – as at the start of Alexander I's reign or during that of Nicholas I. Even the structure and organisation of the highest level of government was decided by the tsar and, since so much hinged on his character and preferences, changes could be rapid.

More consistent features of the autocracy were the chief institutions of the state which carried out its policies. The three elements here were the church, army and bureaucracy. The first of these was the Russian Orthodox Church which had split away from the Greek Orthodox in the fifteenth century. It had been rendered powerless in the 1760s when its lands were nationalised, or confiscated, by the state so as to secure a cash income. By 1800 it had become part of the government system, funded by it and used by it, to disseminate information into every village as well as to instruct the inhabitants to remain obedient to the tsar. Indeed the insistence on divine right included special claims for 'holy Russia' as the tsar was seen as a 'little father' who cared for his people in a God-like way. Similarly, Moscow was seen as a "Third Rome" or holy city after the failure of Rome and then Constantinople to provide a haven for Christianity from hostile armies. The leader of the Church was the Over Procurator of the Holy Synod, a layman appointed by the tsar from the early eighteenth century, which ensured effective state supervision.

The army numbered 3–400 000 men in 1800 but from 1812 and for much of the century stood at about one million. It was composed primarily of serfs who were often drafted into it as a punishment. Its military capability lay in part in its size since it

could use attrition; Russia's manpower reserves were unlikely to be depleted before those of an enemy. However, it could also fight with skill under the command of officers drawn from the nobility. Tactical retreats were used to finally defeat Napoleon in 1812 and they could attack very successfully too as the succession of victories against Turkey and neighbouring states in Asia demonstrated during the nineteenth century. It was a huge drain on the government's limited finances, though; in 1815 it accounted for about one-third of all revenue.

The bureaucracy was an alternative career for those members of the nobility who did not enter the armed forces or whose estates could not support them. Russia's civil service numbered up to 20 000 in 1800 and it was based mostly in the two main towns, Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Its efficiency might be doubted, though, as in the 1810s the Minister of Justice, Troshchinskii, observed that for most everyday needs 'the greater part of the population of the state depend almost exclusively on local institutions'. It was the task of the tsar's provincial governors to keep him informed and, above all, to maintain order in each of Russia's fifty or so provinces. Compared to western Europe the bureaucracy was under-manned too.

Social structure

The social hierarchy in Russia closely reflected the political order, with the tsar and his court at its pinnacle and then a series of tiers of successively greater numbers of people reaching down to the serfs and peasants. The intermediate groups included the nobility, Church, army officers, merchants and bureaucrats each of which could overlap in terms of wealth and status, but despite this Russian society was not complex. Its most complicating feature was the diversity of nationalities within the empire.

The nobles amounted to just one per cent of the population. They were composed of an élite aristocracy with large estates and access to high government positions, and a lesser gentry class with smaller landholdings and fewer serfs. The aristocrats could typically trace their ancestors back almost a millennium to the foundation of Russia and they often took the title of 'Prince' (as did members of the royal family) although this might be translated as Grand Duke. Titles were inherited by all children. The nobles had effective control of their large estates since they enforced order and obedience among the serfs and in practice they were the most powerful individuals in the Russian Empire's provinces. The provincial governors were, of course, drawn from this class too.

The gentry were a lesser class but often lent their name to include the nobles. They held land which might be worked by a few dozen serfs but was very unlikely to exceed one hundred; about one-third owned fewer than ten serfs. Like the nobles, their social status was diverse, but it was the wish of many to advance up into the higher echelons of the hierarchy and the usual routes of advancement were the armed forces and bureaucracy. Although service to the state was not compulsory in 1800, many still spent some time working in this way. Thus, the social strata were woven into the framework of the state's institutions. The gentry (and nobles) were the political nation of Russia since they wielded considerable influence over the tsars despite not formally having any right to vote for either central or local parliaments. Their power was that much greater because of the absence of any significant middle-class too. Russian economic development was based on expanding traditional agricultural and manufacturing practices rather than innovating and changing the way they were organised. There were therefore

almost no factory owners and the commercial middle class was composed of traders; among these were many Jews based primarily in Poland.

The clergy belonged mostly to the Russian Orthodox Church although there were some Lutheran (German Protestant) groups along the Baltic coast. Each village had a priest who remained with it all his life. He was allowed to marry (but not to re-marry) and his main function was to perform religious ceremonies – baptisms, marriages, burials – rather like a clerk or administrator. There was little by way of Biblical teaching since the level of education most priests achieved was quite low, but many of the sacred texts were related and even recited to the village. The clergy's income was made up of fees for the religious ceremonies and from their own farming practices since each priest had some land of his own. Above the village priests was a hierarchy of bishops as well as a tier of monks from whom the prelates were selected and this was the main distinction in the personnel of the church; between the 'black clergy' at the village level and the 'white clergy' or monks. The church as a whole received about four million roubles a year from the state (one per cent of its revenue) and this supplemented the priests' incomes too, albeit in a rather meagre way.

By far the largest group in the population was the peasantry which was composed of two main groups; the serfs and the state peasants. As with the nobles and gentry, the terms serf and peasant are often used interchangeably, but this is misleading. The serfs were privately owned labourers who could be bought and sold like livestock and amounted to almost half of the entire population. The state peasants belonged to the state (rather than to the royal family) but were in the gift of the tsar and they were often given away to nobles as a reward for services rendered; they accounted for 40 per cent of all rural workers. The Romanov family and the Church also owned a number of peasants amounting to some 10 per cent of the workforce. Altogether, the peasants and serfs made up 90–95 per cent of the population and it was therefore their labour that generated Russia's wealth.

Not all of the empire operated a servile economy, though. It was concentrated in European Russia, west of the Urals, and new territory that was acquired through conquest was by no means certain to be subjected to the system. Even within the areas in which it operated there was diversity since in the far north as few as six per cent of some villages were populated by serfs but in the provinces around Moscow the proportion was 70 per cent. The reasons for such differences were mostly strategic; in areas where Russia did not fear attack, there was little need to tie labourers to a particular estate but in the heart-lands of Russia the tsars had been keen to hold on potential recruits to the army.

Conditions for the serfs were grim. Their masters had the right to sell them, flog them, exile them to Siberia or send them to the army for a typical twenty-five year period. Most serfs worked the land for their landlord (sometimes for six days out of seven) under a system called 'barschina'. It was most common in the black earth belt in the southern part of European Russia where the soil was fertile since lords wanted to maximise their own harvests. It could also extend to serfs who had to work in the lord's household as a domestic servant, and 200 000 were in this situation. Alternatively, serfs might work under the 'obrok' system in which they paid their lord cash (or goods) instead. This method allowed serfs to work in industrial jobs either on the lord's own estate or in a nearby town.

Working conditions were very difficult in either situation since the bulk of the landowners did not run their estates efficiently; the money that the state lent to them on the strength of their assets was often squandered on luxury goods rather than invested in new equipment or better farming practices. The workers themselves had little incentive to increase production beyond their own immediate needs – even if they had the ability to improve their land – since any surpluses were likely to be taken from them. However, there was little scope for them to improve their lot since there were desperately few schools. In 1800 there were no more than 70 000 children receiving primary education and most of those were in towns, so the level of rural literacy was extremely low – well below five per cent even in European Russia.

Taxation fell especially hard on this group, the poorest of all Russia's people, since it had to pay a poll tax (from which the nobles were exempt) and it paid again through taxes on alcohol, where the state operated a monopoly on vodka production. Over half the government's revenue was raised through these two taxes. The plight of peasants and serfs often became desperate and it was not surprising therefore that they could become restless and unruly in times of particular hardship; riots and violent protests were endemic to the Russian countryside.

Finally, it is important to bear in mind that Russia's population was not just made up of those of Russian extraction. By 1800, it included many ethnic and national groups such as the Germans living along the Baltic coast, Poles, Jews and Finns in Europe; and in Asia there were tribal groups that stretched across Siberia and about which Russia knew little. Nor were all Russians quite the same. There were 'Great Russians' whose focus was Moscow, 'Little Russians' based in the Ukraine and Kiev, and 'White Russians' who lived in Belarus. Cultural tensions between these groups remained from their medieval past. A further group that considered itself at least semi-independent was the Cossacks who lived in the southern lands of Russia and who had a reputation as excellent cavalymen. By 1800, their autonomy was much reduced as they were obliged to fight for the tsar, and their skills on horseback were probably exaggerated. Still, they added to the diverse nature of society under the tsar's control.

The Russian economy

If the great size of Russia was its main weakness politically, then conversely this was its great strength economically. The vast expanses of territory were difficult to control but they were inhabited by huge numbers of people. With a population close to forty million in 1800, Russia was by far the largest of the European states. Its closest rival was France with just 27 and then Austria with 25. However, estimates do vary as to how large Russia's population was because it is difficult to find any statistical sources that are reliable. The first census was taken as late as 1897 and, despite the large bureaucracy, even this missed out entire provinces. Consequently, surveys of the Russian economy at this time tend to focus on characteristics rather than on ratios or figures; they tend to be qualitative rather than quantitative. Approximately 95 per cent of Russia's people lived in the countryside and even the main towns were quite small by western European standards.

The Russian economy was overwhelmingly agricultural. The system of farming for both serfs and peasants was based on the village community or 'mir' which operated

Table 1.1 Comparison of Russian and west European urban centres, c. 1800

<i>Town</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Town</i>	<i>Population</i>
Saint Petersburg	300 000	London	960 000
Moscow	250 000	Manchester	75 000
Kiev	20 000	Birmingham	71 000
Odessa	11 000		
		Paris	600 000
		Rome	150 000

an inefficient three field rotation of crops that had been developed in the middle ages. This meant that many areas of Russia were unable to manage anything more than subsistence farming and that they were vulnerable to periodic famines. The worst problems of this kind occurred in 1891–2 and 1898. By contrast, there were some quite fertile areas such as the black earth belt of Great Russia and the steppes of the Ukraine which produced grain surpluses that were then transported to areas of shortage, but the size of the empire and the difficulty in moving goods of any kind through it meant that shortages persisted.

Transport links were poor. Roads were merely earth tracks of varying widths that were adequate in the warm summer months but became muddy or impassable in winter. Water-borne transport was difficult too since Russia's coastline was not continuous and its northern reaches (both in the White Sea and the Baltic) froze in winter. This same problem applied to many of its rivers which prevented barges distributing goods efficiently. Moreover, the warm water ports that Russia acquired on the Black Sea during the eighteenth century were very far distant from the main population centres. The route from Azov to Moscow was over 400 miles for instance. There were no railways, of course, until the 1830s and Russia was among the slowest of the European states to adopt them.

The severity of the Russian winters also left large tracts of its land unusable and the inhabitants impoverished. Parts of Siberia were subject to perma-frost that never melted and anyway access was difficult through dense forests. Moreover, in the outlying regions of the empire Russian control was not complete and local disputes with frontier tribesmen or hostile local populations meant that economic development of newly acquired areas could be very slow. This was true of Poland and especially the Caucasus.

Russia's most obvious economic asset was a mixed blessing. The system of serfdom was enshrined in law by Tsar Alexis in 1649 to ensure the security of the nobles' estates while they were away from home. Their absence had been required of them by the state so that they could carry out official business either in the army or the civil service. The guarantee of a compliant workforce might have offered advantages to enterprising nobles who could innovate on their estates either agriculturally or commercially, but this rarely happened. Economic specialisation remained minimal as each estate continued to produce the same crops primarily for its own needs and the labourers, who were tied to one estate, were also poorly educated. In practice, this meant an inflexible workforce of great size but little skill. In 1800, for example, 600 000 men were employed simply hauling barges along rivers.

Yet Russia did have some economic advantages. It had huge natural mineral resources which, in time, it was able to exploit. From the 1630s there had been an iron-working

industry based in the Urals and this continued to expand in the eighteenth century so that by c.1750 it was the world's largest producer with a total of two million poods of pig iron (33 000 tonnes). By 1800 it was producing nearly ten million poods (160 000 tonnes). Russia also developed its textile industries (linen, silk, wool and cotton), tanneries, paper mills, mining (copper as well as iron) and candle manufacture. By the start of the nineteenth century there were 95 000 industrial workers.

The state had played a part in this process too. Tsar Peter the Great (1689–1725) had imported some western ideas and techniques in the early eighteenth century so as to modernise Russia. He set up a number of factories to serve the needs of the state (especially its army and navy) around his new capital, Saint Petersburg. Thus, the priorities were armaments, metallurgy, timber and cloth. Some of the two hundred factories he set up survived into the late eighteenth century.

Most of the units of production were small with only a handful of workers, often using traditional methods of production in their workshops. Rather than the emergence of large-scale enterprises using significant sums of capital to make use of modern technology, Russian industrial activity at this time saw the concentration of handicraft techniques in some areas. The 323 metal-fabricating workshops in the village of Pavlov in Nizhni-Novgorod province were an exception to the usual absence of specialisation. It was not quite unique as the textile works around Moscow, Saratov and Pavlov demonstrated.

The overall pattern of the Russian economy remained agrarian at the start of the nineteenth century and the few examples of industrial activity there were did not amount to industrialisation. Most people still worked on estates either as the property of the state or as serfs. While most of the population lived to the east of the Urals in the wide lowland plain of European Russia, this was again something that had more potential for the future than for the immediate enrichment of Russia in 1800.

Tsarist policies in Russia

The political and social systems in Russia that have been outlined so far provide only a static view of the situation by 1800. Change, of course, was also part of the process as each aspect of the Russian state adapted to new circumstances. The core population grew steadily for instance, but jumped forward when new lands were added and society tended to become more complex as a result; the autocracy and political culture could become more or less severe according to the character of each new tsar; and the economy lurched forwards or backwards according to war-time or peace-time needs. It is therefore useful to survey briefly the main developments of the eighteenth century to set out the direction in which problems and policies were flowing by 1800.

Political struggle at the very top of the autocracy was a constant feature. The assassinations of several tsars have already been highlighted but they were only part of the process as the succession was vulnerable to dynastic upheaval and threats from the noble class. The Romanov ruling family had come to power in 1613 after what was called the 'Time of Troubles' during the previous fifteen years and this had been caused when the Muscovite dynasty died out. Towards the end of the century, Peter the Great came to power as a joint tsar with his older half-brother Ivan V and his half-sister Sophia who reigned as regent 1682–89; the end of Peter's reign was no easier either as his only male heir, Alexis, was completely opposed to his father's reforms and this so

incensed Peter that Alexis was sentenced to death. However, before this could be carried out, Alexis died during torture. More complicated still, Peter then issued a Law of Succession in 1722 in which the hereditary principle was ignored and the sitting ruler was empowered to nominate his or her successor. Unfortunately, Peter failed to nominate anyone before his death in 1725 with the result that over the next thirty-seven years Russia was subject to endless court intrigues between the six prospective heirs – whether direct or indirect descendants.

The situation only resolved itself in 1762 when Catherine II ('the Great') emerged as a strong tsarina capable of asserting effective control over the court and over Russia itself. In-fighting was banished during her reign following the murder of her husband, but the succession of more than twenty lovers meant that there was probably no royal Romanov blood in any of her offspring. And finally, Catherine herself set up another situation liable to cause confusion after her death. She was on bad terms with her first-born son, Paul, because she feared that her enemies might use him in an attempt to overthrow her. Paul had been taken away from her care by the previous tsarina and this made Catherine more suspicious; but she in turn raised Paul's two oldest sons, Alexander and Constantine, and prepared them for when they might become tsar. There was even the possibility that the succession would by-pass Paul altogether. In the event, Paul did become the ruler of Russia when his mother died in 1796 but he was disliked by many of the nobles and was murdered in a plot that included Alexander after just five years, in 1801. This was by no means the end of the dynastic troubles of the succession. Problems resurfaced again in 1825 when the throne passed from Alexander to his unsuspecting younger brother Nicholas and missed out Constantine altogether.

The threat from the nobles was a second long-term consideration in the struggle for supreme power in Russia. In any period of weak leadership, the nobles tended to become more independent and to try to assert more influence over the policies of the tsars or to secure more local autonomy. A clear example of the nobles' independence from the tsars can be found in the Time of Troubles in the early seventeenth century, but the problem can be traced back into Russia's medieval past as political control from Moscow (or, earlier, from Kiev) had to be wrested from an unruly and violent land. This was why the system of autocracy had developed to such an extent by 1800.

During the eighteenth century, the nobles' assault on tsarist power came in two ways. First, at the political centre, a group of nobles emerged in the late 1720s after Peter the Great's death who seemed ready to take control of Russia's government on behalf of the twelve-year-old Tsar Peter II. They formed a Privy Council and tried to impose a constitution on the Tsarina Anna in the 1730s, only to be beaten by a lack of support

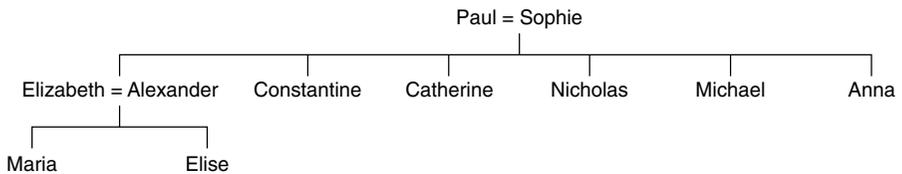


Figure 1.1 The Romanov family tree

from the rest of their class. This, though, allowed a second provincially based attack to be made. The nobles were granted a series of new rights and powers from the 1730s onwards which enhanced their control of local government and their own estates. The law of primogeniture was abolished, they were given greater police and judicial powers over the serfs and they were also made responsible for the collection of taxes from them. By 1760 they additionally had the power to exile serfs to hard labour in Siberia. Thus, the system of serfdom was gradually extended in the course of the eighteenth century partly as a means of keeping the support of the nobles.

From 1762 the nobles were no longer compelled to enter the service of the state and, lastly, in 1785 Catherine the Great formalised the status of the nobles as a privileged class in the Charter of the Nobility, which affirmed their exemption from taxes and absolute property rights. This left the nobility as a powerful political and social class with which all nineteenth century tsars had to work closely. In particular it meant that any attempt to abolish serfdom was going to be extremely difficult and this accounts for why Tsars Alexander I and Nicholas I only dared to tinker with the system. Not until the reign of Alexander II was serfdom finally abolished, in 1861.

The rebelliousness of the serfs was a further issue that tsars had to address. The vast numbers of serfs made them a considerable threat to the autocracy especially if there was any co-ordinated rebellion. The sparsely populated terrain made this unlikely since communication between peasant communities was difficult and they were always encouraged to be loyal to their lord and to the tsar. Despite this, peasant revolts were frequent and could be substantial as those led by Razin (1667–71), Bulavin (1707–08) and Pugachev (1773–75) demonstrated. This last example involved various disaffected groups along the River Volga who rallied behind a Cossack deserter who claimed to be Tsar Peter III and who promised an end to serfdom, taxation and military service. Over 1500 nobles were killed and the total number of victims approached 3000. This served as a warning to the tsar and nobles alike that even their hold on power could be precarious and that the mismanagement of issues such as the emancipation of the serfs could ignite spontaneous rebellions. This was why the committees that considered the issue of emancipation in the nineteenth century were always held in secret.

Tsarist policies abroad

Just as the tsars encountered regular threats to their position from within Russia, so there were dangers from abroad. By 1800, the pursuit of security, which was the primary aim of foreign policy, had come to focus on western and southern Europe. The northern frontier was safe since the Arctic Circle froze out any danger of attack from there and Sweden had been effectively defeated as a rival power in the Baltic as far back as 1721. The frontier to the east across the vast expanses of Siberia (reaching as far as the Pacific Ocean) was safe as it had been conquered in the early seventeenth century. The huge distance involved also afforded its own protection.

In western Europe, the key concern was Poland. This was subject to strong Russian influence not least because it was the Russian-backed candidate, Augustus, who emerged as the king after the War of the Polish Succession 1733–35. Poland acted as a buffer state for Russia and, as a weak neighbour, represented no threat to Russia itself. However, Poland was partitioned between 1772 and 1795 and thereafter ceased to exist as a