

Russia & Backwardness

Key Terms:

backwardness

mir

emancipation of the serfs 1861

Slavophiles v. Westernizers

Useful Dates & Names:

1825: Decembrist Revolt

1854-56: Crimean War

Nicholas I (r. 1825-55)

Alexander II (r. 1855-81)

Alexander III (r. 1881-94)

Nicholas II (1894-1917)

The Development of Backwardness

Europe itself was not uniformly wealthy and powerful.

Relatively poorer and weaker states, as well as regions within states, e.g. Romania, Ireland, Italy, and Poland were unable to participate in imperialist ventures. Indeed, they were themselves vulnerable at times to the empire-building of other European states—see **maps**.

Russia was a special case in that it was both an imperial, expanding state, yet it was distinctly backward. Agriculture and industry are being carried out according to methods that are no longer “socially necessary” as Marx would say or in other words, not using the most advanced methods in practical use at the time. Agriculture and industry are labor-intensive rather than capital intensive.

As we talked about in the first lecture, long-distance and local trade, urbanization and the ability to feed non-food producers are all required to form cities, and that extensive bureaucracies existed in the world long before the development of capitalism. We can indeed point to the industrial revolution as creating backwardness—in other words, slowness to change was the norm worldwide. In the context of world history over the last 500 years, the exceptional thing is the Industrial Revolution and the dynamics of industrial capitalism—yet if we examine media, textbooks, etc., we see that most people in the West explain “backwardness” as being the exceptional condition which requires explanation.

This brings us to a second definition of backwardness: An ideological view of certain normal areas in the world as peripheral or backward and the contrasting areas of intense industrialization as “normal”.

Industrialization and backwardness are both outcomes of developing capitalism. Along the same lines, one can think of “backward” agricultural areas with labor-intensive, undercapitalized production methods as part of the same system as capital-intensive, mechanized production.

The ideological inversion of what was “normal” and what was “exceptional” is as old as the Industrial Revolution itself. Its leading theory of free trade, Adam Smith, claimed, against the mercantilists, that economic growth was natural for societies. In societies, individual pursued rational self-interest. If economic growth was not taking place, Smith argued, then some external factors must be stopping it.

Smith assumed that producers have the desire to commoditize all or most of their output in response to the possibility of trade ... [and] that the producers will have the ability and the liberty to allocate their resources as they see fit.

The conundrum of the IR is still with us: what is it that causes economic growth and what political solution ought people tolerate in the quest to overcome slow economic growth?

Russia & Backwardness

Russia like all places we might investigate as “backward” had its own historical conditions that shaped its confrontation with the IR in W Europe. Its own IR did not take place until the 1890s after 20 years of halting efforts.

In the years after the Fr Rev, Russia established a name for itself as the most reactionary power in Europe. The tsars of the early 19th c, part. Nich. I, developed a police state so rigid that in 1848 when revolutionary movements spread across all the rest of Europe, Russia remained untouched.

Nich I’s own sever rejection of any W influences whatsoever was shaped by his experience of coming to power in the wake of a nobles’ revolt in 1825—Decembrist Revolt. Between 1848 and the Crimean War, there were more than 100 peasant revolts—however, the army was able to suppress them.

It was the Crimean War in 1854-56 that finally forced on almost all Russians, including the new tsar Alexander II, the need for change. The Crimean War was the result of British and French efforts to keep Russia from gaining control of the Balkans and Constantinople—**see Map.**

The reasons for Russia’s utter failure in this war, which was fought much closer to its own soil and to which Britain and France devoted only a fraction of their own military power, were manifest to all: inefficiency, crippling lack of skills among the army, which was manned mostly with serfs, and technological inferiority. Russia would have to change or face losing its status as a great power.

Reform

The way in which reform actually took place illustrates one of the oddities of Russian politics that specifically related to backwardness: a despot and a progressive were likely to be one and the same person. Alex II, who put through major reforms, was himself no liberal. He imposed his reforms as an autocrat, as an absolute ruler. He stated to the nobles in Moscow:

The existing order of serfdom cannot remain unchanged. It is better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait until the serfs begin to liberate themselves from below.

There was no dialogue with Russians interested in the problem of reform, no forum for exchange, and certainly the majority of the Russian people whose lives were the object of reform efforts were never consulted: the serfs.

The most important of Alex II’s reform was the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Bureaucrats drew up the edict, then Alex II forced it on Russian nobles. It provided for the state to purchase land from the nobles, and for the land to then be distributed by the state to the freed serfs. Serfs now had the freedom to marry without the lord’s permission, to seek justice in the courts instead of having to receive it from the lords, were freed from the most cruel kinds of corporal punishment that had been lords’ prerogative, and supposedly worked their own land.

However, the freed serfs remained bound to the land because another part of the arrangement was that they had to pay off the state for the parcels that had been bought from the lords. The basic decision to compensate the lords therefore crippled serf emancipation from the beginning. There was not enough land to go around, and peasants were not free to go elsewhere.

To make sure that peasants paid their debt to the state, they were organized into a structure that was traditional to Russian society, but now was under the direct authority of the state, rather than the lords: the *mir*, or village council. Peasants lived in peasant communes

which were governed by the *mir*. The decision to keep peasants under the control of the *mir* was not inevitable, some had opposed. The *mir* decided how to allocate land for changing needs: if a couple had lots of kids they might get allocated more land which would be taken from people whose children were adults. Only if a peasant gave up his/her land could he or she leave the village commune. Those who left and moved to the cities became part of the small urban proletariat—they were the least skilled and the most desperate.

Because of the *mir* organization and the ongoing shortage of land for an increasing peasant population—Russia's population doubled in the second half of the 19th c from 67-126 million—serf emancipation did not create an independent, conservative peasantry. The serfs' old economic and political grievances remained.

Moreover, innovation in methods of production did not result, because the large supply of labor meant that employers found it cheaper to hire more workers, rather than to use technology to make each worker more productive.

In addition to the serf emancipation, Alex II also imposed judicial reforms and army reforms. His reforms increased literacy for Russian peasants, which was important for their politicization.

Reform efforts in the 19th c took place, but under a repressive regime. No strikes were allowed—striking workers were fined, sent to Siberia or imprisoned. Thus, there was little chance for a labor movement to develop as was happening elsewhere to the W.

Response to Reform

Since legal outlets for activism were not allowed, illegal political activism became the norm.

Terrorism was far more “normal” political practice than elsewhere in Europe—e.g. assass. of Alex II.

The reforms were crippled at the outset by the sheer enormity of the problem and the unsuitability of the Russian bureaucracy. They took place in a context cut off from the people they were aimed at: the peasants.

Because there was no possibility for open discussion, Russian social thought in this period developed as abstract, philosophical discussion rather than as practical political programs.

Revolutionaries and reformers tended to be an assorted group of intellectuals (*intelligentsia*) from the social classes of petty officials and landowners, both noble and non-noble. The parameters of the debate were first set in the 1830s and 40s between slavophiles and westernizers—debate renewed and intensified after the Crimean War.

According to the *slavophiles* the big issue was how Russia should relate to W Europe. The West, in their estimation, was not something that ought to be imitated. Russia, by contrast, had a more social, communal nature. The *mir* encouraged a form of hierarchical consensus. Slavophiles placed a positive value on tsarist absolutism—Russians called upon the tsar to free them from the burden of politics. They thought the first big mistake in Russia's history came with Peter the Great's reform around 1700.

The *Westernizers* were a less unified assortment of intellectuals who opposed the slavophiles during the 1840s. They admired Peter the Great, and desired the development of individual and rational thought. For the Westernizers, the *mir* was not the bastion of Russian culture, but rather the obstacle to its progress. The undeniable divide between the masses and society would eventually be closed, the Westernizers claimed, by raising the masses to the level of educated society. A bourgeoisie on the W model would help to achieve these development. In the 1860s, the Westernizers split into populist and liberal branches, with the latter concerned about protecting the privileges of the nobility.

Out of the whole slavophile-westernizer controversy emerged other political movements, e.g. revolutionary populism embodied in the Russian socialism of Alexander Herzen (1812-70). Herzen noted that capitalism seemed to be in crisis in W Europe and he wanted Russia to follow a different path. He urged intellectuals to overcome the divide separating

them from the peasants by literally “going to the people”. In the 1860s, hundreds of students walked to remote villages and attempted to live with peasants. The result was mass arrests and even attacks by the peasants on the intellectuals; the peasants had no reason to trust urban people who were acting so strangely. Nevertheless, the Populists continued to maintain that the peasant masses ought to dominate the educated elite. The main danger according to the Populists was capitalism. Populism overlapped with anarchism, a movement which aimed at the abolition of the state. One leading anarchist was Peter Kropotkin, who wrote a book on mutual aid among animals and humans that was intended to show that competition was not natural.

Nihilism, was another intellectual movements. It rejected all established authorities and claimed to believe nothing that could not be proven by rational argument and natural science. Society, family, and religion all placed irrational bonds on the individual. Nihilism was politically moderate. It sought to reform the individual intellectual rather than to transform all of society thru revolution.

Interestingly enough, Marxism did not become popular in Russia until the 1890s. The first Marxist party, the Russian Social-Democratic Workers’ Party was founded in 1898. In 1903, a split occurred in the party into a Bolshevik—majority faction supporting Lenin and the Menshevik, minority faction which was skeptical of Lenin and his methods.

Lenin’s program had little to do with Karl Marx. His thought was rooted in Russia’s historical experience and his own experience as a revolutionary intellectual.

Russia’s Industrialization

Efforts to industrialize were spear-headed by Sergei Witte, the Minister of Finance bet. 1892-1903:

Russia remains even at the present essentially an agricultural country. It pays for all its obligations to foreigners by exporting raw materials, chiefly of an agricultural nature, principally grain. It meets its demands for finished goods by imports from abroad. The economic relations of Russia with W Europe are fully comparable to the relations of colonial countries with their metropolises. The latter consider their colonies as advantageous markets in which they can freely sell the products of their labor and of their industry and from which they can draw with a powerful hand the raw materials necessary for them.

By that time, Witte, program of developing heavy industry was already underway. He wanted to use state-directed investment, foreign capital, and tariff protections to develop Russian industry. He attracted foreign capital, esp. French capital, to build RRs, develop mining, and build factories.

Witte cut imports, increased exports—peasants were not much a market for products, and taxed items of everyday consumption heavily to raise money from peasants. This top-down industrialization and foreign investment produced a sort of neo-colonialism in Russia, as well as in other E European states where it was applied.

Russian factories borrowed W technology, and were therefore often more “modern” than older plants in W Europe; yet, certain phases of production remained unskilled.

Only after 1890 did factory production finally overtake cottage and manual production.

Still around 1900, there were only about 2 million industrial workers in Russia, concentrated in small areas around St. Petersburg and Moscow, as well as in Lodz, Warsaw, Kiev/Ukraine, Ekaterinenburg/Urals, and Baku/Azerbaijan (oil).

Although industrialization was taking place, agricultural methods were not reformed.

Creation of a Revolutionary Proletariat

The Russian industrial proletariat, whose working conditions were far worse than those of W European workers, were readier than the peasants for radical political activism because they lived in a few concentrated areas.

Around 1900, Russian industry experienced its first downturn, which together with losing the Russo-Japanese War in 1904-1905, led to a revolution in 1905. The tsar was forced to

grant a constitution and create a parliament—limited powers and he could call/recall at whim.

Between 1905 and WWI, however industry continued to expand.

The First World War, as the first total war, demanded complete mobilization of not only the military, but the entire economy.

In Feb. 1917, a revolution toppled the absolutist rule of tsar Nicholas II, and a liberal, parliamentary republic was established. However, this republic failed to get Russia out of the war. Later that year, the Bolsheviks with their slogan of Peace, land, and bread were able to capture control in key industrial population centers and replace the parliamentary republic with a dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party.