

Political Movements in the 1890s

When Alexander III died and was replaced by his son Nicholas II, the political conditions in which the revolutionaries operated essentially remained the same. Nicholas only reaffirmed the principle of autocracy, but the demand for political reform was about to become irresistible.

Russia's economy underwent rapid modernisation in the 1890s:

- attraction of foreign loans and investments
- establishment of financial stability
- maintenance of protective tariffs
- further expansion of the railway network
- development of mining in Ukraine
- growth of grain exports through the Black Sea ports

The principle movements that can be distinguished were the liberal, Populist and Social-Democratic, although the distinctions between them are not always clear-cut. All of them represent continuation of oppositions to autocracy.

1) The liberal movement grew out of the efforts to bring about social improvements at local level within the legal framework provided by the zemstva (the councils)

Many members of the Intelligentsia were content with a policy of "small deeds". This is evident in Chekhov's plays where the characters resign to the present stagnation, but are hopeful that their descendants might one day live more satisfying lives.

The rural Intelligentsia established firm contact with the peasantry by assuming positions of lawyers, doctors, nurses, teachers and agronomists in the zemstvos.

At a higher level, among the appointed officials of the zemstvos, there was an aspiration for the creation of consultative bodies.

2) Populism was reinvigorated by the dismay at the severe famine which affected the provinces in 1891 and which was followed by an outbreak of cholera and peasant unrest. This rural crisis renewed the contact with the peasantry. It also vividly highlighted for revolutionaries the question as to whether they should focus on alleviation of the present hardship or on eventual political change which would remove the causes of that hardship in the long term.

— Union of Socialist Revolutionaries (the Northern Union) was founded in Saratov in 1896, but moved its headquarters to Moscow in 1897. It followed in the tradition of

the People's Will, advocating terrorism with the aim of political liberation and neglecting activity among the peasantry.

- Southern Party of Socialist Revolutionaries was founded in Voronezh in 1897. It put forward a strategy advocating for an agitation among the masses, mainly the urban workers but not excluding the peasantry.

- Independently, Chernov made attempts in Tambov Province in the period 1885-88 to take revolutionary ideas to the peasantry.

- A group, founded by Breshko-Breshkovskaja and Gershuni in Minsk in 1898 also advocated political terrorism.

The foundation of the Agrarian Socialist League in Paris in 1900 aimed at uniting these scattered Populist groups. In the period 1901-02, they merged into the broad party of Socialist Revolutionaries (the SRs).

The continuing popularity of terrorism was attested by a spate of assassinations, some of them carried out by the Combat Department of the Socialist Revolutionaries. Overall, Populism struggled to reassert itself.

3) The popularity of Marxism increased rapidly among the Intelligentsia in the early 1890s.

— In 1883 Lenin, having qualified as a lawyer in Samara joined one of the Marxist circles in St Petersburg and in 1885 went abroad and visited Plekhanov. On his return to St Petersburg, he collaborated with Martov to unite the Marxist groups there as a Union of Struggle for the Liberation of the Working Class. It was, however destroyed by arrests in 1885-86. Both Lenin and Martov were exiled for three years to Siberia.

— the Russian Social-Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) was founded by surviving groups of Marxist intellectuals and workers who secretly met at Minsk in 1888. It was soon incapacitated by arrests.

Within the Marxist camp fissures, mirroring those within the Populist camp, soon developed.

- some Marxists concentrated their attention on the short-term objective Marxists shared with the bourgeoisie - gaining political freedoms and undermining autocracy.

- Kremen argued that the Intelligentsia should learn from the masses and represent their grievances

- Another point of view claimed that socialists should strive to win for the workers' economic gains and material improvements.

- Other socialists were focused on building one mass labour movement rather than one dominated by Marxists in the Intelligentsia.

All of these are opposed by Lenin, who argued that if the working class was left to its own devices, it could only achieve a "trade-union" consciousness which would bring no durable improvement in its condition. He makes the case for a tightly organised conspiratorial party, using Land and Liberty and the People's Will as examples. Such a party wouldn't be a broad-based working class organisation but an organisation of active revolutionaries.

The Russian Social Democrats came to be divided into the factions known as Bolsheviks and Mensheviks.

Assessment

In the late XVIII century, Russia's educated public still conducted debate about matters of cultural, social and political concern without seriously questioning the legitimacy of autocracy as a form of government for the country. However, quite early into the XIX c. the harmony between the civic society and the autocratic state began to break down.

As opposition grew larger, women came to play a larger and more prominent part in it. In the first half of the XIX c. they did frequent and preside over the salons in which cultural life was conducted. During the second half they became a more powerful presence in the socialist commune or revolutionary circle and suffered punishment together with men.

The Russian XIX c. Intelligentsia, in all its phases of its development, professed an admirable independence, integrity and idealism. Its members placed great faith in the power of ideas and, in the second half

of the century, in natural science.

And yet the systems of ideas which the Intelligentsia conducted often had a character no less authoritarian than the political and social systems against which the Intelligentsia was pitted. The lack of representative political institutions helped to give free reign to a mode of thinking that was impractical, irresponsible as well as idealistic.

The divisions within the Intelligentsia were numerous and opinions differed greatly as to the course that opposition to autocracy should take.

Within the revolutionary circle too, divisions too quickly became apparent. For one thing, they had to decide whether to replace autocracy with another form of government or to abolish government altogether.

The mission of Russian thinkers was overall the construction of social and moral utopia, even the realisation of the kingdom of heaven on earth. They display a fierce moral engagement, even religiosity. They tend to subordinate the interest of



the individual to that of the larger unit—family, peasant commune, Church, people, nation—which the individual inhabits. They express anxiety about national identity.