

Research project

Central Government: Autocracy

Tsarist autocracy meant that the tsar held absolute power, without being limited by a constitution or a parliament.

The tsar was considered:

Head of State

Head of Government

The supreme source of law

Chosen by “divine will”. It was believed that God had chosen the tsar to rule.

- Therefore, questioning the tsar was seen almost as questioning God.
- This idea supported the autocracy and justified his absolute authority.

Key institutions of the central government:

The Tsar: held absolute authority and could issue decrees with the force of law.

The Council of Ministers: advised the tsar but could not contradict him.

The imperial bureaucracy: vast administrative bodies that carried out orders from above.

The Okhrana: the secret police responsible for surveillance, spying, censorship, and suppressing dissent.

The introduction of the Duma (1905–1906)

The Revolution of 1905 forced Tsar Nicholas II to accept certain changes.

With the October Manifesto (1905), the following institution was created: The State Duma

A partially elected parliament, but with very limited powers.

The Duma:

- Debated laws
- Could propose reforms
- Represented different sectors of society

Limitations:

- The tsar could dissolve it whenever he wished (and he did so several times).

- It had no real control over the army or foreign policy.
- Half of the government continued to answer directly to the tsar.

The Zemstvos

The zemstvos were local and regional councils established in 1864 under Tsar Alexander II as part of his reforms.

What they did:

- Managed local education (primary schools)
- Oversaw public health (clinics, doctors)
- Maintained local infrastructure (roads, bridges)
- Supported agriculture and local economic development
- Provided social services

Characteristics:

- They were one of the few institutions that allowed limited local self-government in the Russian Empire.
- Representation favored the nobility, so peasants had much less influence.
- They were supervised by officials appointed by the tsar, so they were not fully independent.
- Over time, zemstvos became centers of professional expertise (teachers, doctors, engineers) and sometimes fostered mild political activism.

Tsar Alexander II: emperor of Russia

Tsar Alexander II of Russia (Alexander II Nikolaevich) was one of the most significant rulers of the 19th century.

- Reigned: 1855–1881
- Dynasty: Romanov
- Son of: Nicholas I, a very authoritarian tsar

He came to power during the Crimean War, when Russia suffered a humiliating defeat that exposed how outdated the empire had become.

Most Famous Reform: The Emancipation of the Serfs (1861)

He freed more than 20 million serfs, who had been legally tied to the land and controlled by their landlords.

The reform wasn't perfect—many peasants ended up with little land and heavy payments—but it was still the largest social transformation in Russian history up to that point.

Other Major Reforms

Creation of zemstvos: local government councils with some autonomy

Judicial reform: modern and more independent courts

Partial relaxation of censorship (especially early in his reign)

Encouragement of industrialization and railway expansion

Military reform: universal conscription and shorter service

Foreign Policy

Sold Alaska to the United States in 1867

Expanded Russian influence in Central Asia

Tried to maintain peace and avoid major European conflicts

Opposition and Radicalization

His moderate reforms angered everyone:

Nobles felt threatened

Liberals wanted more reforms

Radicals wanted to overthrow the whole system

By the late 1870s, revolutionary groups became increasingly violent, carrying out multiple assassination attempts.

Assassination

On March 13, 1881, members of the revolutionary group Narodnaya Volya ("People's Will") assassinated him with bombs in St. Petersburg.

Ironically, on the very same day, he had been preparing to approve even more liberal reforms, including a consultative parliament.

Legacy

Remembered as the most progressive tsar of the Romanov dynasty

His reforms set in motion social forces he could not control

After his death, his son Alexander III reversed many reforms and returned to heavy repression

Some historians believe that if Alexander II had lived longer, Russia might have developed into a constitutional monarchy and potentially avoided the 1917 Revolution