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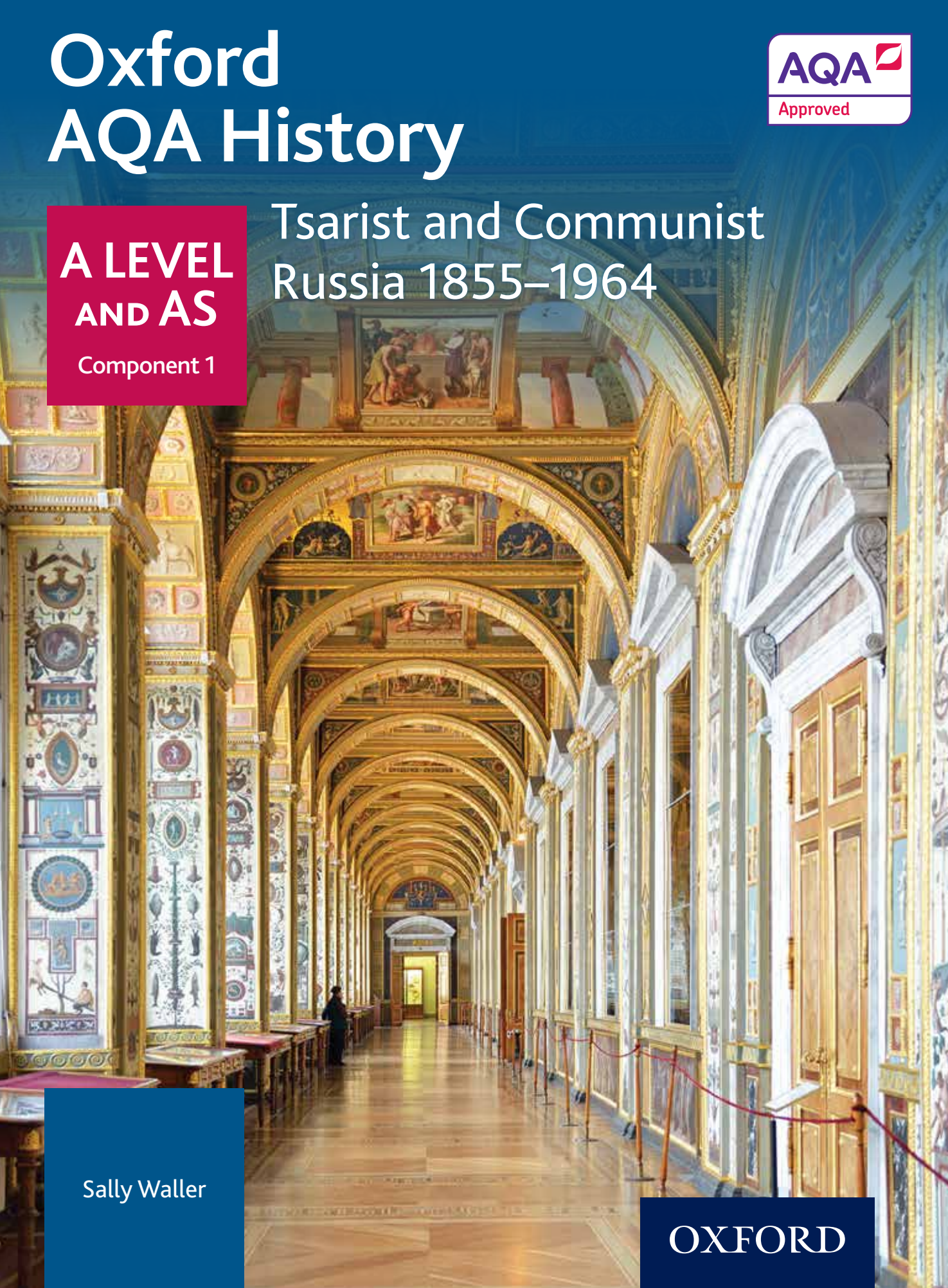
**A LEVEL
AND AS**

Component 1

Tsarist and Communist
Russia 1855–1964

Sally Waller

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1

Trying to preserve autocracy, 1855–1894

1 The Russian autocracy in 1855

EXTRACT 1

The Russian Empire was deeply divided between the government and the Tsar's subjects; between the capital and the provinces; between the educated and the uneducated; between Western and Russian ideas; between the rich and the poor; between privilege and oppression; between contemporary fashion and centuries-old custom. Most people (and over 90 per cent of the Emperor's subjects were born and bred in the countryside) felt that a chasm divided them from the world inhabited by the ruling elites. Russia was an empire, but national consciousness was only patchily developed and local traditions and loyalties retained the greatest influence. National consciousness was not a dominant sentiment among Russians. Except in times of war, most of them were motivated by Christian belief, peasant customs, village loyalties and reverence for the Tsar rather than by feelings of Russian nationhood. Christianity itself was a divisive phenomenon; Russian Orthodox teachings were not accepted universally. But the Tsar and the Church hierarchy wanted obedience and they had the authority to secure just that.

Adapted from Robert Service, *History of Modern Russia*, 1997

The well-respected modern historian Robert Service has painted a picture of tsarist Russia as it was in the mid-nineteenth century and was to remain, scarcely changed, until the end of tsarist rule in 1917. His account of the state of the Russian Empire stresses its geographic, social, intellectual, economic and even religious divisions. Above all, he emphasises the **localism** of Russian society and the lack of national consciousness. The empire he describes seems to be held together by a 'reverence for the Tsar', and by the power of that Tsar and the Russian Orthodox Church to demand obedience.

The political context

In 1855, Russia was an **autocratic empire**. At its head was a Tsar, who took the title 'Emperor and Autocrat of all Russia'. According to the 'Collected Laws of the Russian Empire' compiled by Tsar Nicholas I in 1832, 'The Emperor of all the Russias is an autocratic and unlimited monarch; God himself ordains that all must bow to his supreme power, not only out of fear but also out of conscience.'

A CLOSER LOOK

Empire

An empire is made up of a number of lesser states ruled over by one monarch. Nineteenth-century Russia was a vast empire of around 21 million square kilometres, twice the size of Europe and a sixth of the globe's surface. It had been acquired through military conquest and colonisation, and was still growing.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

In this chapter you will learn about:

- the powers of the Tsar of Russia in the mid-nineteenth century
- the way in which Russia was governed and the problems the rulers faced
- the economic state of Russia in c1855
- the social make-up of Russia in c1855.

KEY QUESTION

As you read this chapter, consider the following Key Question:
How was Russia governed and how did political authority change and develop?

KEY TERM

Localism: loyalty to the local community or local area

ACTIVITY

As you read this chapter, see if you can find evidence that agrees with Service's interpretation in Extract 1. Later in the chapter, you will be asked to assess how convincing his argument is.

KEY TERM

Autocratic: autocracy means having no limits on a ruler's power; such a ruler was called an autocrat

KEY TERM

Orthodox Church: following a split in the Christian Church in the eleventh century, the Eastern Orthodox Church had developed its own beliefs and rituals; in 1453, when Constantinople fell to the Turks, Moscow became its spiritual capital

Over-Procurator: appointed by the Tsar from the laity, this was the highest Church official

Holy Synod: a group of bishops, which forms the ruling body of the Orthodox Church; it is the highest authority on rules, regulations, faith and matters of Church organisation

Edict: [Russian: *ukaz*] an official order issued by a person of authority



Fig. 1 *The Russian Empire in 1855. What can be learned from this map about the likely problems of governing Russia in the mid-nineteenth century?*

A CLOSER LOOK

Problems of governing the Empire

Many different ethnic groups lived within the Russian Empire, each with their own culture, customs, language and, in some cases, religion. Less than half the total population of around 69 million people in 1855 was Russian, and three quarters of the total population lived within European Russia – to the west of the Urals – on less than a quarter of the total land mass.

KEY TERM

Provincial: living away from the capital

CROSS-REFERENCE

One example of the special committees appointed by the Tsar is the committee of nobles that were formed to discuss the issue of Emancipation, or freeing the serfs. This is discussed in Chapter 2.

Nicholas' statement is a reminder that the Tsar was, in name only, also the Head of the Russian **Orthodox Church** and was regarded by Orthodox believers as the embodiment of God on Earth. The vast lands of the Russian Empire were his private property and the Russian people were his children. Russians were taught to show devotion to their Tsar and to accept their conditions on Earth as the will of God. The Patriarch of Moscow, who worked in close harmony with the Tsar, provided spiritual guidance, while the **Over-Procurator** of the **Holy Synod**, a post created in 1721, was a government minister appointed by the Tsar to run Church affairs. This meant that the structures of Church and State were entwined, as archbishops and bishops at the head of the Church hierarchy were subject to tsarist control over appointments, religious education, most of the Church's finances and issues of administration.

The Tsar's imperial **edicts** (*ukazy* in Russian) were the law of the land. The Tsar did, of course, have advisers and ministers, but these were all chosen by the Tsar himself and no-one could do anything without the Tsar's approval. His main advisory bodies were the Imperial Council or Chancellery, a body of 35 to 60 nobles specially picked by the Tsar to advise him personally and provide their 'expert' opinion; the Council of Ministers, a body of 8 to 14 ministers in charge of different government departments; and the Senate, which was supposed to oversee all the workings of government but in practice was largely redundant by 1855.

The Tsar and the central government were based in the Imperial capital of St Petersburg but the regime also depended on the **provincial** nobility for support. Nobles had not been obliged to serve the State since 1785, although many continued to do so, for example as a provincial governor of one of the Empire's fifty provinces. However, their sense of obligation remained strong and all landowners were expected to keep order on their estates. Furthermore, when circumstances demanded, Tsars might choose to appoint a special committee to carry out an investigation or prepare a report. Such committees were usually headed by trusted nobles but, even so, there was no need for the Tsar to take any notice of their findings.

The **civil servants** who made up the **bureaucracy** were paid noble officials, selected from a 'table of ranks' that laid down the requirements for office.

There were 14 levels, from rank 1, held by members of the Council of Ministers, to rank 14, which covered the minor state positions, for example, collecting taxes or running a provincial post office. Each rank had its own uniform, form of address and status. This bureaucracy was riddled by internal corruption and incompetence, but through it orders were passed downwards from the central government to the provincial governors and, in turn, to district governors and town commandants. It was a one-way operation though; there was no provision for suggestions to travel upwards from the lower ranks.



Fig. 2 The Tsar's palace in St Petersburg

As well as his civilian officials, the Tsar also had at his disposal the world's largest army of around 1.5 million **conscripted serfs**, each forced into service for 25 years and made to live in a 'military colony'. This huge army and the much smaller navy absorbed around 45 per cent of the government's annual spending. The higher ranks of the military were prestigious posts, reserved for the nobles who bought and sold their commissions, but for the lower ranks discipline was harsh and army life was tough. This army could be called upon to fight in wars or to put down risings and disturbances inside Russia. The Tsar also had the service of elite regiments of mounted **Cossacks**, with special social privileges. The Cossacks acted both as a personal bodyguard to the Tsar and as police reinforcements.

A CLOSER LOOK

Cossacks

The Cossacks came from the Ukraine and Southern Russia. They were known for their skills in horsemanship and their strong military tradition. By the nineteenth century, the Cossacks formed a special and prestigious military class serving the Tsar. They were provided with arms and supplies by the tsarist government, but each soldier rode his own highly trained horse.

To maintain the autocracy, the country had developed into a **police state**. The police state prevented freedom of speech, freedom of the press and travel abroad. Political meetings and strikes were forbidden. Censorship existed at every level of government and the police made sure that the censorship exercised by the State and Church was enforced. The secret state security network was run by the 'Third Section' of the Emperor's Imperial Council. Its agents kept a strict surveillance over the population and had unlimited powers to carry out raids, and to arrest and imprison or send into exile anyone suspected of anti-tsarist behaviour. They sometimes acted on the word of informers, and were greatly feared.

Following the **French Revolution**, Alexander I, Tsar between 1801 and 1825, considered setting up an advisory representative assembly and possibly giving it law-making powers, but he never put this into practice. His brother Nicholas I, who ruled between 1825 and 1855, totally rejected such a thought. A military uprising against his rule in December 1825 encouraged him to follow a path of repression, and he deliberately sought to distance Russia from

KEY TERM

Civil servant: someone working for the government

Bureaucracy: a system of government in which most of the important decisions are taken by state officials rather than by elected representatives

Conscription: compulsory enlistment of a person into military service

Serf: a person who was the property of the lord for whom he or she worked; serfs and serfdom are further discussed later in this chapter (on page 4, in A closer look: What was serfdom?) and will be covered in detail in Chapter 2

Military colony: where the conscripts lived (with their families) and trained, all under strict military discipline

Police state: a state in which the activities of the people are closely monitored and controlled for political reasons

ACTIVITY

Draw a diagram to show the political structure of Russia in c.1855.

CROSS-REFERENCE

Less than half the total population of around 69 million people in 1855 was Russian. Read more in A Closer Look: Problems of governing the Empire on page 2.

the West where the liberal ideas he most feared were spreading. He believed in strict autocracy and severe restrictions were imposed on Russia's other nationalities. While leading intellectuals argued for a civil society based on the rule of law, Nicholas tightened censorship and set up the secret police, or Third Section. His reign ended in military defeat in the Crimea, which finally brought the long-ignored need for change to the new Tsar's attention.

A CLOSER LOOK

The French Revolution

The French had risen up against their absolutist King in 1789 and a republic had been set up in 1792. The French example of representative government (as already practised in Great Britain) was spread across Europe by Napoleon before 1812. French 'liberal' ideas ignited a demand for greater political freedom in the European states.

KEY TERM

Entrepreneur: someone who invests money to set up a business despite the financial risks

Cottage industry: work done in the worker's own home or a small workshop, typically spinning, weaving and small-scale wood and metal work; occasionally whole villages specialised in a particular trade, such as making samovars for boiling water for tea

The economic and social context

KEY QUESTION

How and with what results did the economy develop and change?
What was the extent of social change?

The economic situation

When Alexander II came to the throne in 1855, Britain, Belgium, France and the states comprising Germany were already well advanced industrially. Mills, factories, coal pits, quarries and railways were transforming the landscape and trade was flourishing. However, the Russian economy remained mostly rural with a ratio of 11:1 village to town dwellers, compared with 2:1 in Britain.

There were good reasons for Russia's economic backwardness. Although the Russian Empire was vast, much of its territory was inhospitable (over two thirds lay north of the 50th parallel north), comprising tundra, forests and stretches of barren countryside, especially to the north and east. As a result, both size and climate placed severe strains on economic development. Although mid-nineteenth century Russia was Europe's main exporter of agricultural produce and possessed vast reserves of timber, coal, oil, gold and other precious metals, much of its potential remained untapped and communications between the different parts of the Empire were poor.

However the lack of progress was primarily due to Russia's commitment to a serf-based economy. The landowning aristocracy, the tsarist government and the army were all reliant on the **serfs**. This inhibited economic development by limiting the forces that drive change, such as wage-earners, markets and **entrepreneurs**. The serfs were poor. Most just about managed to survive on the produce they grew for themselves on the land made available by their landlords, and '**cottage industries**' provided the little extra cash they needed for special purchases and taxes. However, they often suffered with starvation in the winter, particularly in years of bad harvest, and systems of land management within the serf communes (*mirs*) meant that individual serf families worked scattered strips and were obliged to follow a communal pattern of farming. There was little incentive or opportunity, therefore, for them to develop into 'wage-earners'.

A CLOSER LOOK

What was serfdom?

Russian peasants (serfs) were men, women and children who were classified as the 'property' of their owners, rather than as 'citizens' of the State. Serfs could be bought and sold, were subject to beatings, and were not allowed to marry without permission. Serfs were also liable for conscription into the army. There were two main types: a little over half were privately owned, with around 30 per cent of these paying rent (*obrok*) and around 70 per cent providing labour (*barshchina*). The remainder were 'state serfs' who paid taxes and rent. Most serfs worked on the land in village communes (*mirs*) run by strict rules imposed by the village elders. Some performed domestic service.

Markets existed (and indeed were growing) although ‘business’ was mostly small-scale. The most common peasant purchases were vodka (for celebrations), metal tools and salt (to preserve food), which they bought in the nearest town, or at a fair. However, self-sufficiency meant that comparatively few goods were actually ‘purchased’ and in peasant markets, money was not the usual form of payment. Exchanges took place ‘in kind’; for example some eggs might be given in return for a length of wool. In some areas, particularly near large cities, market forces were beginning to develop as peasants sought wage-work in nearby towns at slack times in the farming year, but for the vast majority, money was simply irrelevant and there was no **internal market demand**.

At the other end of the scale was the small **landowning elite**, who obtained most of what they needed from their serfs in the form of service and feudal dues. They were generally uninterested in how efficiently their estates operated. For many, serf-owning merely provoked idleness. So long as their bailiffs squeezed sufficient amounts out of the peasants for their own benefit, the aristocratic landowners saw little need to do more. There was no opportunity for **capital accumulation**, since income was generally falling. This was thanks to the rural population growth and the **agricultural changes** in Western Europe that had increased the competitiveness and productivity of the European markets. Many landowners had been forced into debt and had to take out **mortgages** on estates which had previously been owned outright by their families. Sometimes they even mortgaged their serfs, but despite their despair, they did not seek alternative ways of ‘making money’, because money as such was of little use in Russia’s under-developed economy.

KEY TERM

Internal market demand: the desire and ability to buy the products of manufacturing within the country; if a country’s inhabitants are poor, there will be little internal demand

Landowning elite: those who owned land and who were a privileged minority in Russian society

Capital accumulation: building up money reserves in order to invest

Mortgage: this involves borrowing money by providing a guarantee; in this case a landowner’s serfs provided the guarantee for a state loan, and if the borrowed money and additional interest was not repaid, the State could seize the serfs

A CLOSER LOOK

Agricultural changes

Crop rotation, new fertilisers and developments in agricultural machinery had all helped to transform Western agriculture.



Fig. 3 A peasant woman tilling the soil

A CLOSER LOOK

Serf poverty

The serfs’ working and living conditions were, by Western standards, primitive. It was normal for corn to be cut by hand with sickles and for peasants to share their huts with their animals. In such circumstances, it is perhaps unsurprising that most peasants were illiterate but deeply religious, inclined to superstition and deeply hostile to change.

KEY QUESTION

What was the extent of social and cultural change?

KEY TERM

Urban artisan: a manual worker in a town who possessed some skills, e.g. a cobbler or a leather-maker

Intelligentsia: the more educated members of Russian society, including writers and philosophers with both humanitarian and nationalist concerns; many opposed the State for various cultural, moral, religious, philosophical and political reasons

ACTIVITY

According to Extract 2, what were the consequences of the absence of a middle class in Russia?

The social context

Socially, Russia was, as Service suggested in Extract 1, starkly divided between the privileged land-owning elite and the serf majority; the non-productive and the productive classes. The former consisted of the clergy, nobility, civil and military officials, army and naval officers and, at the very top, the royal court. In addition to the serfs, there were some **urban artisans**, manufacturers and merchants within the ranks of the ‘productive classes’, but the striking feature of mid-nineteenth century Russian society was the absence of any coherent ‘middle class’, as was becoming increasingly dominant elsewhere in Europe. There were a small number of professionals (doctors, teachers and lawyers, for example) some of whom comprised an educated ‘**intelligentsia**’, but these were often the sons of nobles.

EXTRACT 2

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the late survival in Russia of serfdom, an institution that in Western Europe is associated with medieval times and had begun to decline from the end of the thirteenth century. By tying the bulk of the population to the land and preventing the movement of a free labour force, it acted as an impediment to the development of a middle class. This social gap had a profound effect on political as well as economic development. It accounts for the relative weakness in nineteenth-century Russia of moderate liberal political opinion. It may also explain the lack of sympathy shown by thinkers at both ends of the political spectrum for entrepreneurial activity, the lack of practicality in much of their thought – which tended towards the visionary rather than the concrete – and their disdain, even contempt, for prosperity and material gain.

Adapted from Derek Offord, *Nineteenth Century Russia: Opposition to Autocracy*, 1998

The word ‘class’, with its connotation of ‘economic status’ is actually a rather modern term to use of nineteenth-century Russian society, which was still based on birth, land and service. As in the past, in 1855 legal barriers still limited social mobility. Serfs were liable for dues, as demanded by past custom, to their masters (from whose bond it was almost impossible to escape). They also paid direct and indirect **taxes** to the government. The nobility and clergy, however, were exempt from the payment of any direct monetary taxes.

A CLOSER LOOK**Taxes**

The government was financed from taxes and dues. The main direct tax, paid by all except the merchants, was the poll tax, literally a ‘tax on heads’, which had been introduced in 1719 in order to cover the costs of maintaining Russia’s large army. It was levied, at the same rate, on every male peasant in the Empire, no matter what his circumstances. This, together with the *obrok* paid by state serfs in lieu of land and service dues, made up 25 per cent of ‘ordinary’ government income. Indirect taxes (on services and goods) included a tax on salt, and, even more importantly, on vodka. This had grown during the nineteenth century to represent 30 per cent of ordinary government income by 1855, suggesting that a change was already underway towards a more ‘commercial’ source for government revenue. Overall, the taxes hit hard at the peasantry who, together with the urban workers and tradesmen, provided around 90 per cent of Imperial finance.

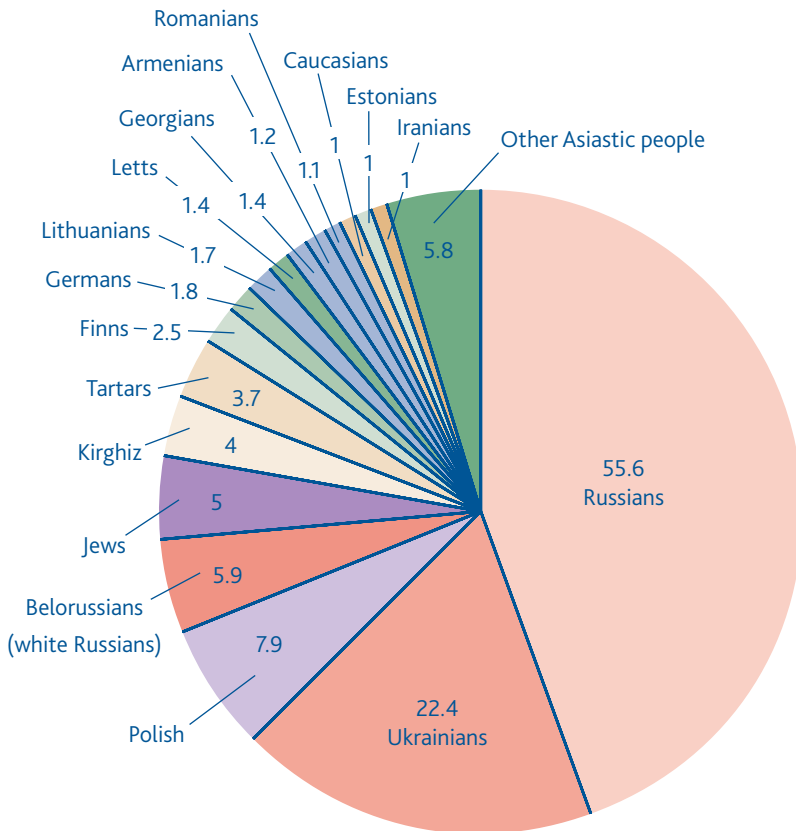


Fig. 4 Ethnic groups within the Russian Empire, as given in the first national census of 1897 (population in millions)

EXTRACT 3

Most of the structures present in mid-nineteenth century Russia were still typical of the pre-modern world. A small ruling group, unified by the structures of autocracy, lived off resources mobilised directly from a large agrarian population through the system of serfdom. Most of the peasant population lived lives little different from those of the Middle Ages. The family, the household and the village were the crucial institutions of rural life. Largely self-sufficient peasants used traditional ways of working the soil, and levels of productivity were little higher than those of the Middle Ages. However, new forces were already beginning to undermine the traditional patterns. In some areas, market forces were beginning to transform village life, while the government's revenues came increasingly from commercial sources. At the upper level of society, the increasingly westernised outlook of Russian elites undermined the autocratic political culture of Russia's ruling group. The government became aware of how threatening these various changes might be to its own power only in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Adapted from David Christian, *Imperial and Soviet Russia*, 1986

So, while Russia was still considered a 'great' power in Europe because of its size and huge army, politically, economically and socially it remained undeveloped and 'backward' in comparison with the West. Small changes were taking place but, as yet, these had been insufficient to promote extensive modernisation.

STUDY TIP

When faced with this type of question, look carefully at each extract and make a note of the arguments it puts forward in your answer. Comment on the overall argument and the specific, lesser arguments, using what you have learned so far to assess how convincing these arguments are.

A LEVEL PRACTICE QUESTION

Evaluating historical extracts

Re-read Extracts 1, 2 and 3. Using your understanding of the historical context, assess how convincing the arguments in these three extracts are in relation to the condition of Russia in 1855.

The impact of the Crimean War 1853–56

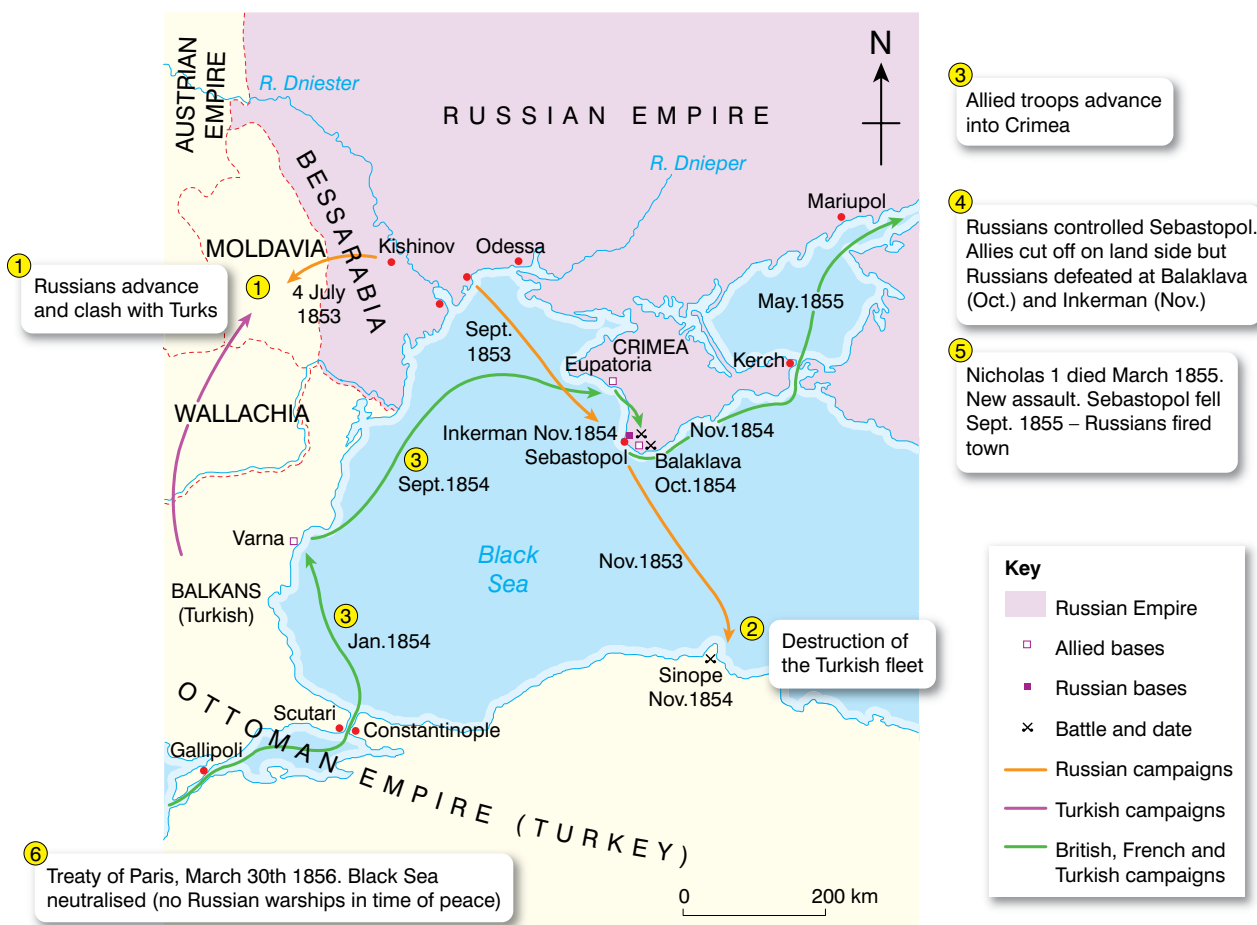


Fig. 5 Map of the Crimean War

In the mid-nineteenth century, the empire of the Ottoman Turks stretched from the Middle East across the Black Sea Straits and into the Balkans. However, ever since the 1820s, the Sultan had struggled to control the Christians in his European dominions and consequently Tsar Nicholas I had seized the opportunity to increase Russian influence in the area by posing as the Protector of Slavs and Christians.

In June 1853, Nicholas sent a Russian army to Moldavia and Wallachia (now part of present-day Moldova). This provoked the Turks into declaring war in October. The Russians were the stronger, and triumphantly sank a squadron from the Turkish Black Sea Fleet, which had been at anchor in Sinope Bay on the Black Sea. This brought the British and French, who were anxious to protect their own trading interests in the area, into the war in

defence of Turkey. They sent a joint expeditionary force of more than 60,000 men to the Russian Crimea, where they mounted a land and sea attack on the major Russian naval base of Sebastopol.

The war was marred by incompetence on both sides, and the death toll was made worse by an outbreak of cholera. Russia suffered badly from outdated technology, poor **transport** and inadequate leadership and while the Russian conscript army was larger in number, it lacked the flexibility and determination of the smaller French and British units. The Russians were defeated at Balaclava in October 1854 and at Inkerman in November 1854.

Shortly before his death in March 1855, Nicholas I addressed his son, the future Alexander II, with the words, 'I hand over to you my command, unfortunately not in as good order as I would have wished'. By September, the fortress of Sebastopol had fallen to its enemies, leaving the tsarist government shocked and humiliated.

Although they had gone to war in a spirit of utmost confidence, the course of the fighting had revealed Russia's military and administrative inadequacies. In every respect, the war was little short of disastrous. Trade had been disrupted, peasant uprisings escalated and the intelligentsia renewed their cries for something to be done to close the gap between Russia and the West. The concluding Treaty of Paris (1856) added the final humiliation by preventing Russian warships from using the Black Sea in times of peace.

A CLOSER LOOK

Transport was a major problem for the Russians. It took them longer to get equipment to the front line than it took France and Britain to send soldiers and materials from the channel ports. Russian equipment was also outdated. Their muskets were inferior and there was only one to every two soldiers. The Russian navy still used sails and wooden-bottomed ships, while Western ships had metal cladding and were powered by steam. Furthermore, the inshore fleet contained galley boats, rowed by conscripted serfs.



Fig. 6 *The siege of Sebastopol*

ACTIVITY

Write a short newspaper editorial on the death of Nicholas I. Refer to the situation Russia is in and your hopes and/or fears for the future.

Failure in the Crimean War provided the ‘wake-up call’ that Russia needed. With the death of Nicholas I, decades of stagnation came to an end. In 1855 there came to power not only a new Tsar, Alexander II, but also a new generation of liberal-minded nobles and officials who were to have a major influence on his reign. The dilemma was how to match the other European powers in economic development without weakening the autocratic structure that held the Empire together.



Fig. 7 Alexander II receiving congratulations from his family after his coronation

STUDY TIP

Don't forget that all essays require balance. So, even if you are going to disagree with this statement, you should also put forward the opposing case, but remember to explain why this is less convincing.

SUMMARY**Activity**

1. Draw a chart, as illustrated below, and complete it with bullet point notes, based on what you have learned in this chapter.

	Strengths	Weaknesses
Political		
Economic		
Social		

2. Using this chart, assess the validity of the statement, ‘The Russian Empire had more strengths than weaknesses in 1855.’

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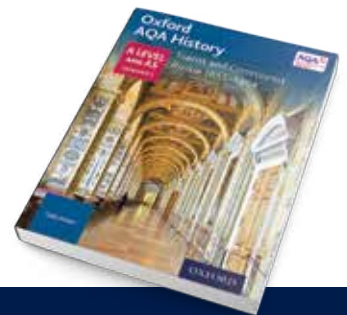
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Sally Waller is a respected author, enthusiastic History teacher, and she has many years of examining experience. She is currently teaching History at the Cheltenham Ladies' College.

What's on the cover?

The State Hermitage is a museum of art and culture in Saint Petersburg, Russia. The palatial building was originally the main residence of the Russian Tsars.



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