RUSSIA BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

I. Purpose and overview of the lecture

A. To study the peculiar problems that Russia faced in modern times, as a nation “between east and west”
   1. This picks up themes in several previous lectures
      a) The first lecture discussed the brutal efforts of Peter the Great to copy the West
      b) A recent lecture spoke of Russia’s humiliation in the Crimean War
      c) And more generally the efforts of nearly all nations to consolidate and “modernize” in this period
   2. This lecture links as well to a number of future lectures, the Russian Revolution, Leninism, Stalinism

II. Long-range historical background

A. Certain themes are well covered in McKay: Rule by Mongol invaders in 13th through 15th centuries
   1. Russia was largely isolated from the West in this period
   2. That experience left a lasting mark on the country’s psyche and its institutions
      a) One of the most obvious of those institutions: the all-powerful tsar

B. As we have seen, by the 16th and 17th centuries contacts of all sorts between Russia and the West increase
   1. It becomes an active participant in European events
   2. It is invaded often, but also invades
   3. It participates in the partitions of Poland
   4. More famously, Russia is invaded by Napoleon and then launches a powerful counter-offensive
   5. Similarly, Russia played a key role in putting down the rebels in Hungary in 1848

C. On the whole, one may say that Russia came out well in these confrontations
   1. Its army was respected and feared in the early nineteenth century—if only because of its great size
III. Russia and western modernization

A. By mid-century, rivalry with the West came to assume a more threatening aspect for Russia
   1. The Crimean War gave concrete expression to that threat, but there were other signs, more subtle but also deeper

B. The fundamental forces, which has been called the Dual Revolution, that was so transforming the West, threatened Russia as no other major power
   1. That is, ideas coming out of the Enlightenment, ideas of liberalism, individualism, democracy—all were incompatible with tsarism, and were considered “un-Russian”

C. More tangibly, western industrialization began to push the West far ahead of Russia in economic and thus military power
   1. Above all the rapid industrialization of Great Britain and Germany put Russia in an increasingly vulnerable position
   2. German and British strength tended to intensify Russia’s long-standing paranoia

D. Thus, the central problem of modern Russian history: How to deal with the growing threat from the West?

E. The answers branched off in two, opposing though sometimes intertwined directions:
   1. Copy the west
   2. Find a special, Russian way

IV. Tsarism and westernization

A. An institution that seemed particularly Russian—or "un-Western—was that of the tsar

B. As we have seen, the Russian tsar ruled with a despotism so absolute that it was the marvel of western observers

C. One obvious path, then, was for the absolute tsar to direct westernization
   1. That was pretty much what Peter the Great had done
   2. And if there had been a consistent series of capable tsars, of “enlightened despots,” perhaps that path would have worked
3. But such tsars did not come to the fore
   a) For every great tsar in the nineteenth century, there was another who was incompetent or short-sighted

D. Nicholas I (1825-55)
1. Actually, he was able and conscientious, but blindly reactionary
2. He was fanatically determined to stamp out any opposition to his autocratic authority
3. Foreign observers compared his rule to that of a military camp, living in a state of siege
4. And, finally, his methods did not work
5. The last year of his reign was blotted by the humiliating defeat in the Crimean War
   a) And this defeat greatly intensified internal pressures for reform inside Russia

E. Alexander II (1855-81)
1. At first he seemed the answer to those who had hoped for a more flexible, even “liberal” regime
2. The opening years of his reign saw the freeing of the serfs (1861)
3. In some ways more important was his “revolution from above”
   a) A series of legal, administrative, economic, educational, and military reforms
   b) What he introduced might be appropriately compared to what happened in France between 1789 and 1799
   c) But not because of pressure from below but rather from above
4. The reforms in fact accomplished a great deal, but they also entailed many problems
   a) The privileged orders, in this case as in the French Revolution, were not really reconciled to them
   b) And thus the reforms were often undermined in practical application
5. The freeing of the serfs
   a) This was an especially disappointing matter
b) To begin with, they were not really freed in the normal sense of the word: They remained tightly controlled by the mir (the collective farm)

c) A former serf could not leave the mir, or sell his land without permission

d) Even after he left, he remained liable for taxes on the mir that he had left

e) In short, this “freeing” did not really create the legal foundations for the sense of a free individual that really corresponded to western liberal ideals

f) The Russian peasant remained still very much under the authority of others and thought of himself as part of a collectivity rather than as a free individual

g) Similarly, the material condition of former serfs did not improve

(1) Interestingly, this was much like situation of Negro slaves freed in the United States at about the same time

h) The lands that were “given” to them (or to the mir) still had heavy indemnities to be paid, to pay off former owners

i) Former serfs could simply not handle payments of these heavy taxes

j) At times they then sold “their” land to bourgeois entrepreneurs

k) And these men put the land into production, mostly in grain, for the market, rather than for internal consumption

V. Comparisons to the West

A. In some ways, what was happening after 1861 had suggestive parallels with trends in the West in previous years

1. That is, the movement of market forces into the countryside, the great pressures put on the rural poor, etc.

B. But, even granting the often terrible conditions in countries like
England and France 50 years before, conditions were worse in Russia

1. Evidence suggests that mortality among peasants increased sharply in the 20 years following emancipation
2. Famines, disease, malnutrition, illiteracy remained—or even increased—at appalling rates

C. Yet, also as in the West, there was paradoxically a rapid growth in the rural population

1. But Russian industrialization and urbanization did not prove capable of absorbing this excess rural population
2. Thus, a kind of “pressure cooker” effect might be said to have developed in Russia in these years—with no apparent way to relieve the pressure
   a) No one with political power seemed to have any workable plan to remedy the situation
3. There was no national legislature
4. The zemstvos that had been created were only to deal with local issues
   a) In 1875 they were expressly forbidden even to discuss general political issues
5. On top of this, Alexander II himself began to move to the right, to a more repressive stance
   a) That in turn encouraged the spread of secret revolutionary societies
   b) Part of the younger generation of Russia’s educated class became increasingly alienated from the regime

D. In 1881 a revolutionary group succeeded in assassinating the tsar

E. Alexander III (1881-94)

1. The typically anarchist expectation of this “propaganda of the deed” was that the regime would collapse
2. But that did not happen
3. Moreover, Alexander III reverted strongly to the traditions of Nicholas I—brutal repression

VI. The Narodniks and the reform of Russia

A. The young revolutionaries who assassinated Alexander II were
part of a broad “populist” or narodnik movement

B. narod = people in Russian, and the narodniks tended to look to the people as the font of all virtues

C. They were especially interested in the Russian peasant, or muzhik, as the truest, or purest example of the Russian spirit
   1. In the countryside was the “real Russia,” with obvious borrowings from Herder

D. Alexander Herzen and the narodniks
   1. Herzen's influence was more direct and widespread than Herder’s
   2. From his writings the narodniks came to be fascinated with the peculiar “collective” institutions among the Russian peasantry
      a) mir (obshchina) and artel
      b) The narodniks did not approve of the way these institutions were currently functioning
      c) Nevertheless, they saw in them the germ of a future idea society, one that would be libertarian, humanistic, socialistic
      d) They would provide a path by which Russia could modernize without paying the terrible price that had been paid in the West
      e) In Russia, in other words, the “awakening of greed,” the individualistic egotism could be avoided
      f) Russia could industrialize, modernize by means of collective institutions, cooperation, not competition
      g) In their own language, Russia could then “skip” the stage of bourgeois capitalism

E. The difficulties the narodniks faced:
   1. One obvious one: the tsar and his officials would hear nothing of their plans
   2. And this opposition tended to move the narodniks, or at least certain elements among them, to ever more violent uncompromising opposition to tsarism
   3. There was a much bigger and rather embarrassing problem: These populists were not popular, especially not with the peasants
   4. In a famous period of the early 1870s, they followed
Herzen’s urgings and engaged in a “going to the people” (khoozdhenie v narod)

a) But they encountered indifference, suspicion, and outright hostility from the peasants

b) (There were rather striking parallels to what many civil rights workers found among southern Blacks in the 1960s)

c) Indeed, in many cases, the peasants turned these young revolutionaries into the tsarist police

d) Similarly, the government, or at least local officials, had little difficulty in rousing the people against these “city-slicker” agitators

e) The work of the officials was made easier because of the number of Jews among the narodniks, allowing the officials and others on the right to exploit anti-Semitic feelings

f) To a degree, that was part of an established policy of the tsarist regime: “divide and rule”

(1) That is, the regime played upon the many ethnic hostilities of the Empire

F. More subtly, defenders of the regime argued that without the “rule” part—without a very strong hand at the top—Russia’s various nationalities would simply tear each other apart (and hatred of Jews was only one of a wide range of ethnic and religious hostilities in Russia)

1. Thus, democracy was not a feasible option

2. (These arguments against democracy were once used in South Africa, and indeed they have revived in the Russia of the 1990s)

G. Changes in the narodniks

1. Many were inclined to move away from their earlier anarchist-decentralist ideas

2. Some took up ideas similar to those of Blanqui in the West

a) That is, a more elitist approach:

(1) It was necessary to do things in the name of
the people, without worrying about “formal” support of the people

b) Indeed, a revolutionary might even need to work in opposition to the majority of the people, since they were blinded to their own interests by prejudice and misinformation

c) In short, it might be necessary to “force them to be free” (Rousseau)

VII. The Industrialization of Russia

A. A yet further large disappointment for the narodniks was that from the 1880s onward, western-style, capitalistic industrialization was spreading rapidly in Russia

B. And it was due primarily to large-scale investment from non-Russian, foreigners from western countries

C. In the generation before World War I Russia’s rate of industrialization exceeded that of most countries in the world
   1. This is a somewhat deceptive statement, in that a rapid rate for a country without much industrialization is relatively easy; still, Russia experienced remarkably rapid growth)

D. Thus, the hope of avoiding, or skipping the capitalist stage seemed to be fading fast

E. Many former narodniks thus began to look more closely at the prevalent socialist theory in the West at this time: Marxism, which of course spoke of the inevitability of capitalist development
   1. And the eventual enthusiasm of many of them for Marxism finally exceeded the enthusiasm of western socialists in this period
   2. Here was a “scientific” doctrine that proved Russia must move inevitably through a capitalist stage to socialist revolution
   3. It gave instructions on how to prepare for that moment
   4. And it presented new revolutionary force: the factory proletarian, instead of the peasant (who had so disappointed reformers and revolutionaries)

F. Again, as with the lecture on Marx and anarchism, these
remarks look to Leninism—the subject of a future lecture—which would combine Marxism and anarchism in a potent fashion