

Autocratic Europe: Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia

TIME LINE

- 1855-1881 Reign of Tsar Alexander II of Russia
 - 1861 Tsar Alexander II issues the edict of emancipation
 - 1864 Tsar Alexander II establishes the zemstvos
 - 1867 The Compromise of 1867 creates the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary
 - 1871 The German Empire is established Bismarck begins the *Kulturkampf*
 - 1875 The German Social Democratic Party is established
 - 1881 Tsar Alexander II is assassinated
- 1881-1894 Reign of Tsar Alexander III of Russia
 - 1888 Emperor William I of Germany dies
- 1888-1918 Reign of Emperor William II of Germany
 - 1890 Emperor William II dismisses Bismarck
- 1894-1917 Reign of Tsar Nicholas II of Russia
 - 1898 The Russian Social Democratic Party is established
 - 1901 The Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party is established
 - 1903 The Russian Social Democrats split into two factions, the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks
- 1904-1905 The Russo-Japanese War
- 1905-1906 Russia is swept by revolution
 - 1905 Tsar Nicholas II issues the October Manifesto
 - 1906 Tsar Nicholas II issues the Fundamental Laws

In the late nineteenth century, authoritarian government remained the pattern in Germany, the Austrian Empire, and Russia.

The constitution that Bismarck devised for the new German Empire in 1871 made some concessions to liberal opinion, but real power was exercised by the conservatives and above all, by the emperor. During the period prior to the outbreak of World War I in 1914, Germany's rulers refused to consider any real democratization of the country's political system.

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In the Austrian Empire, Emperor Francis Joseph was forced to make concessions to the Magyars of Hungary. The desires of other nationalities remained unsatisfied, however, and their intensifying nationalism challenged both Francis Joseph's control of Austria and the Magyars' domination of Hungary.

In Russia, the tsarist autocracy appeared to be infirm control. While Alexander II abolished serfdom and introduced other reforms, his successors were totally committed to reactionary principles. A small but growing number of middle-class intellectuals embraced liberal or socialist ideas, however, and Russia's defeat by Japan resulted in the Revolution of 1905, which led to the establishment of an elected parliament. Nevertheless, the tsarist regime remained fundamentally authoritarian.

Germany

The Constitution of the German Empire

When the German Empire was created in 1871, Otto von Bismarck (1815-1898), Germany's chancellor (prime minister), devised a constitution that contained a combination of liberal and conservative features. Nevertheless, he made certain that ultimate control remained in the hands of the conservatives and Prussia.

The Parliament: Reichstag and Bundesrat

The lower house of the parliament, the Reichstag, was elected by universal manhood suffrage, a concession to the liberals. The Reichstag's consent was necessary for legislation. However, if the Reichstag failed to approve a new budget, the government could continue to operate under the old budget. This restriction of the Reichstag's budgetary authority strengthened the position of the country's conservative rulers.

The Reichstag's power was further limited by the upper house, the Bundesrat, whose members were appointed by the princely rulers of the German states. A thoroughly conservative body, the Bundesrat could prevent the passage of bills favored by the Reichstag. Furthermore, the state of Prussia alone had enough votes in the Bundesrat to block any amendment of the constitution.

Power of the Emperor

The power of the conservatives and Prussia was strengthened further by the provision that the chancellor and the cabinet ministers were responsible only to the emperor. The emperor had the power to appoint the chancellor and the ministers, and he alone had the authority to dismiss them. From 1871 to his death in 1888, however, Emperor William I generally left the conduct of government to Bismarck.

The Kulturkampf

During the 1870s, the Iron Chancellor, as Bismarck was known, conducted a campaign against the Roman Catholics of Germany, known as the *Kulturkampf* (“the struggle of civilizations”). Bismarck distrusted the Catholics, believing they could not be loyal both to Germany and to the pope.

In 1872, the Jesuit Order was expelled from Germany, while other legislation dissolved all religious orders except those whose primary activity was caring for the sick. The May Laws of 1873, which applied only to the large state of Prussia, placed the education of the clergy under the supervision of the state and gave the state veto power over clerical appointments.

Germany’s Catholics responded by voting in increasing numbers for the Catholic Center Party. In the late 1870s, Bismarck recognized the failure of the *Kulturkampf*. He now perceived what he regarded as an even greater threat than the Catholics: the emergence of the Social Democrats as a force in German politics.

Bismarck’s Anti-Socialist Campaign

In 1875, several socialist groups, including the Marxists, joined to form the new Social Democratic Party. The Social Democrats, who advocated both socialism and the establishment of a republican form of government, made their primary appeal to the country’s industrial workers.

In his campaign against the Social Democrats, Bismarck used a combination of repression and social welfare legislation designed to attract the workers to the support of the state. The antisocialist law,

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passed in 1878, banned socialist meetings, suppressed the party's newspapers, and restricted its fund-raising. Social Democrats remained eligible for election to the Reichstag, however. Bismarck's social welfare legislation was remarkably progressive. In 1883, a program of health insurance was enacted, and a program of accident insurance was adopted in 1884. In 1889, a system of old-age and disability pensions was approved.

Despite Bismarck's efforts, the votes polled by the Social Democrats continued to increase. In despair, Bismarck began to consider an abrogation of the constitution in order to abolish universal manhood suffrage.

The Reign of William II (1888-1918)

When Emperor William I died in 1888, he was succeeded by his son, Frederick III. The new emperor was already fatally ill and died after a reign of ninety-nine days.

The death of Frederick III brought William II to the imperial throne. Unlike his grandfather, William I, the young emperor was not content to leave the direction of affairs to Bismarck but wanted to rule in his own right. In 1890, he dismissed Bismarck.

Economic and Social Reforms

William II allowed Bismarck's antisocialist legislation to expire, but he expanded the program of social insurance in the hope that somehow the working class could be induced to abandon the Social Democrats and support more conservative parties. In 1891, the system of factory inspection was expanded, and a labor department was created the following year. A series of laws, passed between 1899 and 1903, expanded the programs of sickness and accident insurance and old-age pensions, while the Comprehensive Factory Act of 1908 placed restrictions on the employment of women and children. The Imperial Insurance Code of 1911 provided for a consolidation and further expansion of the social insurance programs.

Gains by Social Democrats

William II was no more successful than Bismarck had been in reducing support for the Social Democrats. In 1912, the last elections before the outbreak of war in 1914, the party polled over 4 million votes and elected 110 deputies to the Reichstag, where they were now the largest party. In fact, the Social Democrats and other parties favoring democratic reforms held a majority of seats in the *Reichstag*. Nevertheless, William II remained adamant in his refusal to appoint a chancellor and ministers who had the confidence of a Reichstag majority.

Economic Development

During the years from 1871 to 1914, Germany experienced tremendous economic growth. The country's industrial plant and railway mileage expanded, while its merchant fleet and foreign trade increased substantially. The expansion of industry was greatly facilitated by the availability of coal and iron, as well as by the country's growing population, which raised demand for the products of industry. Germany's population of 41 million in 1871 grew to 65 million by 1914. Germany became a close second to Great Britain in its level of industrial production and foreign trade.

Austria

Austria Following the Revolutions of 1848

Following the upheavals brought by the revolutions of 1848, the Austrian government reestablished the traditional system of centralized rule for the multinational empire, concentrating authority in the hands of German-speaking officials loyal to the Hapsburgs.

Attempts at Decentralization

Austria's defeat by Piedmont and France in 1859 weakened the prestige of the Austrian government. In an effort to regain popular support, Emperor Francis Joseph (r. 1848-1916) initiated an experiment in decentralization. The October Diploma of 1860 expanded the authority of the aristocratic assemblies in Hungary, Bohemia, and other provinces. These assemblies would also elect

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delegates to an imperial diet, which had limited powers. However, the Magyars of Hungary refused to participate in the new system and demanded the restoration of the March Laws of 1848 (see Chapter 22).

Resistance by Magyars

In the February Patent of 1861, Francis Joseph modified the October Diploma, establishing a parliament for the empire, known as the *Reichsrat*. The emperor would appoint the members of the upper house, while the lower house would be indirectly elected. The complex voting system was weighted in favor of the German-Austrian bourgeoisie and upper class. Once again, the Magyars refused to participate in the new political structure.

The Compromise of 1867: Dual Monarchy

In 1866, Prussia defeated Austria in the Seven Weeks' War (see Chapter 23). Just as in 1859, defeat weakened the prestige of the imperial government.

The Magyars, led by Francis Deák (1803-1876) and Julius Andrassy (1823-1890), pressed their demands against the Hapsburgs and, in 1867, Emperor Francis Joseph agreed to the Compromise of 1867 (the *Ausgleich* of 1867), which created the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary.

The Compromise of 1867 divided the Hapsburg empire into two distinct units, the Austrian Empire and the Kingdom of Hungary. Austria was governed under a constitution based on the February Patent of 1861, while Hungary was governed under the March Laws of 1848, which had established a parliamentary government for Hungary during the revolution of that year.

Austria and Hungary operated for the most part as if they were two completely separate and independent countries, although joint ministries controlled foreign policy and military and financial affairs. Less formally, Austria and Hungary were bound together by the need to keep the minority nationalities under control.

Austria After 1867

Although Austria was in principle a constitutional monarchy, the emperor retained considerable authority. He could dissolve the parliament at will and had the power to legislate by decree when the parliament was not in session.

Electoral Reforms

In time, Austria developed a more democratic franchise. In 1907, universal manhood suffrage was introduced, along with the direct election of the members of the lower house of the Reichsrat.

Discontent Among Subject Nationalities

Extending the right to vote, however, did little to satisfy the minority nationalities in Austria, especially the Czechs and the South Slavs. Rather than becoming an effective instrument of government, the Austrian parliament provided the minority nationalities with an arena for attacking the Austrian government and each other.

Hungary After 1867

As king of Hungary, Francis Joseph had very limited authority. The Magyar aristocracy dominated both houses of the Hungarian parliament and made few concessions either to the Magyar peasants or the minority nationalities. In fact, they pursued a policy of Magyarization, seeking to force the minority nationalities to adopt the Magyar language and culture. The effect of Magyarization was the opposite of what was intended, since the minority nationalities – the Slovaks, Rumanians, and South Slavs – reacted to the arbitrary rule of the Magyars by becoming ever more conscious of their own nationality and more determined to gain rights of self-government.

Russia

The Reforms of Tsar Alexander II (r. 1855-1881)

After extricating Russia from the Crimean War in 1856, Tsar Alexander II turned his attention to Russia's most serious domestic problem: serfdom.

Emancipation of Serfs

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In the Emancipation Edict of 1861, Alexander II abolished serfdom. Along with their freedom, the emancipated serfs acquired some land. The state compensated the landowners for the land they lost, while the peasants were required to reimburse the state in redemption dues extending over a period of forty-nine years. Title to the land was transferred not to individual peasants but to the village communes (*mir*s), which then distributed the land among their members and were responsible for paying the redemption dues.

In general, the land received by the peasants was insufficient to support their growing numbers, while the redemption dues placed a heavy financial burden on them. The freed peasants were often little better off than they had been as serfs, and peasant discontent and unrest continued.

The Rural Zemstvos

The emancipation of the serfs was followed by other reforms. A decree issued in 1864 established a system of elected rural assemblies, known as *zemstvos*. The district and provincial *zemstvos* were authorized to levy local taxes and to operate elementary schools and orphanages, to build and maintain roads and bridges, and to promote public and animal health. The *zemstvos* were elected under a three-class voting system, with private landowners, townspeople, and peasant communes all choosing representatives. The relatively small number of landowners and townspeople elected more representatives than the peasants. The *zemstvos* did important work in the Russian countryside, and they represented Russia's first experiment in representative government.

Other Reforms

Also in 1864, Alexander II decreed a reform of the legal and judicial system. The principle of equality before the law was proclaimed, and a new system of courts was established. The reform also provided for trial by jury and public trials.

An 1870 decree created municipal *dumas*. These elected councils in Russia's cities and towns gave the country's urban areas

a system of self-government similar to that provided by the *zemstvos* in rural areas.

A reform of the army enacted in 1874 established the principle of universal liability for military service. The reform also reduced the term of service for draftees from twenty-five years to six years, with further reductions based on education.

Alexander II and Poland

At first, Alexander II pursued a moderate policy toward Poland. Nevertheless, the Poles increased their nationalist agitation, and in 1863, a revolt against Russian rule broke out.

The Russians crushed the Polish revolt with a severity that brought diplomatic protests from Great Britain, France, and Austria, although Prussia extended support. Following the suppression of the revolt, the Russians intensified their efforts to promote the Russification of Poland.

Russian Expansion

During the reign of Alexander II, Russia continued its expansionist policies in Siberia and Central Asia. Acquiring the Maritime Provinces northeast of Manchuria, the Russians established the port of Vladivostok on the Sea of Japan. By the end of Alexander II's reign, Russian control extended over almost all of Central Asia north of Persia and Afghanistan, reaching from the Caspian Sea eastward to the border of China.

The Russians were less successful, however, in their efforts to expand at the expense of the Ottoman Empire (see Chapter 28).

Populism

The reforms of Alexander II served to increase demands for further reform. During the 1870s, middle-class radicals launched the Populist movement (the “going to the people” movement). Under the auspices of Land and Freedom, the major Populist organization, radicals went out into the countryside and attempted to organize the peasants as a revolutionary force. The uneducated

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Russian peasants generally failed to respond and often betrayed the radicals to the police.

Terrorism

In desperation, some radicals turned to terrorism, creating an organization known as the People's Will. The terrorists believed that acts of terrorism would force the regime to grant concessions. In fact, terrorism ultimately led to an intensification of repression.

As opposition mounted during the 1870s, Alexander II considered the possibility of further reforms. Responding to proposals made by Michael Loris-Melikov (1825-1888), the minister of the interior, the tsar agreed on March 13, 1881, to establish a representative council to advise the government on reform measures. Later the same day, terrorists assassinated Alexander II.

Tsar Alexander III (r. 1881-1894)

Tsar Alexander III was a determined autocrat who ruled Russia with an iron hand, rejecting all proposals for further reform.

While Vyacheslav Plehve (1846-1904), the head of the secret police, moved to crush the terrorist movement, Constantine Pobedonostsev (1827-1907), the procurator-general of the Holy Synod (the chief administrative official of the Russian Orthodox Church), placed renewed emphasis on the traditional formula of Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Nationalism. Censorship was tightened, and controls over education were increased. In addition, efforts to promote the Russification of the country's ethnic and religious minorities were intensified. In particular, the government increased the economic and social restrictions on Russia's Jews, and tsarist authorities often encouraged peasants to conduct *pogroms* (anti-Jewish riots). The government also harassed Protestants in the Baltic provinces and Catholics in Poland.

Tsar Nicholas II (r. 1894-1917)

The last of the Romanovs to rule Russia, Nicholas II was as determined as his father had been to uphold the autocracy,

although he lacked Alexander III's iron will and determination. His wife, the German-born Alexandra (1872-1918), exerted considerable influence over him.

Economic Development

The 1880s marked the beginning of Russia's industrial revolution. Railway mileage increased, and coal production mounted, as did the output of pig iron and steel.

Industry

Count Sergei Witte (1849-1919, who served as minister of finance from 1892 to 1903), played a central role in Russia's industrialization.

Witte put Russia on the gold standard, which attracted foreign investment, and furthered other policies designed to encourage industrialization. He also spurred the construction of the Trans-Siberian railroad, spanning the almost 5,000 miles between Moscow and the port of Vladivostok.

Agriculture

Despite the expansion of industry, Russia remained a predominantly agricultural country. As late as 1914, only 18 percent of the population was classified as urban. Russian agriculture continued to be backward, and rural poverty was so extensive that many peasant communes fell behind in their payment of redemption dues. Overpopulation served to intensify rural poverty, and migration to Siberia provided only slight relief.

The Growth of Radicalism

Despite the government's repression, radical movements continued to develop during the reign of Tsar Nicholas II.

Social Democrats: Mensheviks and Bolsheviks

In 1898, Russian Marxists, inspired by George Plekhanov (1857-1918), the father of Russian Marxism, organized an illegal party, the Russian Social Democratic Party. As Marxists, the Social Democrats sought to organize the increasing number of industrial workers as a revolutionary force. In 1903, the Social Democrats split into two rival factions, the relatively moderate Mensheviks

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(minority) and the hardcore revolutionary Bolsheviks (majority), led by Vladimir I. Lenin (1870-1924).

Socialist Revolutionaries

In 1901, a group of agrarian radicals, the political descendants of the Populists, established the illegal Socialist Revolutionary Party. Hoping to organize the peasants in the cause of revolution, the Socialist Revolutionaries looked forward to creating a new socialist Russia composed of peasant and worker communes.

The Union of Liberation

In 1903, middle-class liberals, many of whom had been active in the *zemstvos*, organized the Union of Liberation. Its goal was the establishment of a constitutional monarchy.

The Revolution of 1905

Russia's defeat by Japan in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 (see Chapter 27) discredited the tsarist government and encouraged the forces of discontent in Russia to come to the surface. The result was the Revolution of 1905.

Bloody Sunday

The first act of the revolution came on Bloody Sunday in January 1905, when troops fired on a large peaceful demonstration in St. Petersburg. Under the leadership of a Russian Orthodox priest, Father George Gapon, the demonstrators had gone to the Winter Palace to petition the tsar for reforms. In the aftermath of Bloody Sunday, a great wave of demonstrations and strikes swept the country. For the most part, the armed forces remained loyal to the tsar, although a famous mutiny occurred among the sailors of the battleship *Potemkin* in the Black Sea.

October Manifesto

Hoping to stem the tide of revolution, the government canceled the peasants' obligation to pay redemption dues. In addition, Tsar Nicholas II issued the October Manifesto of 1905, promising to grant a constitution, to provide guarantees of civil liberties, and to establish the Duma, an elected parliament.

Fundamental Laws

By the spring of 1906, the revolutionary upheaval began to subside, and the tsarist government recovered its confidence. In the Fundamental Laws, which served as the Russian constitution, Nicholas II restricted the powers of the Duma. The tsar retained control of financial affairs and foreign policy, as well as the authority to dissolve the Duma and to legislate by decree when the Duma was not in session. Cabinet ministers were responsible to the tsar, rather than the Duma. The tsar also created a conservative upper house, the Council of State, which would have to pass on legislation adopted by the Duma.

Political Parties

Political parties were now legal, and the Mensheviks, Bolsheviks, and Socialist Revolutionaries were no longer confined to clandestine activities. The middle-class liberals established two parties. The Union of October 17 (the Octobrists) took its name from the date of the October Manifesto and generally accepted the concessions the tsar had granted. The Constitutional Democrats (Cadets) urged further political reforms. In particular, the Cadets called for the establishment of a democratic constitutional monarchy on the British model, with the prime minister and other cabinet ministers being responsible to the Duma, rather than the tsar.

The Dumas Under Government Control

The first Duma, which was elected in 1906, expressed opposition to government policies and was soon dissolved. In 1907, the second Duma was elected. Proving to be even more hostile to the government than the first Duma, it, too, was quickly dissolved.

Following the dissolution of the first Duma, Prime Minister Peter Stolypin (1863-1911) attempted to conciliate the peasants by issuing, by decree, the Agrarian Reform Act of 1906. The law made it possible for peasants to withdraw from the village communes and to receive title to their land. The execution of this law over a period

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of years would have created an independent, landowning peasantry. The government hoped the landowning peasants would become a conservative force in society. Before the law could take effect on a broad scale, however, Russia was engulfed by war and revolution.

After the dissolution of the second Duma, Stolypin decreed a new electoral law, which increased the representation of the propertied classes. This made certain that the third Duma, elected in 1907, would be more conservative. The third Duma (1907-1912) served its full term, as did the fourth Duma (1912-1917). Nevertheless, at the outbreak of World War I in the summer of 1914, popular discontent was mounting, while the tsarist government remained adamant in its refusal to enact further reforms.

In Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia in the late nineteenth century, political power remained in the hands of conservatives. In all three countries, however, serious challenges to the existing order developed.

Germany retained its semi-despotic political system, which Bismarck had established in 1871. While Bismarck failed in his campaigns against the Roman Catholics and Social Democrats, the German government functioned effectively during the almost two decades of his chancellorship. Under Bismarck's less capable successors, however, the stresses in German society became more evident. Although the imperial government remained adamant in its refusal to make concessions to those calling for democratic reforms, it appeared increasingly unlikely that the empire could survive for an extended period of time without fundamental political change.

The Compromise of 1867, which created the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary, brought about a fundamental restructuring of the Hapsburg Empire. While the compromise satisfied the demands of the Magyars, the discontents of the other nationality groups, especially the Czechs of Bohemia and the South Slavs, became more intense. This nationalist unrest threatened the survival of the Dual Monarchy.

The late nineteenth century brought substantial changes to Russia. Tsar Alexander II abolished serfdom and introduced other reforms, while the Revolution of 1905 resulted in the establishment of an elected parliament. Despite the reforms, however, Russia remained a semiautocracy. The growing middle class desired a more fully constitutional government, while the peasants and workers wanted relief from poverty. The unwillingness and inability of the tsarist government to undertake more far-reaching reforms increased the likelihood of revolutionary upheaval.