

Three Sisters and Russia

Russian history is turbulent, difficult, and hard wrought. Spanning centuries, it is a story of countless disparate groups coming together—not always of their own volition—to survive rival armies, internal catastrophes, and above all, the winter. It is a land of storied pasts, and vibrant culture.

Three Sisters exists in one of the most exciting times in Russian history. Not only are culture, education, and the arts flourishing in Russia, but politically the state is developing rapidly. Across the nation vast changes to life (across the military, middle class, aristocracy, and lower classes) is changing with a speed previously unthinkable. Against this period of tumultuousness, Chekhov penned one of his finest works—*The Three Sisters*. Here we see character after character, stuck, unable to move forward, clinging to nostalgia and the past. It is an unsustainable world, one that primes itself for both comedy and tragedy, and Chekhov reaches into both masterfully. Let us look into this world which seems to leave the characters of *Three Sisters* clinging on to any remnants of familiarity.

The single most defining characteristic of Russian life over the centuries was the nation's longstanding acceptance of Feudalism. While the rest of Europe had abandoned the practice of serfdom (a peasant class legally bound to the land or estate of their noble or royal masters) well before the arrival of the industrial age, Russia maintained this system of governance until 1861. The policy's demise was due to a number of factors. Nicholas I was a liberal Tsar, who recognized the need to modernize his nation. He began to lay out plans for agricultural, industrial, and military reforms. However, it wasn't until the humiliating defeat Russia suffered in the 1852-1856 Crimean War these changes went to the forefront of the imperial agenda. Nicholas died during the war of natural causes, but left his ambitions to his son, Alexander II. Russia's military was archaic both in terms of equipment and strategy, and Crimea finally broke their long held strategy of overwhelming through sheer numbers. With a devastating defeat marking the opening of his reign, Alexander rapidly sought to bring his nation into the modern world.



Tsar Alexander II



Thus in 1861, in an effort to modernize the state, the serfs were freed. This action completely revolutionized life in Russia. It is difficult to overestimate the changes the emancipation led to within the nation. For comparison, the US Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 in the US, freed some



Above: A Middle Class Russian Family c. 1900

Below: Russian Peasants c. 1880



Aside from the emancipation order, Alexander also launched a series of crucial military reforms in 1874. For the last half-century, Russia had a standing policy of male conscription of the peasantry for 25 years. Of course, this was not unilaterally enforced, as conscripts were largely pulled from rural peasant communities (to the general devastation of families and towns) and neglected to be pulled from the aristocracy, and educated middle classes (who would usually provide a male heir to the officer corps instead). However, the 1874 put far greater limits on conscription, bringing the term down to 15 years, and introducing universal male conscription, forcing the improvement of the general conditions for soldiers serving by guaranteeing better educational prospects them and their children—something naturally demanded by the middle and upper classes now subject to potential conscription. Additionally, the military experienced a tremendous updating in strategy and

roughly 3 million slaves, or about 10% of the population. The Russian Emancipation of the Serfs, freed some 23 million, roughly a 33% of the population. The next decades would be wholly invested in trying to comprehend this action, and bring the state into modernity. First, government negotiators were contracted (prominently including Count Leo Tolstoy) to visit noble households and help find accords between the landowners and serfs, establishing timetables and amounts of land (broken down either by size or value) so that the serfs might have a fair prospect with which to begin their lives. After this, local councils, called Zemstvo's were founded which helped bring about equitable representation for the varying parties (peasant, middle classes, and aristocracy) within each township.

equipment, the nation was split into districts, and railways, telegram lines, and other modern materiel was equipped.



Tsar Nicholas II and Family



Finally, the last major series of Alexander were the judicial reforms of 1864, which, built on the French example, helped unify a series of law codes for the entire nation. This reform, perhaps more than any of the others, would help stand to unify the nation from within to its furthest reaches. While small claims and crimes could still be dealt with by local authorities, more severe ones now required a regional judge. This brought a sense of awareness in a greater society to the smaller towns and locales. Alexander's reforms were brought to a halt by his assassination in 1881. His son, Alexander III, would attempt to undo much of his father's liberalization. When he died in 1894, his son, Nicholas II, came to power. Nicholas, while acquiescing to the realities of his situation, allowed for liberal reforms to continue and encouraged his leading advisor and Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin to continue the liberalization (Stolypin's most significant contribution were the Land Reforms of 1906, which sought to improve agrarian life for the peasantry). However, growing discontent grew largely as a response to improved education throughout the nation and brutal living conditions in rapidly growing urban centers.

Thus in 1905, on Sunday 22 January, protestors marching on the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg were shot on by imperial soldiers. This started the 1905 revolution, which, while suppressed, would force Nicholas into moving from a system of absolute rule to one of a constitutional monarchy. It would last a meager dozen years, when Nicholas, after entering Russia into the ruinous First World War, was forcibly removed by revolutionaries. The revolution ended the Russian state as it had existed for centuries. A year later the former Tsar and his family were shot without warning by operatives of the revolution where they were being kept under house arrest. Soon after, the early years of communism would take hold (to a fledgling beginning), only to be met by the turbulent and devastating years of Stalin's reign, but this is the story which comes after that of Chekhov and the Prozorov family.

Russia is a land of people constantly fighting impossible odds. It has historically been tied to corruption and dictatorial figures. These are hardly new developments. It is always a land fighting a

winter—whether physical or metaphorical varies from year to year. It is a land of struggle. But this word, struggle, is not a negative term. To the Russian mind, struggle is not merely a way of life, but the cause for existence. To cease to struggle, for food, for life, for wealth, for survival, is to be dead. To struggle is to meet difficulty, and to fight. To resist. As long as there is struggle, there is the possibility of success. As long as there is struggle, there is a flicker of hope.