

How successful was the policy of Russification of national minorities between 1881 and 1914?



- (1) "Russification, far from stamping out nationalist feeling, served to increase resentment against Great Russian dominance."

David Warnes

- (2) "The Russification policy.....could not be called a success. Those opposed to the Tsarist empire were not quelled. Perhaps more importantly, valued friends such as the Finns and the Armenians were alienated."

Martin McColgan

- (3) The policy of Russification "has to be regarded as one of the great mistakes made by Russia's last two Tsars."

Martin McColgan.

The Russian Empire

One of the most startling features of tsarist Russia in 1900 was its size. It was a vast empire crossing two continents – Europe and Asia. The empire had been built up over centuries. The Russians who lived in the area around Moscow gradually extended their state (Muscovy) from the fifteenth century onwards by conquering the peoples around them.

So by the beginning of the twentieth century, Russia was a vast sprawling empire that contained a large number of different national groups. The Russians themselves formed about half of the population, the vast majority of whom lived in the European part of Russia west of the Ural Mountains. The diversity of culture, religion and language throughout the empire was astonishing, ranging from sophisticated European Russians living in St. Petersburg, to nomadic Muslim peoples in the desert areas of the south, to the peoples who wandered the vast spaces of Siberia.

Russification

The size and diversity of the empire made it extremely difficult to govern. Many of the national minorities resented Russian control, particularly the policy of russification that was imposed more rigorously in the second part of the nineteenth century. This policy involved making non-Russians use the Russian language instead of their own, wear Russian-style clothes and adopt Russian customs. Russian officials were put into run regional government in non-Russian parts of the empire like Poland, Latvia and Finland. It meant that the Russian language was used in schools, law courts and regional governments; for instance, in Poland it was forbidden to teach children in the Polish language. Usually it was Russians who got the important jobs in government and state-sponsored industry. The national minorities saw russification as a fundamental attack on their way of life and a monstrously unfair policy that discriminated against them. During the nineteenth century there were a number of uprisings and protests from national groups seeking more autonomy (self-government) in their parts of the Empire.

How the Policy of Russification was applied in different parts of the Empire.

Poland

At the time of Alexander 111 Poles in Russia numbered over six million. They regarded themselves as a distinctive people with a distinctive identity whose lands were occupied by enemy powers. Rebellions, such as that of 1863, had long been a feature of the Polish situation.

For some time, schools in Poland had been the subject of Russification. In 1885 a law was passed which decreed that all school subjects except Catholic religious education and the Polish language had to be taught in Russian. The idea here was to ensure that those who wanted the necessary educational qualifications to succeed were Russian speakers. Eventually, it was hoped, the Polish language would disappear. Poles everywhere reacted strongly against what the Tsar was obviously attempting to do and opposition to Russification rapidly escalated.

Finland

Russification of Finland started in earnest in 1891. In that year, the Russian language was declared the official language of selected government departments, and Russians were appointed to the Finnish civil service. The Imperial Manifesto of 1899 decreed the Tsar could impose Tsarist legislation on Finland, bypassing the Finnish Parliament. One further measure which really upset the Finns was the Tsarist decree that they could now be conscripted into the Tsar's armies.

Further insults to the Finns added to their disgust. The Governor-General, it was decreed, could dismiss Finnish judges, police officers or civil servants suspected of being disloyal to the Tsar. Russians were given the right to purchase land in Finland. Even the Finnish postal service was to be incorporated into the imperial post office of the Tsar.

Russification in Finland under Alexander 111 and Nicholas 11 had done much damage to relations with a former loyal ally. Quite incredibly, Russia's last two Tsars had managed to turn formerly peaceable friends into outright enemies.

Armenia

Amongst the most loyal friends of Tsarist Russia were the Armenians, who lived in the south of the empire beside the Caspian Sea. The techniques of Russification applied in Armenia were of the type already used in other parts of the Empire. Forced conversions to Orthodoxy were attempted, schools were interfered with, and the legal system was altered to fit in with Russian ways. If the process of Russification in Armenia was begun under Alexander 111, it took off with a vengeance under Nicholas 11. In 1896 all schools operating under the control of the Armenian Church were closed and were replaced by Russian schools supervised by the Tsar's Ministry of Education. In 1903 the funds of the Armenian Church were confiscated.

The Baltic Provinces: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The Baltic provinces became part of the Tsar's empire in the eighteenth century. Many of the people were of German extraction. The geographical location of the Baltic provinces-their proximity to St. Petersburg and the access to the Baltic Sea which they provided-ensured that Russification was applied there in a particularly energetic fashion. Language, education, law and religion received special treatment, the idea being to purge anything German from the provinces and replace it with something recognisably Russian. In 1885 the schools of the Baltic States were placed under the direct control of the Tsar's Ministry of Education in St. Petersburg. In 1887 a law was passed which decreed that Russian should be the language of instruction for all subjects. In 1889 the Russian system of law was introduced and all law courts were required to conduct their business in the Russian language. Pobedonostsev secured the Tsar's co-operation in insisting that any new Protestant churches in the Baltic provinces could only be built with the specific permission of the Most Holy Directing Synod. At the same time, funds were made readily available for the building of Russian Orthodox churches

should Russia's Baltic governors request them. This was the beginning of a sustained campaign in the Baltic provinces to win converts to Orthodoxy. Russification in the Baltic provinces were then spread into local administration and policing Russian officials were imported to replace Germans.



A Kazan mullah and his wives. There were over 20 million Muslims in the Empire.

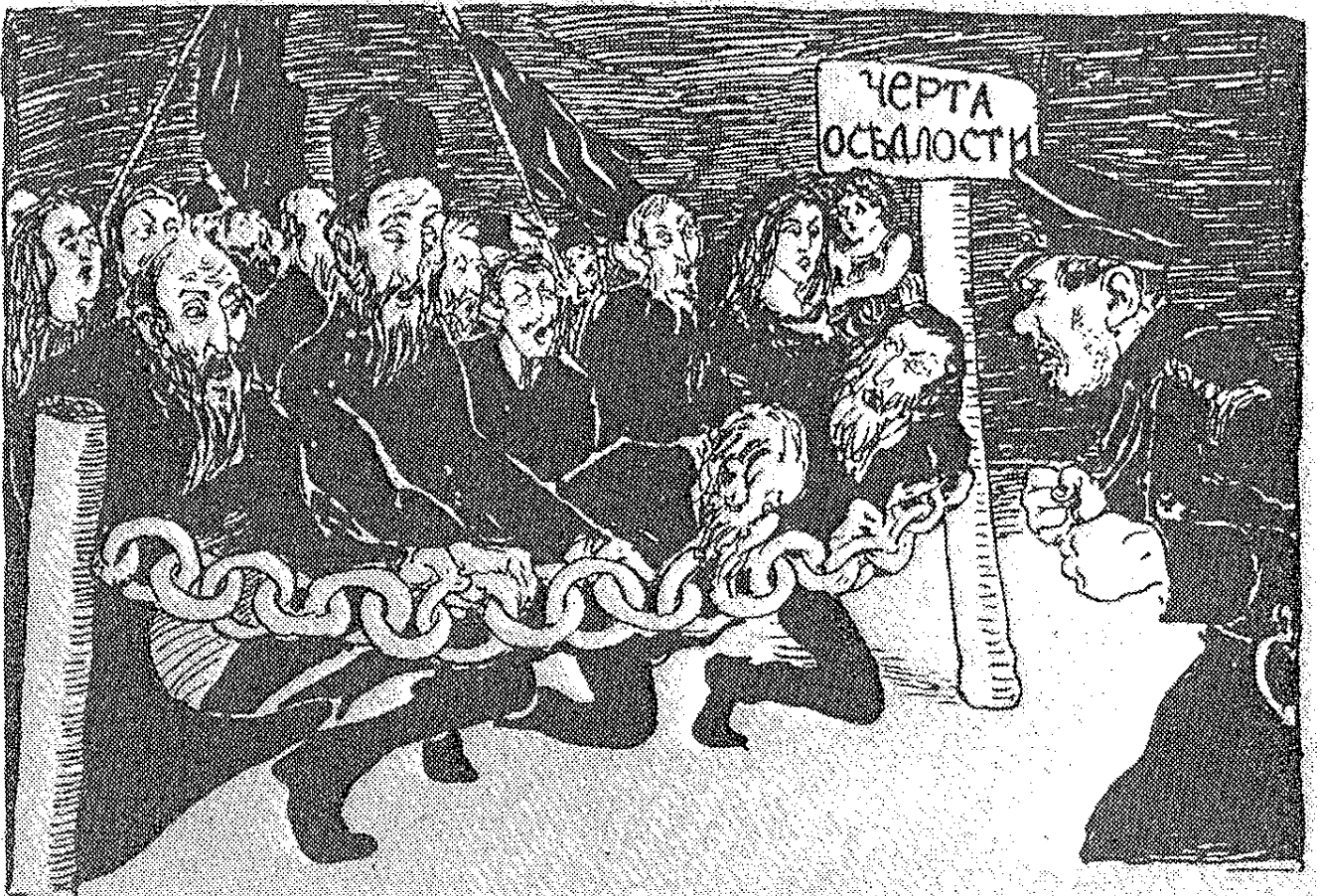
How the national minorities reacted to the policy of Russification.

- Most of the nationalities resented the dominance of the Great Russians and hoped to regain their independence. Russification, far from stamping out nationalist feeling, served to increase resentment against Great Russian dominance.
- The Russification policy embarked upon by Alexander II and developed further by his successor, Nicholas II, could not be called a success. Those opposed to the Tsarist empire were not quelled. Perhaps more importantly, valued friends such as the Finns and the Armenians were alienated. The policy of Russification has to be regarded as one of the great mistakes made by Russia's last two Tsars.
- The policy lacked any semblance of common sense. Loyal minorities like the Baltic Germans and Finns were treated with the same disregard as the potentially disloyal Ukrainians and Tartars, or those in open revolt such as Poles. Thus by the outbreak of World War One, the Finns, Armenians, Georgians, and some Baltic Germans were in active opposition to the Tsarist regime. With the Jews, the systematic programme of repression and violence resulted in mass emigration to Eastern Europe, the United States and Palestine.
- The policy of Russification turned the nationalist movements into enemies of Russia. Throughout the empire the effect of the Russification campaign was to drive non-Russians into the new anti-tsarist parties. For example, in the Baltic provinces the native population turned to the Social Democrats to defend their national rights against the tsarist state. In Poland they turned to the Polish Socialist Party. By 1905 similar nationalist parties had emerged as a major revolutionary force in most of the non-Russian borderlands. By its failure to come to terms with nationalism the tsarist regime had created another instrument of its own destruction. It is not surprising that many of the leading Communists in 1917 belonged to persecuted minorities, Stalin was a Georgian and Trotsky was a Jew.

The Jews

There were approximately four million practising Jews in the empire when Alexander 111 became Tsar. Anti-semitic sentiment had long been evident in Tsarist Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church, and especially its hierarchy, despised the Jews as the murderers of Christ. The assassination of Alexander 11 was vaguely attributed to the Jews, and a succession of pogroms-attacks on Jews and their property, including instances of murder-occurred throughout the rest of the year. The new Tsar and his regime turned a blind eye to what was happening, particularly in the Ukraine where most Jewish settlements were.

Russian Jews were severely restricted in their movements throughout the empire. Since the eighteenth century, they had been limited to a strictly defined region referred to as the Pale of Settlement. This lay in the south-western and north-western parts of the empire. They were also barred from buying landed property or from settling outside towns. In effect they were forced into "ghetto" areas of towns, and because of prejudice against them, they had to rely on their own means of earning a living.



a Tsarist policeman stops Jews breaking out of the Pale of Settlement

Following the pogroms of 1881, the Minister of the Interior, Tolstoy, restored order, but he also carried through a succession of policies designed to ensure that Orthodox Russians should be protected from Jewish influence. Jews had to keep to their ghettos. Severe restrictions were placed on the number of Jews who could be admitted to secondary schools or universities. Barriers were placed against Jews entering professional life in areas such as medicine and the law. They were denied a vote in zemstvo elections. Massive Jewish expulsions from Kiev in 1886 and from Moscow in 1891 occurred under heartless and uncompromising circumstances.

Nicholas II was even more harsh towards Russia's Jews than his father had been. This was partly because, as Russia entered the twentieth century, the problems facing the Tsar and his government were becoming progressively more intense. The authorities in Russia found it convenient to turn opposition away from themselves on to the Jews. Pogroms became widespread, for example following the defeat of Russia in the war against Japan of 1904 – 05. Organised groups of thugs, with names such as the "Union of the Russian People", consciously picked out vulnerable Jewish settlements to attack. Murders were commonplace during these raids.



LEFT *The military stand by while the mob assaults a Jew. The pogroms that started in 1881 resulted in the great waves of emigration that took Jews as far afield as the United States.*

How the Jews reacted to Russification.

1.

Revolutionary parties

- Jews were attracted to socialist and revolutionary parties. Many Jews like Trotsky joined the Marxists. Witte admitted that if the Jews “comprise about 50% of the membership in the revolutionary parties” then this was “the fault of our government. The Jews are too oppressed.”

2.

Formation of the Jewish Bund

- The Bund was Russia’ first mass-based Marxist party. Established in 1897, it had 35,000 members by 1905. It declared the Jews to be a “nation” and demanded full national autonomy for the Jewish people, with Yiddish as the official language.

3.

Mass Emigration

- The pogroms caused mass emigration of Jews to Eastern Europe, the USA and Palestine. It also led to a strengthening of the Zionist movement.

Zionism – movement to found and support a Jewish homeland in Palestine.