

# What was the Russian Imperial Era?

The Russian Imperial Era is the time when Russia was ruled by emperors called tsars (and later an emperor called the 'Emperor of All Russia'). It lasts roughly from the early 1700s (when Peter the Great made Russia into an empire) until 1917, when the last emperor, Nicholas II, lost power.

## Short, easy timeline

- Late 1600s-1725: Peter the Great modernizes Russia and creates the Russian Empire (officially 1721).
- 1762-1796: Catherine the Great expands territory and supports some learning and arts.
- 1855-1881: Alexander II frees the serfs in 1861 (important reform) but faces opposition.
- Late 1800s-early 1900s: Industrial growth, cities grow, and social problems increase.
- 1905: A big protest and uprising lead to limited change (Duma = parliament) after Bloody Sunday.
- 1914-1917: World War I weakens Russia; in 1917 two revolutions remove the tsar and then bring a new government.

## Who were the important rulers?

- **Peter the Great** (early 1700s) — traveled to learn Western ways, built a strong army and navy, moved the capital to St. Petersburg.
- **Catherine the Great** (late 1700s) — expanded Russia's borders, supported arts and education for the elites.
- **Alexander II** (mid-1800s) — famous for freeing the serfs in 1861 (peasants were legally tied to the land before this).
- **Nicholas II** (1894-1917) — last emperor; his rule ended during World War I and the Russian Revolutions of 1917.

## What was life like for different people?

- **Peasants and serfs:** Most people were peasants. Before 1861 many were serfs — they could be bought and sold with the land and had to work for landowners.
- **Nobles (landowners):** They had power, big houses, and controlled local government and courts.
- **City workers and middle class:** As factories appeared, more people worked in cities. Conditions were often hard and wages were low.
- **Clergy and Church:** The Russian Orthodox Church was very important and worked closely with the state.

## Why did problems grow?

- **Slow reforms:** The government changed things slowly. Many peasants and workers wanted faster improvement to their lives.
- **Industrialization:** Factories created jobs but also poor working conditions and overcrowded cities.
- **Political ideas:** New ideas (liberalism, socialism) spread, and secret groups wanted change.
- **War and defeats:** Losing wars and the huge cost of World War I made life harder and angered people.

## How did it end?

By 1917, the strain of the war, food shortages, and anger at the government led to two revolutions. The February Revolution forced the emperor to step down. Later that year the October Revolution brought a new government (the Bolsheviks) which ended the imperial rule and led to building a different political system (Soviet Russia).

## Important words to remember

- **Tsar/Tsarina:** The ruler of Russia (same as emperor/empress).
- **Serf:** A peasant legally tied to a landowner until 1861.
- **Emancipation of 1861:** The law that freed the serfs.
- **Duma:** A parliament created after 1905, with limited power.

## Quick review — the main idea

The Russian Imperial Era was a time when big changes happened: rulers tried to modernize, the country grew richer and larger, but most people stayed poor. New ideas and the problems caused by war and industry led to huge protests and revolutions that ended the empire in 1917.

## Activities and questions for you (age 13)

- Draw a simple timeline showing Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Alexander II, and Nicholas II with one sentence under each explaining why they mattered.
- Imagine you are a 13-year-old living in 1860 as a serf — write a short diary entry about your hopes and fears.
- Answer: Why did freeing the serfs help some people but not fix all problems in Russia?
- Bonus: Compare one problem in the Russian Empire (for example, poor city life) to a problem today — what is similar and what is different?

If you want, I can make a printable one-page timeline, help write the diary entry, or give a short list of books and videos for teens to learn more.