

# Industrial Revolution in Russia

The Industrial Revolution in Russia was instrumental in transforming not just the economic conditions of the erstwhile Russian Empire but also brought major social changes that laid the groundwork for the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The factors and the result of the Industrial Revolution in Russia will be discussed at length in this article within the context of the Civil Services Examination.

## Russia during the late 19th Century

During the 1800s, the Tsars of Russia developed trading relations with the rest of Europe. This was a lucrative deal as most Europeans were aware Russia was land of natural resources and endless economic opportunities. The proceeds that flowed as a result of these trade negotiations lined the pockets of the aristocracy, leaving little motivation to invest in the further industrialisation of the country

The Industrial Revolution was slow in coming to Russia because of any proposal for industrial projects was rejected as they threatened the traditional interests of the landowners. Even though heavy industry such as coal mining, steel production did exist, the scale of operations was comparatively small when compared to Germany, Britain and France

It was not until Russia's defeat in the Crimean War (1854-1856) that the need for industrialisation was understood. Russia's military factories were not sufficient to produce weapons to meet the war demand and along with this, there was little to no technical innovation. The war also exposed its other infrastructure such as railways as woefully inadequate to transport soldiers and equipment in large numbers

Thus a series of reforms would be initiated to overcome these drawbacks.

## Reforms of Tsar Alexander II and Sergei Witte

Among the many reforms initiated by Alexander II to revive the Russian, economy, the most significant of them was the emancipation of serfs in 1861. Serfdom was the last vestige of feudalism where landless labourers worked in the agricultural lands owned by aristocrats. In short, serfdom was basically bonded labour where even the descendants of the serfs would be obliged to work for their lords with no restitution in return.

The emancipation of serfs was also done keeping in mind that the powers of the conservative nobles would be undermined. It was anticipated that the newly freed serfs would be a mobile workforce that would be deployed to key industrial areas.

One another expected outcome was that new agricultural methods would be introduced leading to the growth of a new peasant class, the *kulaks*. A *kulak* would be a peasant capitalist owning large tracts of land, livestock and machinery and hiring other landless labourers to till these large tracts of land thus driving up agricultural productivity and selling surplus grains for a profit.

Although millions of serfs were released from bonded labour, there was no development of a *kulak* class on account of the strength of the peasant communes. The emancipation of the serfs did little to contribute towards the upliftment of the Russian economy

By the 1870s Tsar Alexander II began a series of infrastructure projects particularly focussing on the railways. These programs were helmed by Sergei Witt, a qualified mathematician.

In 1889, Witte was overseeing the development of the Russian railways. It was during his tenure when the planning and construction of the Trans-Siberian were underway.

Recognising the need for investment, Witte made it easy for foreign venture capitalists and governments to invest in the Russian industry. With the removal of existing barriers, further incentives were provided to encourage foreign investment in Russia's manufacturing sectors.

Further reforms by Sergei Witte include:

- Currency reforms by moving the Russian rouble to the gold standard
- Stabilising and improving foreign exchange rates
- Funding of public works such as telegraph lines and electrical plants.

## Benefits and Drawbacks of the Russian Industrial Revolution

Through the 1890s, the reforms of the previous decades began to bear fruits. New factories were introduced through funding from Britain and France. The new factories were located in Kiev, St. Petersburg, Moscow and other Russian cities. Although most of its industries were foreign-owned, the Russian empire was the fourth-largest producer of steel and second-largest source of petroleum by the 1900s.

The opening of the Trans-Siberian Railway opened up distant parts of the empire allowing further inflow of investment. The Russian economy had progressed in more than a decade as compared to the previous century. This rapid economic growth was dubbed as the 'Great Spurt' by contemporary economists.

But for all its benefits, the Industrial Revolution in Russia had its fair share of drawbacks. These drawbacks would prove to be disastrous for the Tsarist regime in the coming years.

The industrial of Russian cities was rapid enough to draw landless labourers in search of work but the cities could not keep up with the pace of the ensuing urbanisation creating new social problems and a new revolutionary class; the industrial proletariat.

The conditions of the industrial workers who had found work were not any better as they were forced to live in unhygienic conditions while toiling away at the factories for long hours in dangerous conditions.

The final outcome of Sergei's reforms would meet national goals but they would give rise to a new working class easily vulnerable to exploitation and maltreatment. Clustered together in large numbers in many of the urban centres of Russia, they would be susceptible to revolutionary ideas. The consequences of these revolutionary ideas would be the Assassination of Alexander II himself on March 31, 1881, and the October Manifesto of 1906