

The Historical Evolution of Russian Nationalism- Nicholas I and the Crimean War

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Abstract:

When Russian Republic getting embroiled in the Ukraine crisis, the strong influence of east Slavic nationalism and the conflict it create have been proved. Since the establishment of the Soviet Union, the system of constituent republics met the original need for multi-ethnic autonomy within Russia, and also laid the groundwork for numerous subsequent issues. To understand the current nationalism in Russia, it's necessary shifting the research focus to the period of Tsarist Russia. From the failed Crimean War to the Crimean referendum to join the federation, Russia's ideology after the collapse of the Soviet Union inherited the original Tsarist Russia. The modern ideology of Russia can be summarized as: tradition, stability maintenance, and expansion. The persistence of tradition was manifested in the conservative reforms of the serfdom system, which, together with the backdrop of the Industrial Revolution, contributed to Russia's more complex national conditions compared to other powerful nations. Stability maintenance is manifested in Russia's strict internal policies and its efforts to resolve conflicts among different ethnic groups within the empire through ideology, while also uniting all the people under the banner of the Orthodox Church. Expansion was manifested through numerous wars waged externally, which was in line with that of other major powers, although there were some differences in driving forces.

Keywords: The Crimean War; Nicholas I; Nationalism.

1. Introduction

This study focuses on the historical evolution of Russian nationalism, mainly concentrating on the period of Nicholas I's rule. It also examines the impact of

the Crimean War on this. Additionally, this study explores how the legacy of 19th-century Russian imperialist policies has shaped the contemporary connotation of Slavic nationalism, especially in the current context of the Ukraine crisis, where its influence is

profound. The historical analysis method was employed to examine primary and secondary sources, including political documents, historical literature, and academic analysis. The research results can indicate that Nicholas I and the official nationalism he advocated, as well as the Crimean War he initiated, had a significant impact on the identity construction of Russia as a modern state and its geopolitical strategies. This article concludes that understanding nationalism during the Russian Empire period is extremely important for understanding modern Russia. Current ideologies and territorial disputes can all be traced back to the 19th century.

2. Background

The paper will firstly focus on Nicholas I's government policies and historical influence of his political decision-making toward modern Russian nationalism. During his reign from July 6th, 1796 to March 2nd, 1855. Through this period, we could understand how Russian nationalism evolved from an imperial tool to a modern national ideology. Nicholas I's "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Peoplehood" defined official nationalism, emphasizing traditional values and imperial authority. 'Important to define Russian nationalism [1]. The history of late-modern Russian nationalism is the ideology of Slavism vs Westernists. Intellectuals debated national identity, with Slavists advocating for unique Russian values and Westernists favoring European models [1].

To ensure a certain degree of logical continuity, the modern Russian history period divided in this article only includes the time before the establishment of the Soviet Union and after its disintegration. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, it faced the logical collapse of liberalism within the country, so it still chose strongman politics, reaching the Putin era. Anthony Smith's "Ethnic Symbolism" It can serve as a framework for studying this issue [2]. The Orthodox Church was established by him as the core of the imperial identity, while non-Orthodox groups were marginalized. For instance, after the Polish uprising, Nicholas I intensified his suppression of Polish culture, forcibly promoting the Russian language and the Orthodox Church, and forcibly adapting the original religion to weaken its national independence [3].

His policies also fully demonstrated the autocratic nature of his rule. The autocratic system was promoted as the natural political form of the Russian nation. The tsar was regarded as the symbol and protector of the nation, similar to direct divine right of kingship. This narrative attempted to link nationalism with obedience to the imperial power, with the Slavic nation being equivalent to the tsar. However, such policies clearly laid the groundwork for subse-

quent ethnic conflicts. For instance, in the Baltic region, the Caucasus, and Poland, etc. From the time of Tsarist Russia to the Soviet Union and even up to the present day. These former Soviet republics have always emphasized their own national languages and cultures. At the same time, the awakening of some non-Russian ethnic groups has led to a certain degree of regional security crisis, such as the secret brotherhood in Ukraine [4].

This organization was active from the 1830s to the 1850s and emerged in the form of a brotherhood. Its members were mostly young intellectuals, students, and local high-ranking officials. They belonged to an upper-class. The main brotherhood was in Kyiv. Their ideology was to build Ukraine as part of an independent Slavic ethnic union, rather than being completely assimilated. Moreover, they opposed the Tsar's autocracy and serfdom [5].

3. Economic and Social Consequences of Serfdom

When it comes to serfdom, this was also a major social contradiction during the reign of the Tsars. It is necessary to mention Peter I's serfdom reform at this point. Against the backdrop of Western European countries gradually promoting the status of free citizens, he instead strengthened and consolidated the serfdom system in Russia. The main reform was to restrict the sale of serfs, especially the restriction on the sale of private serfs. Serfs owned by the government were not affected. This limited reform hindered the development of capitalism and restricted the construction of large factories because of the scarcity of free citizens. Serfs were confined to the manor and had restricted movements, unable to freely act as hired laborers in social production. From a political perspective, Peter I almost turned serfdom into a symbol of the tsar's rule. After the Enlightenment, the emerging bourgeois ideology in Europe challenged the traditional values of Russia, and serfdom exacerbated social contradictions and ethnic conflicts, laying the groundwork for subsequent social unrest and reforms [6]. During the rule of Nicholas I, Russia still relied on serfdom as the economic and social foundation, although other European countries had gradually abolished it. Nicholas I only made limited reforms to the agricultural and serfdom system, for instance, the government maintained a relatively strict direct control over the management of state-owned serfs. The labor and living arrangements of the state-owned serfs were more systematically regulated, led by Pavel Kiselyov, but no substantive liberation of personal freedom was achieved; at the same time, Nicholas I also attempted to reform the agricultural production and management system during the same peri-

od, such as improving land utilization and the productivity of farmers, failing to completely solve its fundamental problems. One of the reasons was that the Russian serfdom system had a long history, and Russia was a vast country with a sparse population. Peter I strengthened and consolidated the serfdom system while other countries were gradually legislating to restore the status of free citizens. His reforms were limited to restricting the sale of serfs. And the state-owned serfs were not affected (under the guidance of Pavel Kiselyov), but private serfs were [7]. This limited reform not only affected the development of capitalism in Russia, but also prevented the construction of large-scale factories because the serfs were confined to fixed manors and could not move freely. At the same time, it exacerbated ethnic conflicts. The serfdom system became a symbol of the Tsar. For instance, Polish nobles and Polish peasants jointly rebelled against the Tsar, leading to the later unrest of Nicholas [6].

4. The Eastern Question and European Geopolitics

The Crimean War was a war launched by Tsar Nicholas I towards the end of his reign. The background of this war was the conflict between the Orthodox Church and the Catholic Church. From the Russian perspective, the pretext for intervening in the Balkan Peninsula was to protect the Orthodox Christians there. However, it is obvious that this was actually a choice made by Russia to expand its own influence; while from the Western perspective, there was also a certain religious significance: Christians have certain management rights in Jerusalem, including the maintenance of churches, the opening of churches, and the priority arrangement of religious ceremonies. During some major religious festivals and ceremonies, such as Easter, Catholics have the priority to hold services, and even the right to restrict the activities of Orthodox Christians. These privileges were obtained by France through various means in the 19th century and pressure on the Ottoman Empire, which gradually angered Russia and the Orthodox camp. As mentioned earlier, Nicholas I still used the name of the Orthodox Church to demand that the Orthodox believers within the Ottoman Empire come under Russian jurisdiction. However, France supported the rights of the Catholic believers in Jerusalem. The trigger for the outbreak of the war was the already weakened Ottoman Empire, which, under pressure from France, handed over the keys to the Church of the Virgin Mary to the Catholics. Russia then launched the war. The issues within the Ottoman Empire revolved around Russia and France. Other Western powers referred to this as the 'Eastern

Question' [8]. They were all wary of Russia's advance into the Balkans. Nicholas I overestimated the intervention of Britain and France, and Austria would remain neutral. As a result, Russia was besieged by the Western powers.

Regarding the misjudgment made by Nicholas I, researchers usually consider it as an important research area, and the most prominent problem is undoubtedly the underestimation of the determination of the British and French powers to intervene. Nicholas I wrongly believed that the Western powers would not launch a full-scale war against Russia due to the religious and power disputes within the Islamic camp of the Ottoman Empire. The previous successful territorial expansion reasons failed this time, and the civil law determined to curb Russia's influence in the Balaton Peninsula. The second and most important point is that Nicholas I originally believed that the long-standing ally of Russia, Austria, would remain neutral or even support Russia during the conflict. However, due to concerns over Russia's expansion and internal factors within Austria, Austria ultimately sided with the anti-Russian camp. Austria is characterized by a multi-ethnic structure [9]. They believed that Russia's expansion in the Balkans would harm their regional interests, so they no longer supported Russia. This weakened Russia's strategic support on the European continent, leading Russia to be completely isolated. The third point is the issue of justice. Nicholas I failed to accurately predict the intricate interests among the major European powers in the 19th century. This complex relationship of interests, in the context of the Eastern issue, gave rise to the anti-Russian alliance. In the face of interests, Western countries united in a short period of time. The reason for Russia's declaration of war was to defend the rights of the Orthodox believers. This pre-existing pretext for declaring war, which had been used many times in previous territorial disputes, could no longer uphold their justice internationally [10].

5. Discussion

After the initial Sinop naval battle, the Russian navy completely annihilated the Ottoman fleet. Then, Britain and France directly entered the conflict. In September 1845, the British and French coalition forces landed on the Crimean Peninsula and besieged the Russian Black Sea Fleet. The Russian forces were unable to defend. Until Sevastopol fell, Nicholas I had already passed away at this time, and the new Tsar Alexander II sought peace. The Siege of Sevastopol was the peak of the conflict in the Crimean War and the key battle that led to its conclusion [9]. In October 1854, the British and French forces launched a siege and landing operation against this place, which lasted for one and a half years. The Sevastopol port

was a strategic location for Russia in the Black Sea. After the fall of this city, Russia declared defeat and began negotiations.

Sevastopol, as a Russian fortress, had well-trained defenders and a battery defense line. During the siege, the Russian forces were at a disadvantage, but they were able to hold off the British and French forces for a long time due to the terrain advantage. The famous battles happened in this period, such as “The Battle of the Great Redan” and “The Malakoff Redoubt”, all demonstrated extremely fierce confrontations of attack and defense. However, despite the Russian army’s strong will to resist and well-constructed defensive fortifications, the outdated weapons and the loss of sea control resulting in insufficient supplies ultimately led to the fall of this fortress in September 1855.

The Russians were forced to sign the Paris Treaty, which directly deprived them of the ability to station troops in the Black Sea. This war had an unprecedented impact on Russian nationalism. It directly exposed the backward serfdom economy and military technology of Russia. Alexander II was the direct catalyst for abolishing serfdom. At the same time, as the author of this article stated at the beginning, the debate between the Slavists and the Westernists became increasingly intense. Both sides engaged in intense discussions about the capitalist path Russia should take in the future. To a certain extent, this led to the rise of Pan-Slavism, which was to wage wars under the guise of liberating Slavic brothers. At the same time, the nationalist sentiment became a major tool for the Tsar to consolidate his rule, and Russia began a more rapid modernization process.

From the time of Catherine II to that of Nicholas I, Russian nationalism served as a double-edged sword. It was both a tool for consolidating imperial rule and sowed the seeds of numerous contradictions. The Crimean War was Nicholas I’s last failure, and it also pushed the Russians to reform their outdated system. The findings of this study are as follows: The reign of Nicholas I and the Crimean War played a crucial role in shaping modern Russian nationalism, and this further leads to the conclusion that the fundamental reason for Russia’s territorial expansion towards Western Europe and its attempts to expand its influence in modern times was the fundamental ideological difference between Russia as an industrial civilization and the mainstream of Europe. This study provides many valuable references for future research in this direction, mainly influencing religious and political studies in the former Soviet Union and the Russian Federation. Future research should conduct more logical analyses by referring to historical events from the Soviet era and the subse-

quent ideological evolution of Russia.

6. Conclusion

This article uses a specific analysis of the Crimean War and the study of the ethnic policies and programs during Nicholas I’s era to reveal the evolution process of Russian nationalism from an imperial tool to a part of the modern national ideology. When analyzing specific issues during this period, this article can be used to support key viewpoints. This article mainly reveals that nationalism has evolved from being merely an imperial tool to becoming the pioneer of modern national ideology. By analyzing the geographical and political background of the Balkan issue as well as the ethnic policies within Russia, this study emphasizes the complex interaction between imperial interests and emerging ethnic identities. The research is helpful for a deeper understanding of the historical roots of Russian nationalism and its influence on the broader European political landscape in the 19th century. Through the study of these aspects, Future research should focus more on integrating the historical events of the Soviet era and the subsequent ideological evolution of Russia, completing the parts that were not covered in the author’s research, improving the logical chain, and conducting a more rigorous and in-depth analysis and exploration of Russian nationalism.

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