

Societies at Crossroads

A Summary

The Ottoman Empire in Decline

As the nineteenth century dawned the Ottoman empire was shrinking. Already damaged by Vasco da Gama's discovery of an alternate trade route around Africa, the loss of Greece, Serbia, and especially Egypt further damaged Ottoman prestige and economic might. Unequal trading agreements with the western Europeans, known as **capitulations**, made the economic situation even more dire. Attempts at reform were blocked by governmental corruption and the power of the Janissaries. **Mahmud II** was only able to bring about western European-inspired military and educational reforms by first slaughtering a large number of Janissaries. The years from 1839 to 1876, known as the **Tanzimat** or "reorganization" era, brought about legal reform based on the French model. Nevertheless, the Tanzimat reformers faced opposition from devout Muslims, corrupt bureaucrats, and the Young Ottomans. Sultan Abd al-Hamid II (1876–1909) suspended the constitution and ruled despotically but also built railroads and continued to modernize the army and educational system. The **Young Turks** dethroned Abd al-Hamid II and pushed forward a program calling for universal suffrage, equality before the law, freedom of religion, free public education, secularization of the state, and the emancipation of women. Unfortunately, the Young Turk insistence on Turkish as the official language of the empire caused dissension in the heterogeneous Ottoman Turkish empire.

The Russian Empire under Pressure

The humiliating loss in the Crimean War in the 1850s to a poorly led but technologically advanced Franco-British force displayed the weakness of Russia. Reform in Russia, as in the other societies discussed in this chapter, was essential. At the heart of Russia's desire for social reform was Alexander II's emancipation of the serfs in 1861. However, the newly freed serfs discovered a world with few political or economic opportunities; serfs were required to make redemption payments to their landlords, a move intended to maintain the aristocracy as a privileged class. Governmental innovation, with the creation of the zemstvos or district assemblies, and judicial reform did bring some improvements. By the end of the century minister of finance Sergei Witte was pushing for massive industrial expansion and the construction of the trans-Siberian railway. Substantial gains, however, were made difficult by an obstinate aristocratic class (who sabotaged the effort to end serfdom), the lack of a bourgeoisie, and the fact that over half of Russia's industrialization was funded by European investors. When change did occur, the rapid pace of industrialization created an angry, suffering proletariat that was very susceptible to revolutionary ideas. Opposition leaders, ranging from university students and members of the intelligentsia to anarchists and peasant revolutionaries, grew tired of the slow pace of change. Alexander II was assassinated in 1881 by a faction of

the Land and Freedom Party. His successor, Nicholas II, relied on oppression. The year 1905, with the humiliating defeat in the Russo-Japanese War and the Revolution after the Bloody Sunday massacre, shook Russian confidence even more. Although a representative body, called the Duma, was created, the Tsar slowly stripped the Duma of its powers. As it approached the First World War Russia was ripe for revolution.

The Chinese Empire under Siege

The causes and consequences of the Opium War (1839–1842) were profound for nineteenth-century China. Beyond merely a dispute with the British over opium, the conflict centered around questions of sovereignty and modernity. The Treaty of Nanjing gave the British control over Hong Kong and certain very beneficial trading concessions, but more important, the humiliating defeat revealed the weakness of China. Quite simply, for all the external pressure being supplied by the western Europeans, China was also collapsing internally. Hong Xiuquan's devastating **Taiping Rebellion** fed off the chaos of popular discontent and governmental incompetence. By its end in 1864 the Taiping Rebellion had left around thirty million Chinese dead. Attempts at reform—such as the **Self-Strengthening Movement's** desire to combine Chinese cultural traditions with European technology—met with imperial opposition. Like the Ottoman empire, the Qing empire lost control over valuable lands (e.g. Burma, Vietnam, Korea) to more powerful competitors. Emperor Guangxu, inspired by the proposals of Kang Youwei and Liang Qichao, embarked on the Hundred Days reforms of 1898. Unfortunately the empress dowager Cixi imprisoned the emperor and squelched the reforms. The anti-foreign Boxer Rebellion in the end came to nothing.

The Transformation of Japan

The story in Japan, although similar in origins, would have a very different ending. Calls for reform, such as those of Mizuno Takakuni in the early 1840s, became more pressing after the American show of force by Commodore Perry in 1853. Beginning in 1868 reformers such as Fukuzawa Yukichi and Ito Hirobumi brought about the Meiji Restoration, which was designed to copy some aspects of western European and American achievements so that Japan would not meet the same fate as China. Industrialization was key to the success of this reform. The Meiji leaders abolished the old feudal order, revamped the tax system, and remodeled the economy. The Japanese army and navy were modernized and restructured, and Japan embarked on a very western-style imperialistic expansion. Victories in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars signaled Japan's rise to the status of a world power.