The Westerner/Slavophile controversy

The Slavophiles, who were most active in the 1840s and 1850s, represented an intellectual group that wanted the future of Russia to be based on its early history. They believed that Peter I (the Great) had corrupted Russia by looking to the West for inspiration. It was a philosophical and political movement that emphasised the rational individuality of Russia and idealised the Russian past, and particularly admired the pre-Petrine period. Basically the movement had liberal aims but was not democratic. The centre of the movement was Moscow and it attracted members of the old aristocracy whose interests included history, philosophy, theology, philology and folklore. Its members included Aleksei A. Khomyakov, Konstantin S. Aksakov, Ivan S. Aksakov, Ivan V. Kireyevsky, Pyotr V. Kireyevsky and Yury F. Samarin, and they were greatly influenced by Friedrich Schelling.

The Westerners believed in the superiority of Western Civilisation and maintained that Russian conditions were essentially similar to those in Western Europe, or Russia could easily imitate them and should Westernise as soon as possible. This included the development of capitalism and the introduction of constitutional governments. Both Slavophiles and the Westerners came from the same social and intellectual backgrounds and had in common disillusionment with the existing regime. Drawing distinctions between them is far from easy.

Slavophiles distrusted Western Europe with its Roman Catholic and Protestant religions, and considered constitutional government and capitalism as the outcome of a deficient society. The Russian Orthodox faith by contrast gave Russians a common faith so that the people were united in a ‘Christian community’. Within this spiritual community an individual could find true freedom, therefore there was no need for Western state structures. The Slavophiles also believed in the peasant commune and an autocratic form of government. Some Slavophiles felt that once a truly Christian society was estab-
lished Russia should reintroduce spiritual values in the West to replace rationalism, materialism and individualism.

Slavophiles urged extensive reforms to bring back autocracy and the church in their pure form and aimed at:

1. the emancipation of the serfs;
2. reducing bureaucracy;
3. freedom of speech;
4. freedom of the press;
5. freedom of conscience;
6. establishing of an institution representing the whole people similar to a *veche* or *zemskii sobor*.

Nicholas I objected to their criticism of his regime. His government censored their journals and generally tried to suppress the movement. After the Crimean War (1853–56), the death of many of its leaders and the reforms of Alexander II that achieved part of its aims, the movement declined. It then tended to merge with Panslavism.

**Peter I's visits to Western Europe**

In 1697 Peter I (the Great) organised an embassy of 250 to visit Western Europe. He was, in fact, the first tsar to travel west except on a military campaign and J. Bouvet in *The Present Condition of the Muscovite Empire* (1699) wrote

> the motive which could induce so great a prince to leave for some time his native country cannot be attributed to any other cause than his most ardent desire of improving his own knowledge and of his subjects, quite contrary to what has been practised by his predecessors, who looked upon the ignorance of their subjects as the main foundation stone of their absolute power.

The Grand Embassy consisted of three ambassadors headed by François Lefort and it left Moscow on 9 March 1697 and over a period of eighteen months travelled through Sweden, Holland and England and in the Hapsburg Empire. There were three main aims of the embassy, the first was to bring concerted action against Turkey by European states, the second was to obtain greater knowledge of shipbuilding, and the third was to recruit craftsmen and sailors. Peter travelled with the embassy incognito as Pëtr Mikhailov and spent many months working as a craftsman in the docks of Amsterdam and London, having left Holland for England in January 1698 with a squadron of the Royal Navy. He stayed in England for three and a half months.

John Evelyn (1620–1706), the English diarist, wrote in 1698 ‘The Czar of Muscovy being come to England, and having a mind to see the building of