

Lesson Seven: St. Petersburg v. Moscow: the Slavophile/Westernizer Debate

Overview of Lesson: Students will learn about the reign of Nicholas I, which was characterized by repression, yet also the flowering of literature and intellectual ideas. This was the time of the great figures in Russian literature, but also the height of Tsarist autocracy. Students will examine and interpret the two main schools of thought in Russia at the time – the “Slavophiles” and “Westernizers,” and determine the arguments each side used for its unique vision for the future of Russia. Students will learn how the cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg symbolized the contrasting points of view, but also how the architecture of St. Petersburg had both “Slavophile” and “Westernizer” aspects.

This lesson will take at least two 50-minute class periods.

Objectives:

1. Students will learn about the reign of Nicholas I and how it was an oppressive, yet culturally rich time in Russian history.
2. Students will research the contrasting points of view regarding Russia’s future of the Slavophiles and Westernizers.
3. Students will prepare for and participate in a debate of the points of view of the Slavophiles and Westernizers regarding religion, politics, economics, society, and the future of Russia.
4. Students will list arguments on a chart for both points of view regarding these issues.
5. Students will discuss how the architecture of St. Petersburg reflects Slavic and Western influences.

Focus Questions:

1. How would you characterize Nicholas I’s reign? What was life like for Russians at this time?
2. What was the “Nicholas System” of “Official Nationality?” Did it work? Why or why not?
3. Explain the two intellectual schools of thought at this time. Why did this debate heat up during Nicholas’ reign?
4. How does the architecture of St. Petersburg reflect aspects of this debate? Give specific examples.

Resources/Materials:

- Chalkboard
- Russian history sources – books and/or Internet access
- Rules for debate/grading rubric
- Chart – in handout form or on the board, to list contrasting ideas of Slavophiles and Westernizers

Procedures/Activities:

1. Read Pushkin quotation from “The Bronze Horseman,” (in **Lesson Two** then ask students to interpret what it says (put it in their own words) to point out the contrast between traditional Moscow and Peter’s Western vision for St. Petersburg.
2. Give background on St. Petersburg v. Moscow, the Slavophile/Westernizer debate, and Nicholas I through introductory lecture. Teachers may put an outline on the board or put on a handout for students to fill in supporting details. (outline points are in bold print on attached background information).
3. Assign “Slavophile v. Westernizer” Debate:

Assign half of the class to represent the Slavophile (traditional pro-Moscow, anti-Western) point of view and the other half to represent the Westernizer (pro-West, St. Petersburg) point of view. Each side needs to research its point of view as nineteenth-century Russians, during the reign of Nicholas I, in order to engage in a debate over religious, economic, political, and social issues. How does each side see the role of the Tsar and government (politics), the role of the Orthodox Church (religion), relations with Europe and Western values and cultures (society and culture), the future of Russian farming, trade, and industry (economics)?

Students should take notes from historical texts and/or websites regarding the two points of view on these issues and list the major figures who supported each side.

Each side (or half of class) should then elect two people to represent its point of view (two students to argue the Slavophile side, two students to argue the Westernizer side).

Students will then engage in a debate regarding which group has the best ideas for the future (in the nineteenth-century point of view) for Russia. Students should use formal debating rules, allowing specific time periods for speeches and rebuttals.

The “winner” of the debate could be determined by the teacher, a class vote, or a “neutral” colleague or class could be invited to watch and vote on whose arguments were the most convincing.

After the debate, the teacher may put a chart on an overhead or write it on the chalkboard with the headings: Slavophiles and Westernizers, then the subcategories:

- Political views
- Religious views
- Social views
- Economic views
- Significant supporters

Elicit responses from the students to fill in the specific points of view of each side regarding these issues.

4. Students can be assessed/graded on any or all of the following: participation (positive and active), the research process (can collect notes for each group), quality of research, quality of arguments, and debate tactics. Completed charts could also be collected and graded.
5. Discussion: After the debates, ask students if they know of any other examples in history where a group that supported so-called “traditional values” was in conflict with those who wanted change. When and where did this happen? What was the outcome?

Ask students: How does the architecture of St. Petersburg reflect this tension of East (Slavic) and West? Can you give specific examples (ex. Catherine Palace, Winter Palace, Church-on-the-Spilled-Blood, etc.)

Explain to students that after the Communist Revolution, in 1918, Lenin moved the capital back to Moscow, because it was more easily protected from invading forces. Ask students: Could this move be related to the Slavophile/Westernizer debate? How so?

Evaluation/Assessment:

Students will be graded on their debates (see #4 in Procedures/Activities)

Background Information for Slavophile v. Westernizer Debate

I. St. Petersburg v. Moscow:

From the time Peter moved his capital to St. Petersburg, to some traditionally minded Russians, this city represented an oppressive, Western, anti-Slavic Russia. In his autobiography, Konstantin Stanislovksy, director of the Moscow Art Theater in the late nineteenth-century, summarized the attitudes of the “Slavophile” Muscovites toward St. Petersburg:

The new capital considered Moscow to be a provincial town and itself one of the cultural centers of Europe. All that was of Moscow was a failure in Petersburg and vice versa. The Muscovites lost little love on the bureaucrats of Petersburg with their formalism and cold affectedness. They lost no love on the city itself, with its fogs, its short and gloomy days, its long white summer nights. Moscow was proud of its dry frosts, of the bright glitter of white snow under the winter sun, of its hot, dry summers. (Massie 385)

During the reign of Nicholas I, two rival intellectual groups, the Slavophiles and Westernizers, became active, talking and writing about their contrasting views of Russia’s future.

- A. **Slavophiles** – pro-Moscow, anti-Peter the Great, focused on the peasant, Orthodox Church, mystical Russian tradition
- B. **Westernizers** – pro-Peter and St. Petersburg, emphasized rationalism, reform, later became more radical, and even pro-Revolution

II. Nicholas II (1825- 1855)

- A. **Decembrist Revolt (1825)** – uprising by a group of liberal army officers who wanted Nicholas’ brother Constantine to be Tsar at Alexander I’s death, because they thought Constantine would be more of a reformer, maybe allow constitutional government and free the serfs. Nicholas put down this revolt with violence and was determined afterwards to be more autocratic than ever.
- B. **“Official Nationality”** – Nicholas advocated this to support his position –

1. Orthodoxy
2. Autocracy
3. Nationality (Russian people unique, chosen by God)

C. Secret Police – Nicholas used widely to prevent opposition

D. “Little Father” – peasants generally loved the Tsar, did not blame him for his own oppressive regime (blamed his bureaucrats)

E. Great Developments in Literature – despite repressive regime, writers flourished – Turgenev, Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy