ANTON CHEKHOV (1860-1904)

"You write that you wept at my play. You aren't the only one. It's Stanislavsky who has made them so weepy. I wanted something quite different. All I wanted to say to people, quite honestly, as 'Look at yourselves, just how stale and tedious your lives are.'…What is there to weep at in that?" - in a letter to Serebrov

"Besides medicine, my wife, I have also literature - my mistress."

Anton Chekhov was born in Tanarog, Ukraine on January 17, 1860. He was one of six children. A year after he was born, Alexander II liberated the serfs (indentured servants living on the land of the nobles) in his Emancipation Manifesto. Chekhov's grandfather was a former serf who had bought the family's freedom right before the emancipation. As a child, Anton was playful and witty and enjoyed attending the theater. At 16, his father went bankrupt and moved the family to Moscow. Chekhov stayed behind, and supported himself and his education by tutoring. He moved to Moscow to rejoin his family after passing his exams, and enrolled in the Moscow University Medical School. Chekhov paid his tuition by writing short stories for newspapers and magazines. By the time he was 20 years old, he was hired by the Spectator to write comedy stories.

By 1886, after being published in several Russian magazines, he had gained fame as a writer. After the failure of his 1889 play, The Wood Demon, he took a sabbatical from writing and went to Siberia, South East Asia, the Indian Subcontinent, and the Middle East for doctoral research and travel. When he returned in 1892, he stopped his medical practice and recommitted himself to writing. The four plays for which he is best known combine the elements of tragedy and dark comedy: *Seagull* in 1896, *Uncle Vanya* in 1896, *Three Sisters* in 1901, and *Cherry Orchard* in 1904. He enjoyed a rich collaboration with the Moscow Art Theater, and in 1901 he married Olga Knipper, an actress who appeared in each of the four major plays. *Cherry Orchard* premiered on Chekhov's birthday in Moscow on January 17, 1904. Chekhov died six months later, of tuberculosis, which had plagued him for most of his adult life.

Chekhov's Most Prominent Works

Plays

The Swan Song 1889
The Proposal 1889
Ivanoff 1889
The Bear 1890
The Seagull 1896
The Tragedian in Spite of Himself 1899
The Three Sisters 1901
Uncle Vanya 1902
The Cherry Orchard 1904

Novels and Short Stories

Humorous Folk 1887
Twilight and Other Stories 1887
Morose Folk 1890
Variegated Tales 1894
Old Wives of Russia 1894
The Duel 1895
The Chestnut Tree 1895
Ward Number Six 1897

Miscellaneous Sketches

The Island of Saghalien 1895
Peasants 1898
Life in Provinces 1898
Children 1899

RUSSIA 1860 – 1917: THE GATHERING STORM

Living in Russia has never been easy. From the harsh, frozen climate, to the usually moribund economic policies, to Russia's proclivity for maniacal tyrants (or is that tyrannical maniacs?), Russia and its people have seen their share of hardship and turmoil. However, arguably the most tumultuous period in the country's history was the years between the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 and the first Russian Revolution, which occurred in 1905. During this time, an incredibly large number of former serfs (nearly 23 million) were at once liberated…and disenfranchised. They were allowed the right to own land, but left without the means to do so, and without any representation in Russia's monarchal government. This growing sense of disenchantment would eventually evolve into full blown revolution by 1917.

During the 1800's, Russia's population doubled in size while the country maintained an agrarian, serf based economy, resisting the tide of industrialization which was sweeping through Europe. The gap between a burgeoning Europe and a decaying Russia was exposed during the Crimean War (1853-1856), which saw Britain, France, assorted Italian kingdoms and the Ottoman Empire rout Russia, mostly due to their technological superiority. Tsar Alexander II (1818-1881, picture below) saw the writing on the wall (and heard the growing whispers of discontent from his people) and decided to abolish serfdom throughout his country, hoping the freed serfs would evolve into a prosperous middle class, which would in turn help revitalize the economy. Alexander also worried that if he didn't act soon, the decision might not be his to make. "It is better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait for the time when it will begin to abolish itself from below," he reasoned to a group of Moscow nobles who protested the emancipation.

His Emancipation Manifesto, which was written two years before Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, allowed serfs to buy land from their noble landowners. However, part of the emancipation required the serfs to make redemptive payments and taxes back to the government (sometimes for as long as fifty years), which left many of the recently freed serfs back at square one: without money, without land, and hopelessly in debt to the noble landowners. Additionally, the serfs still had no say in the government.

Although serfdom was abolished, since its abolition was achieved on terms unfavorable to the peasants, revolutionary tensions were not abated. Hoping to stem the revolutionary tide, the government enacted several different reforms. Zemstvas were created, which were local governments made up of representatives of various social classes to delegate and discuss important local issues. Dissatisfaction among the people continued, however, reaching its acme when, after several attempts on his life, Alexander II was assassinated by a group of nihilists.

Alexander III (1845-1894) ruled very differently from his progressive father. He set about imposing harsh punishments for all revolutionaries, decreed that only the Russian language and religion would be taught in schools (despite his German, Finnish, and Polish subjects) and railed against freedom of speech, democracy, constitutions and the parliamentary system. Many of Alexander II's reforms were eradicated or marginalized. After Alexander III's death, his eldest son, Nicholas II, assumed the throne. He would be the last tsar of Russia.

Nicholas II (1868-1919) was a man uncomfortable with leadership, and was not fully prepared to steward Russia away from revolution and toward unity. In an effort to boost national pride and morale, he unsuccessfully waged war with Japan in 1904. Although the Russian navy was larger, it was no match for Japan's sleek naval ships, and Nicholas was forced to surrender in humiliating fashion. Shortly after the defeat, in 1905, the people of Russia marched to the Tsar's palace in a peaceful demonstration. Led by Father Gapon, a Russian Orthodox priest, the march was meant to as a non-violent petition for rights, including the right for representation in the government and the right to vote. The palace guards, confused by the crowds walking toward them, opened fire, killing over one thousand people. Nicholas was not even in the country at the time.

This marked the beginning of the Russian Revolution of 1905. Soviets (councils of workers) appeared in most cities to direct revolutionary activity. Russia was paralyzed, and the government was desperate. In October 1905, Nicholas reluctantly issued the famous October Manifesto, which conceded the creation of a national Duma (legislature or parliament) to be called without delay. The right to vote was extended and no law was to go into force without confirmation by the Duma. The moderate groups were satisfied; but the socialists rejected the concessions as insufficient and tried to organize new strikes.

These reforms sated the population for the time being, but many problems still existed: the

weaknesses of the Russian economy, an inefficient military and a wobbly semi-parliamentary government confused about its own power and purpose. Russia teetered on the edge of revolution, and World War I pushed it right over.

(The above information provided by Trinity Repertory)