



## A Level History Summer Independent Learning 2025

### What is Summer Independent Learning?

Summer Independent Learning (SIL) is a series of activities designed to introduce to you the context of Russian history in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Russia 1917-1953 is the depth study (paper 2) in A Level History at New College Doncaster. Many students will not have studied Russian history before, or studied it less compared to other historical topics. Therefore, learning the context of Russia before you start in September will help you develop the knowledge, research and critical thinking skills that will allow you to 'hit the ground running' with your A Level studies from September.

The A Level History SIL is made up of some compulsory tasks and some optional tasks. You must complete all compulsory tasks. You can complete the optional tasks if you want to as extra research.

### How do you complete SIL?

The tasks are designed to take time and make you think hard. You may want to space them out e.g., plan to do one task a day over 5 separate days during the summer holiday. It should take you a minimum of 8 hours to complete all the tasks the set, but it may take longer than this.

Resources to complete each task are in this document. Websites needed are accessible by clicking the links within this document.

You can either complete the tasks by hand or on a word document. If you complete the SIL on a computer, then you will need to make sure you can print it off to hand in for your first lesson.

You must not use artificial intelligence (AI) to write any of the answers for any part of your SIL. We want to see how you think and write as a history student.

SIL must be handed in (handwritten or printed out) in your first history lesson. It must be completed before the first day of college on **Thursday 4 September 2025**.

## Compulsory task 1: fact files

### Tsar Nicholas II

Create a fact file of Tsar Nicholas II using the links below to research the tsar. Answer the following questions in your fact file:

- What do you think were 3 of Nicholas II's key strengths as tsar of Russia? Why do you think these were strengths?
- What do you think were 3 of Nicholas II's key weaknesses as tsar of Russia? Why were these weaknesses?

Links for research:

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nicholas-II-tsar-of-Russia>

[https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/nicholas\\_ii.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/nicholas_ii.shtml)



### Vladimir Lenin



Create a fact file for Lenin that focuses on his background and influence in Russia. Maximum of 6 key facts.

Links for research:

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Vladimir-Lenin>

[https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic\\_figures/lenin\\_vladimir.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/lenin_vladimir.shtml)

## Compulsory task 2: key questions

Read chapter 1, photocopied from Chris Corin and Terry Fiehn's book *Communist Russia under Lenin and Stalin*, (London, Hodder Education, 2015). You will find the photocopied pages at the end of this document. As you read the chapter, answer the following questions:

1. Why was the geographical size of Russia important?
2. What were the problems with communication in Russia? What types of problems might these communication issues lead to?
3. How diverse was Russia in terms of nationality by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century?
4. What was the policy of Russification? Why was it implemented? What were the problems with this policy?
5. What percentage of the population were peasants in Russia in 1900?
6. What is an autocracy?
7. How did the tsars run Russia?
8. What was the role of the Orthodox Church in tsarist Russia?
9. What opposition developed towards the tsars?
10. How did the tsars deal with the opposition towards them?
11. Why was modernisation needed in Russia?
12. Why was modernisation dangerous to the tsar?
13. What were the long-term causes of the 1905 Revolution?
14. What were the short-term causes of the 1905 Revolution?
15. Why was the tsar forced to make concessions during 1905?
16. What were the concessions that the tsar made?
17. What developments between 1906 and 1914 reduced the chance of revolution in the future and why?
18. What developments between 1906 and 1914 increased the chance of revolution in the future and why?

## Compulsory task 3: short essay

Using your notes from tasks 2 and 3 and the additional links below, write a short essay (about 500 words) that answers the following question: *To what extent were economic factors the main cause of the 1905 Revolution in Russia?*

Advice for writing your essay:

- Pick three causes to use as the factors for your three main paragraphs.
- For each cause, identify three pieces of evidence that show this factor was a cause of the 1905 Revolution.
- Explain why this was a cause of the 1905 revolution.
- Rank your causes from most to least important and make links between them to explain why one cause was more important compared to another.
- Outline your main argument in your introduction – what is your rank order of causes?
- Summarise your argument in your conclusion.

Draw out and complete the following planning grid to help you write the essay:

Cause (factor)	3 x evidence that shows this was a cause of revolution	Explanation	Evaluation (judgement)
Cause 1: most important cause	1 2 3	This was a cause of the 1905 Revolution because...	This was more a more important cause compared to cause 2 and 3 because...
Cause 2: second most important cause	1 2 3	This was a cause of the 1905 Revolution because...	However, this was a less important cause compared to cause 1 because... It was still a more important cause compared to cause 3 because...
Cause 3: third most important cause	1 2 3	This was a cause of the 1905 Revolution because...	Whilst this was an important cause, it was less important compared to cause 1 and 2 because...

Additional links to use in research for your essay:

- <https://explaininghistory.org/2025/05/11/the-causes-of-the-1905-russian-revolution-a-structural-analysis/>
- <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zwxv34j/revision/1> - use the 'pages' section on the left-hand side of this website to look at the different long term and short-term causes of the revolution.



## Compulsory task 4: political parties

Use the image and written summary below to answer the questions.

### THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS

In the 1880s, it seemed to some Russian intellectuals that there was no hope of a revolutionary movement developing amongst the peasantry. Instead they turned to the latest theories of a German philosopher, Karl Marx (see page 19). The 'scientific' nature of Marxism appealed to them; it was an optimistic theory in which there was progress through the development of industry and the working class to the ultimate triumph of socialism.

Marxist reading circles developed and societies and groups were formed. They believed in action and soon became involved in organising strikes in factories. The working class, not the peasants, were the key to the revolution.

In 1898, Marxists formed the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party but it split into two factions at the Second Party Congress in 1903 – the Bolsheviks (Majoritarians) and the Mensheviks (Minoritarians).



This split was largely caused by the abrasive personality of Vladimir Ulyanov, or Lenin, who was determined to see his notion of the revolutionary party triumph. During the congress the votes taken on various issues showed the two groups were roughly equal. But in a particular series of votes, Lenin's faction came out on top (mainly because some delegates had walked out of the conference) and he jumped on the idea of calling his group the majority party (Bolsheviks), which gave them a stronger image. In fact, until 1917 they always had fewer members than the Mensheviks, for reasons that will become clear below.

It is worth noting that the Bolsheviks played a relatively unimportant role in the 1905 Revolution and events leading up to February 1917.

**Main beliefs:** Both factions accepted the main tenets of Marxism (see page 19), but they split over the role of the party.

### Bolsheviks

Lenin believed that a revolutionary party should:

- be made up of a small number of highly disciplined professional revolutionaries
- operate under centralised leadership
- have a system of small cells (three people) to make it less easy for the police to infiltrate them.

It was the job of the party to bring socialist consciousness to the workers and lead them through the revolution. Critics warned that a centralised party like this would lead to dictatorship.

### Mensheviks

They believed that the party should:

- be broadly based and take in all those who wished to join
- be more democratic, allowing its members to have a say in policy-making
- encourage trade unions to help the working class improve their conditions.

It took the Marxist line that there would be a long period of bourgeois democratic government during which the workers would develop a class and revolutionary consciousness until they were ready to take over in a socialist revolution.



**Support:** Their support came mainly from the working class. The Bolsheviks tended to attract younger, more militant peasant workers who liked the discipline, firm leadership and simple slogans. The Mensheviks tended to attract different types of workers and members of the intelligentsia, also a broader range of people – more non-Russians, especially Jews and Georgians.

## **How influential were the Bolsheviks in Russia between 1900 and 1917?**

The Bolsheviks were a faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party led by Lenin. Their influence during this period was important but also limited in some ways.

### **Early Years (1903-1905):**

The Bolshevik party was founded in 1903. They were a small, radical group who wanted a workers' revolution based on Marxist ideas. They were active in organising workers, spreading revolutionary ideas, and encouraging strikes. However, they were overshadowed by other political groups like the liberals and more moderate socialists. The 1905 Revolution gave them some opportunity to gain support, but they remained relatively small and often operated underground because the Tsarist regime suppressed revolutionary groups.

### **Between 1906 and 1914:**

After the 1905 Revolution failed to overthrow the Tsar, the Bolsheviks faced a crackdown and went through a period of reduced activity. They remained committed to revolution but struggled to grow their support among peasants and workers, who often supported other parties like the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs). The Bolsheviks mainly gained support in industrial cities among certain groups of workers but were still a minority.

### **During World War I (1914-1917):**

The war caused huge problems in Russia: food shortages, military defeats, and widespread anger. The Bolsheviks' anti-war stance and promises to end the war and give land to the peasants made their ideas more popular. By mid 1917, the Bolsheviks had grown significantly in influence, especially in key industrial centres like Petrograd (St. Petersburg) and Moscow. They were able to organise soldiers and workers effectively and became a major force in the revolutionary events of October/November 1917.

### **Questions to answer:**

1. Who were the social democrats and what did they believe?
2. Who were the Bolsheviks and what did they believe?
3. Who were the Mensheviks and what did they believe?
4. Why do you think the Bolsheviks remained less influential in Russia between 1900 and 1914?
5. Why do you think the Bolsheviks started to gain more support as World War One progressed?

*To answer questions 4 and 5 you will need to use the information above and link this to the wider context you have already covered in tasks 1 to 3 in order to make some inferences that will help you answer these questions.*

## Compulsory task 5: Marxism and ideology

Read the following and use it to answer the questions below the information:

### What is Marxism?

Karl Marx was born in Germany in 1818 and died in London in 1883. He is known as an economist and a philosopher as well as a social theorist, whose ideas have had huge impact around the world. His ideas inspired the foundation for many communist societies. At the turn of the twentieth century, over half the world was being organised and governed under the influence of his ideas.

Marx argued that the relationship that people have with the economy shapes everything else; ideas, relationships, belief systems, culture. Marx argued that throughout history, society has transformed from feudal society into Capitalist society, which is based on two social classes, the ruling class (bourgeoisie) who own the means of production (factories, for example) and the working class (proletariat) who are exploited (taken advantage of) for their wage labour. This means that the ruling class uses the working class to produce goods and services and keep the profit for themselves. Capitalism is based on the idea of private ownership of property, which encourages the individual pursuit of profit. Marxists argue that this system creates great inequalities in societies between the two social classes.

Marx was highly critical of capitalism and argued that the ruling class would get more and more rich and powerful while conditions for the working class would continue to be poor. Marx argued that in capitalist society, the working class feel alienated (removed from their labour) and exploited. Marx claimed that institutions such as religion and the family provide some relief from these feelings of exploitation and alienation. In other words, explaining away inequality and making people accept their oppressed position. He calls this false class-consciousness, the idea that people are not aware of the true extent of their exploitation.

However, Marx argued that the proletariat would become aware of their exploited position, come together and overthrow the system through a revolution, after which society would change radically into a communist or socialist society. Marx argued that this new type of society would remove the private ownership of property, and make sure that everyone was equal, removing social class differences. Contemporary examples of communist societies are China, Cuba and the former USSR.

### How was Lenin was influenced by Marxism?

Lenin was inspired by Karl Marx's ideas about class struggle and the need for the working class (proletariat) to overthrow the ruling class (bourgeoisie). Like Marx, Lenin believed that capitalism was an unfair system exploiting workers and that it would eventually collapse. Lenin agreed with Marx that after the revolution, the working class should take control of the state and work towards a classless, communist society.

## How did Lenin adapt Marxism to Russia?

- **Russia was not fully industrialised:** Marx predicted that a revolution would happen in advanced capitalist countries where a large, organised working class existed (like Britain or Germany). But Russia was mostly rural and agricultural, with a small industrial working class. Lenin argued that revolution could happen in Russia despite this, by leading the working class and aided by peasants.
- **Role of the Vanguard Party:** Lenin believed the working class alone might not be politically aware or organised enough to lead a revolution. So, he created the idea of a **vanguard party** - a small, disciplined group of professional revolutionaries who would lead and guide the workers and peasants.
- **Use of violence and dictatorship:** Lenin believed that a strong, centralised government was necessary to defend the revolution and crush opposition. This was the **dictatorship of the proletariat** - a temporary but forceful rule by the working class through their party, to build socialism.

Lenin took Marx's ideas about class struggle and revolution but changed them to fit Russia's mainly rural society and weaker working class. He emphasised the need for a strong, disciplined party to lead the revolution and maintain power, which became the foundation of Bolshevik rule after 1917.

### Questions to answer from the text:

1. What are the key ideas of Marxism?
2. How did Lenin adapt Marxist ideas to fit the context of Russia in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century?

## Additional optional tasks

### Optional task 1:

Read the article from London School of economics on Lenin's theory of socialist revolution and make a set of Cornell notes on the key points from the article

Article:

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/euoppblog/2020/04/22/revisiting-lenins-theory-of-socialist-revolution-on-the-150th-anniversary-of-his-birth/>

Instructions on how to make Cornell notes:

<https://www.goodnotes.com/blog/cornell-notes>

### Optional task 2:

Read the article by Jonathan Davis and make a set of Cornell notes on the key points from the article:

Article:

<https://daily.jstor.org/the-birth-of-the-soviet-union-and-the-death-of-the-russian-revolution/>



## Reading for compulsory task 2:



# *What led to the downfall of the Tsar?*

### CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter provides a brief background history for those readers who may not have studied Russian history before or need to refresh their knowledge. Its aim is to provide a basic understanding of Russian society and government before the revolutions of 1917, and more particularly to introduce the key players who become important after the fall of tsarist Russia.

- A** Russia under the tsars before 1914 (p. 4)
- B** The social structure of tsarist Russia (pp. 5–6)
- C** How was Russia governed under the tsars? (pp. 7–8)
- D** Background history to the downfall of the last tsar (pp. 8–15)
- E** Who were the key players? (pp. 16–23)

### ■ 1A Russia and its people before 1914



**FOCUS ROUTE**

Make notes under the following headings: Size; Communications; National groups; Policy of Russification. Explain why Russia was a difficult country to govern before 1914.

**SOURCE 1.1** The major nationalities in Russia by mother tongue in 1897

Nationality	Millions
Russian	55.6
Ukrainian	22.4
White Russian	5.8
Polish	7.9
Jewish	5.0
Kirgiz	4.0
Tartar	3.4
Finnish	3.1
German	1.8
Latvian	1.4
Bashkir	1.3
Lithuanian	1.2
Armenian	1.2
Romanian/Moldavian	1.1
Estonian	1.0
Murdrinian	1.0
Georgian	0.8
Turkmenian	0.3
Tadzhik	0.3

## A Russia under the tsars before 1914

One of the most startling features of tsarist Russia in 1900 was its size. It was a vast empire crossing two continents – Europe and Asia. From west to east it measured over 6400 km and from north to south over 3000 km. It covered about one-sixth of the world's total land mass. The USA could fit into it two and a half times and Britain nearly a hundred times. Large parts were (and still are) either uninhabited or sparsely populated. The northern part of Russia is frozen for most of the year.

Communications across this huge area were poor. There were few paved roads outside the big cities. Most of the roads were hard-packed earth which turned to mud in heavy rain and became impassable in winter. For longer journeys, rivers were used. Most of Russia's major cities had grown up along important river routes. The other main form of travel was the railway. Although there had been a great expansion of the railways at the turn of the century, Russia in the early twentieth century had only as much track as Britain. The most important route was the Trans-Siberian railway which crossed Russia from Moscow in the west to Vladivostok in the east. This journey took more than a week of continuous travel.

### The Russian people

The Russian empire had been built up over centuries. The Russians who lived in the area around Moscow gradually extended their state (Muscovy) from the fifteenth century onwards by conquering the peoples around them. But large parts of the empire were added only in the nineteenth century. The Caucasus region was secured as late as 1864, bringing into the empire the Georgians and fierce mountain tribespeople like the Chechens. Vladivostok, the most eastern part of the empire on the Pacific Ocean, was added in 1859 and the central Asian area of Russia, including Turkestan, was conquered in the 1860s and 1870s.

So by the beginning of the twentieth century, Russia was a vast sprawling empire that contained a large number of different national groups (see Source 1.1). The Russians themselves formed about half of the population, the vast majority of whom lived in the European part of Russia west of the Ural Mountains. The diversity of culture, religion and language throughout the empire was astonishing, ranging from sophisticated European Russians living in St Petersburg, to nomadic Muslim peoples in the desert areas of the south, to the peoples who wandered the vast spaces of Siberia, living and dressing very much like native Americans.

### Russification

The size and diversity of the empire made it extremely difficult to govern. Many of the national minorities resented Russian control, particularly the policy of russification that was imposed more rigorously in the second part of the nineteenth century. This policy involved making non-Russians use the Russian language of their own, wear Russian-style clothes and adopt Russian customs. Russian officials were put in to run regional government in non-Russian parts of the empire like Poland, Latvia and Finland. It meant that the Russian language was used in schools, law courts and regional governments; for instance, in Poland it was forbidden to teach children in the Polish language. Usually it was Russians who got the important jobs in government and state-sponsored industry. The national minorities saw russification as a fundamental attack on their way of life and a monstrously unfair policy that discriminated against them. During the nineteenth century there were a number of uprisings and protests from national groups seeking more autonomy (self-government) in their parts of the empire.



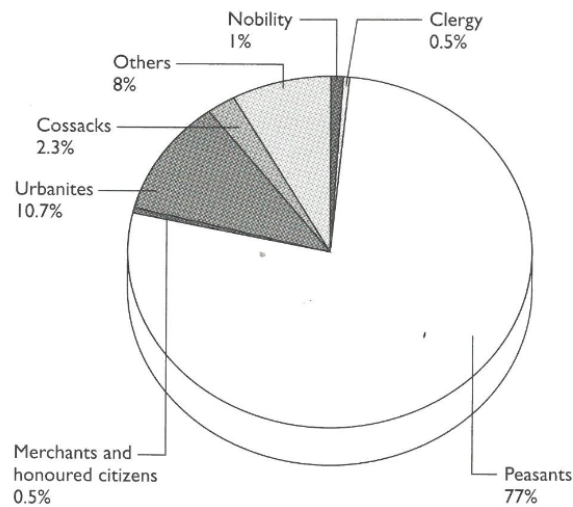
### FOCUS ROUTE

Identify and note down features of Russian society that were likely to cause problems for the tsarist government in the first decade of the twentieth century.

### ■ Learning trouble spot

It is difficult to determine the size of social classes in Russia at the end of the nineteenth century. The 1897 Census looks at 'social estates', not classes. There is no category for middle classes. The nearest to the Marxist definition of bourgeoisie is the merchants and honoured citizens, only 0.5 per cent of the population. The 'urbanites' category comprised small tradesmen, shopkeepers, white collar workers and artisans. Similarly, there is no category for industrial workers. About 7 per cent of peasants lived in towns but were not all factory workers. The 'others' category, referred to as 'settlers', covers much of the population of Russian Central Asia. The Cossacks were categorised as a separate ethnic group.

## B The social structure of tsarist Russia



**SOURCE 1.2** A breakdown of Russia by class in 1900, based on the census of 1897

The most noticeable features of Russian society around 1900 were the high proportion of the population, almost 80 per cent, who were peasants and the small proportion in the professional and merchant classes. The absence of a significant middle class played an important part in the development of Russia during the early twentieth century. Chart 1B gives some idea of the character of these different groups.

### ■ IB The social structure of tsarist Russia

#### NOBILITY

- Made up just over one per cent of the population but owned 25 per cent of all the land. Some were extremely rich, with enormous country estates.
- Few spent much time on their estates. They lived for most of the year in St Petersburg or Moscow, doing the round of social events that constituted 'society'.
- Some had important jobs in government or in the army but were often there more because of their position in society than on merit.

#### MIDDLE CLASSES

- Although small in number, there was a growing class of merchants, bankers and industrialists as industry and commerce developed.
- The lifestyle of the middle class was very good. They had large houses, and enjoyed a wide variety of food, as well as the cultural life (theatres, ballets and operas) of major cities.
- The professional class (doctors, lawyers, teachers) was growing and beginning to play a significant role in local government. Lawyers, in particular, were becoming active in politics.



**SOURCE 1.3** The ball of the coloured wigs at Countess Shavalova's palace, 1914



## ■ IB The social structure of tsarist Russia continued

### PEASANTS

- Life for most peasants was hard and unrelenting, slogging out their lives on small patches of land they owned and working on the estates of the nobility.
- Most were poor, illiterate and uneducated. Some peasants, however, were quite well off and some areas were more prosperous than others.
- Most peasants got by in good years, but in years of bad harvests there was widespread starvation, e.g. 400,000 died in 1891.
- Disease was widespread, with regular epidemics of typhus and diphtheria.
- Many lived in debt and squalor, prone to drunkenness and sexually transmitted diseases, especially syphilis.

### Land and agriculture

- Agricultural methods were inefficient and backward: most peasants practised subsistence farming, using the outdated strip system and few animals or tools, e.g. they still used wooden ploughs.
- There was not enough land to go around. The vast expansion of the peasant population in the second half of the nineteenth century led to overcrowding and competition for land.
- Before 1905, most peasants had serious debt problems because of land repayments to the government. Before 1861, the Russian peasants had been serfs, virtually owned by their masters, the nobility. In 1861, they had been emancipated (freed) and given plots of land from the estates of the nobility. But they had been forced to pay for their land by making yearly redemption payments to the government. Most could not afford the payments and went further and further into debt. The peasants felt betrayed by this. They believed that the land really belonged to the people who worked it – them! They wanted the rest of the big estates to be given to them. The government cancelled the land repayments in 1905.



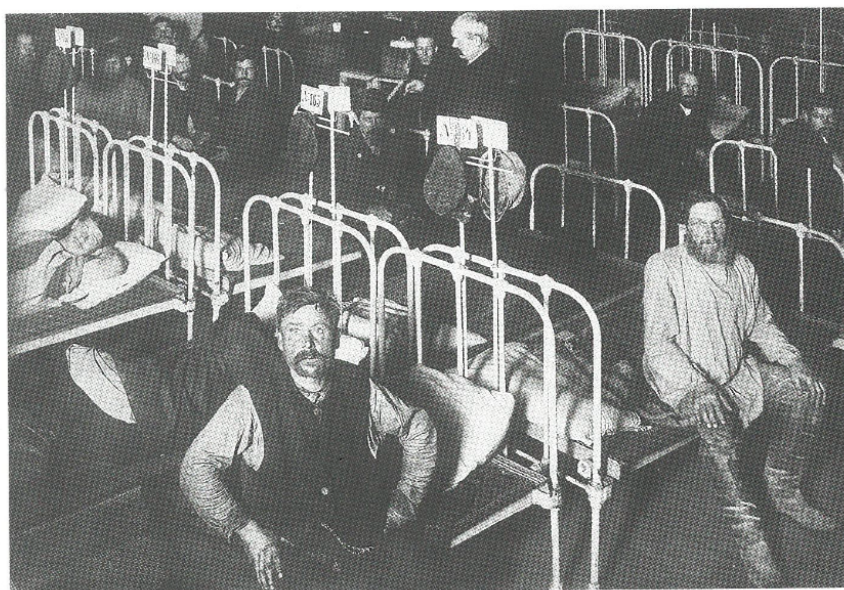
**SOURCE 1.4** Peasants in a village near Nizhny-Novgorod, c. 1891

### URBAN WORKERS

- Most workers were young and male. Although many were ex-peasants, by 1900 over a third were young men whose fathers had worked in factories, mines and railways.
- The 1897 Census showed that literacy among them (57.8%) was twice the national average. They could articulate their grievances and were receptive to revolutionary ideas.
- There were large numbers of women in textile factories in St Petersburg and Moscow.
- Wages were generally very low and working conditions very poor. There were a high number of deaths from accidents and work-related health problems.
- Living conditions were generally appalling: shared rooms in tenement blocks or in barrack-style buildings next to factories or mines. People had no privacy or private space: men, women and children often lived together in rooms divided only by curtains.

### Industry

- There was a low level of industry at the beginning of the century but it was growing fast. By 1914, Russia was the world's fourth-largest producer of coal, pig-iron and steel.
- Because of Russia's late industrial development, many of its factories used up-to-date methods of mass production, although there were also many small workshops with low levels of technology.
- By 1914, two-fifths of factory workers were in factories of over 1000 workers. This made it much easier to organise strike action.



**SOURCE 1.5** Inside a workers' lodging house c. 1900



## C How was Russia governed under the tsars?

### FOCUS ROUTE

- 1 How did the tsars run Russia?
- 2 What was the role of the Orthodox Church in tsarist Russia?
- 3 In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, what sort of opposition to the tsars had developed and how did the tsars deal with it?

### WHO WERE THE COSSACKS?

The Cossacks were a fiercely independent people who came from the Don area of Russia. Once they had been conquered by the Russians they became loyal supporters of the tsar and could be trusted to act against other peoples in the empire, including the Russians. The Cossacks were famed for their horsemanship and formed the best cavalry units in the Russian army. They were feared because they could be brutal and ruthless. According to the 1897 Census, Cossacks made up 2.5% of the population.

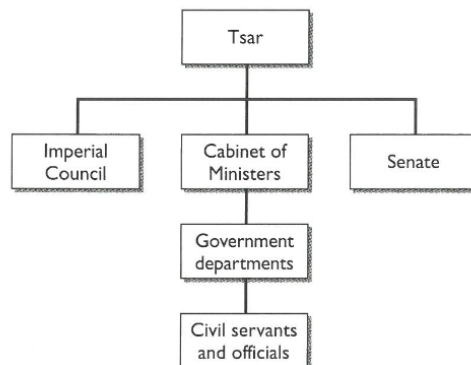
Tsarist Russia was an autocracy. The tsar was an autocrat, an absolute ruler, who had supreme power over his subjects. As far as the tsar was concerned, he had been appointed by God to lead and guide his people. Article 1 of the Fundamental Laws, 1832, makes it clear: 'The Emperor of all the Russias is an autocratic and unlimited monarch; God himself ordains that all must bow before his supreme power, not only out of fear but also out of conscience.'

The tsar had an imperial council to advise him and a cabinet of ministers who ran the various government departments. But they were responsible to him alone, not to a parliament or to a prime minister. They reported directly to the tsar and took instructions from him. This meant that the tsar was the pivot on which the system rested.

To run this enormous empire, there was a huge bureaucracy of civil servants and officials. It was a rigid hierarchy (orders were passed down from superiors to the lower ranks) marked by its inefficiency: it took ages to get things done. The lower ranks who had contact with the people were generally badly paid and there was a culture of corruption in which bribery was common. The bureaucracy was virtually impenetrable for ordinary citizens, who rarely found that their interests were served properly. The different regions of the empire were under the control of governors who had their own local bureaucracies.

Opposition was not tolerated. Political parties were illegal before 1905 and newspapers and books were censored. The government made use of an extensive secret police network, the Okhrana, to root out dissidents and people likely to cause trouble. Political critics who organised strikes and protests were often put in prison or sent to exile in Siberia. The large-scale protests, demonstrations and riots that often broke out in times of famine were suppressed by force. The much-feared Cossacks were used to deal with any trouble. Tsarist Russia was an oppressive and intolerant regime.

### IC The structure of the tsarist state



### The Russian Orthodox Church

This regime was underpinned by the Russian Orthodox Church. It had, for various historical reasons, become independent of the Pope and Rome. It had developed its own traditions and customs, which included a heavy dose of mysticism and superstition. Holy men, or starets, were held in special regard. One who played an important role in the story of the Russian Revolution was Grigory Rasputin (see page 13). The Orthodox Church was closely aligned with the tsarist system. It supported the divine right of the tsar to rule and exhorted believers to obey the tsar as the agent of God. It was a deeply conservative organisation.

**CONSTITUTIONAL MONARCHY**

One where the monarch's political powers are limited as agreed in a constitution (the body or principles or precedents by which the State is acknowledged to be governed); most usually, power is held by an elected parliament of one or two houses.

**Opposition to the tsars**

There was considerable opposition to the tsars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This opposition included revolutionary populist movements like the People's Will, which planned to bring down the government through terrorist acts: in 1881, members of this movement managed to assassinate Tsar Alexander II. Towards the end of the nineteenth century a new revolutionary party, the Social Democrats, grew up, centred around the ideas of Karl-Marx. His 'scientific' theories of history and revolution were attractive to many Russians who were disillusioned with the populist movement.

The other main strand of opposition to the tsars were the liberals, who came mainly from the middle classes. They wanted political reform rather than revolution, and were looking for a parliamentary-style system that would reduce the tsar's power, and turn him into a CONSTITUTIONAL MONARCH like those in Britain. (You can read more about these movements on pages 16–18.)

**WHAT IS POPULISM?**

Populists put their trust in, and seek support from, ordinary people. From the 1860s to the 1880s the populists, or narodniks, largely well-to-do intellectuals, believed that the peasants in Russia could develop their own form of socialism. Life would be based around co-operation and sharing in peasant communes on a fairly small scale. This would mean that capitalism and its evils could be avoided altogether. They believed in 'going to the people' and spreading their socialist ideas to the peasantry by peaceful propaganda. Many populists, particularly students and young people, did 'go to the people' in the 1870s, only to be rejected. The peasants had nothing in common with middle-class youngsters and their strange ideas. When this move failed, some populists formed the People's Will, turning to terrorism to bring down the tsarist regime.



## Background history to the downfall of the last tsar

The last tsar of Russia was Nicholas II. Any ruler would have found the challenges facing tsarist Russia formidable, but Nicholas was ill-equipped to fulfil the role of an autocratic leader.

**Modernisation**

At the beginning of the twentieth century Russia was a very backward, agricultural country compared to highly industrialised countries like the USA, Germany, Britain and France. There was an urgent need to modernise and industrialise for two basic reasons:

- 1 To be a great power in the twentieth century – and the Tsar and ruling élite wanted their country to play a major role on the world stage – Russia had to industrialise. You could not be an important military power without a strong industrial base to provide weapons, ships, munitions and the other military equipment required for modern warfare.
- 2 Russia was poor. Agriculture was hopelessly inefficient, still using outdated traditional methods, such as strip farming, and making minimal use of machinery and modern farming methods. Partly as a result of this and partly because of the ballooning population (a 50 per cent increase between 1860 and 1899), hundreds of thousands of peasants starved in years when

**FOCUS ROUTE**

Make notes using the following questions as guidelines:

- 1 Why was modernisation needed?
- 2 Why was modernisation dangerous to the Tsar?
- 3 How did Witte try to build up industry?
- 4 How successful was Witte's economic policy?



the harvest was poor. With little to lose, there would often be peasant uprisings and revolts which made the tsarist regime unstable. It was essential to modernise agriculture and industrialise to increase the general wealth of the country and take the surplus labour off the overcrowded land and into the towns.

### The contradictions of modernisation

The dilemma for Nicholas II was that while modernisation was desirable in many respects, it also posed a serious threat to the tsarist regime.

- It would be difficult to maintain the institutions of tsarist autocracy in a modernised Russia. Most modern industrial countries had democracies and parliaments in which the middle class featured strongly and the power of monarchs was limited.
- Industrialisation created social tensions when millions moved from the countryside to the cities. A discontented working class living and working in poor conditions became volatile and led to instability. Packed together in the cities they would find it easier than the peasants to undertake concerted action.
- The need for a more educated workforce would make people more able to challenge the government.
- The growth of the middle classes would create pressure for political change and for more accountable and representative government.

So somehow the government had to steer a path between modernisation on the one hand and revolution on the other. It was very difficult to modernise within the framework of an autocracy.

### Tsar Nicholas II

Nicholas came to the throne in 1894 after his father, Alexander III, died unexpectedly. Nicholas was not prepared for this role and admitted that he did not want to become tsar. He was simply not up to the job. His many inadequacies have been well documented – his inability to make decisions; his unwillingness to engage in politics (even to read government reports); his lack of organisational skills ('Unfit to run a village post office', was the comment of an unknown cabinet minister); his weakness; his obstinacy. Yet this was the man who faced the enormous problems of modernising Russia and bringing it into the twentieth century. Moreover, he made clear throughout his reign that he had the God-given duty to uphold the autocracy and proved unwilling to make any moves towards constitutional government, which may have aided his survival and helped Russia solve its political problems. He believed that democracy, with its elections and parliaments, would bring about the collapse of the Russian empire. Above all, he was a family man, devoted to his wife and children. He had photographs of them everywhere, including in the lavatory. Although charming and kind to those around him, commanding respect and loyalty, he could be vicious and merciless. He was a Jew-hater and encouraged pogroms (attacks) on Jewish settlements by the Black Hundreds (right-wing paramilitary gangs). He praised regiments that put down disorders, and he oversaw the vicious repression that took place after the 1905 Revolution.





CAPITAL EQUIPMENT  
Machinery used to manufacture  
goods.

### Witte's economic policy

The problem for Russia, then, was how to build up its industries and generate more wealth. Sergei Witte, the Finance Minister from 1892 to 1903, thought he had the answer. Witte's plan was to make a huge investment in industry to create a spiral of upward industrial growth: the more industry grew, the more demand there would be for other industrial products, which would lead to further growth, and so on. He placed much of his faith in the development of the railways. Whilst these would improve communications between cities, they would also create demand for iron, steel, coal and other industries associated with railway building. During his time in office, the high level of state investment in the railways nearly doubled the kilometres of railway in operation.

However, developing the railways was not enough. The government needed to invest in industry on a huge scale to really get it going. This meant buying expensive machinery – CAPITAL EQUIPMENT – from countries like Germany to equip factories until Russia could manufacture its own. The big question was: where was the money for this going to come from? Witte had two sources available:

- 1 Foreign investment – he negotiated huge foreign loans, particularly from the French. The problem with foreign loans was that interest payments had to be made at regular intervals.
- 2 The peasants – he increased both the state taxes they paid and the taxes on everyday items that they used, such as salt, kerosene and alcohol. He used the surplus grain from harvests to sell abroad, to pay off the interest on foreign loans and to buy more capital equipment.

Witte's policy (see Chart 1D) was to squeeze resources out of the peasants to pay for industrialisation. He also kept urban workers' wages low so that all the money available went into industrial development. He hoped that industrial growth would lead to more wealth for everyone before the squeeze hurt too much. At first things went well. There was great expansion in the late 1890s and early 1900s. But in 1902 it all went wrong. There was an international slump and Russia could not sell the products of its industry. The home market was not strong enough because the peasants had been squeezed so hard they did not have money to spend on manufactured goods. Thousands of the new industrial workers lost their jobs. Strikes and protests broke out in most cities.

There were also problems in the countryside. Bad harvests in 1900 and 1902 pushed the peasants into starvation. They had already been squeezed by Witte's policies and now they were at breaking point. From 1902 to 1904, peasant uprisings erupted sporadically and there was widespread violence in which the homes of landowners were looted and burnt. The government's only response to this was to use force to suppress the disturbances.

### The 1905 Revolution

In 1904, in the midst of the economic depression, the Tsar decided to divert attention by starting a war with the Japanese. But the war exacerbated the economic and social plight of industrial workers and peasantry by creating shortages of goods and raising prices. Military catastrophe in the war, especially defeat by a small country regarded as inferior by the Russians, led to growing dissatisfaction with the government and pressure for reform. Tension built up towards the end of 1904. Then, at the beginning of 1905, revolution broke out in St Petersburg following the events of Bloody Sunday (22 January) when the Tsar's troops fired on a peaceful demonstration. By the end of January, 400,000 workers were out on strike. The strikes spread to other cities and into the countryside.

## ■ ID Main causes of the 1905 Revolution

### LONG-TERM DISCONTENT

#### Alienated intelligentsia

- Middle-class liberals wanted to participate in government; wanted some form of elected national assembly
- Students protested against repressive government controls

#### Revolutionaries

- Socialist Revolutionaries – wanted peasant revolution to create socialism based around peasant communes
- Social Democrats (Marxists) – wanted urban working classes to stage revolution to create a socialist state, then Communism

#### National minorities

- e.g. Finns, Poles, Jews
- Wanted more autonomy and independence
- Wanted an end to the policy of russification

#### Peasants

- Grievances included: poverty, need for more land, high taxes, redemption payments on land
- Suffered periodic famines
- Increasing peasant population was putting more pressure on land

#### Workers

- Grievances included: long hours, low pay, terrible working and living conditions
- Wanted more political power

### GOVERNMENT POLICY

#### Tsarist regime

- Weak, indecisive tsar
- Repressive government
- No moves towards constitutional government
- Denied basic freedoms, e.g. free press, freedom to form political parties
- No concessions to nationalities – any protests repressed

#### Witte's economic policy

- Under Witte's industrialisation policy, urban workers and peasants squeezed very hard by high indirect taxes and low wages
- Economic slump after 1902 led to high unemployment and social tension in towns
- Poor harvests in 1900 and 1902 led to starvation and violence in countryside

### CATALYST

#### Outbreak of Russo-Japanese War, February 1904

- Defeats on land and at sea shocked Russian public
- January 1905 – lost Port Arthur
- War caused shortages of food and fuel, high prices and unemployment
- Huge upsurge of discontent as Tsar's government perceived to be incompetent

### SPARK!

#### Bloody Sunday

Sunday  
22 January 1905 –  
Tsar's troops  
fired on peaceful  
demonstrators

### REVOLUTION!

Tsar 'at war with his own people' for most of 1905 – strikes, peasant uprisings, petitions, riots, demonstrations

For most of 1905, the Tsar was 'at war with his own people' – an endless series of strikes, demonstrations, barricades, petitions and political meetings. All groups joined in the protests: workers, students, civil servants, teachers, doctors and even imperial ballet dancers went on strike. The liberals, who were the most powerful political opposition force at this time, demanded reforms in the light of the shameful way the Tsar and his government had handled the war and the economy. They demanded representative government and elections. In addition, the national minorities, such as the Finns and the Poles, demanded independence, while the Jews demanded equal civil rights.

In many towns and cities, the workers started to form new organisations, called soviets, to co-ordinate strikes. They were loose organisations – workers' councils – to which workers were sent to represent their factories. The most important was the St Petersburg Soviet, which soon became an influential and powerful body which threatened the government. A popular and important figure in the Soviet (see page 17) was Leon Trotsky (see page 25). In October, matters reached a head as a general strike spread throughout major cities in Russia, bringing the country to a standstill.

Faced with this opposition and a lack of control in town and countryside, the Tsar had a choice: to put down the uprisings and strike movement with bloodshed or to make concessions. He made concessions in the form of the October Manifesto which he issued on 30 October 1905. This promised:

- a duma or parliament that would be elected by the people and represent their views and interests
- civil rights – freedom of speech and conscience
- the right to form political parties
- an end to press censorship.

After this, the middle classes, worried by the growing unrest and violence, swung back to the side of the Tsar. The October Manifesto had given them what they wanted and they now wanted to see the restoration of law and order. By this time the Tsar also had at his disposal the soldiers returning from the Russo-Japanese War which had ended in September. He made sure that they received all their back pay and improved their conditions of service so that they stayed loyal. Nicholas now felt he was in a position to reassert control. He used force to crush the St Petersburg Soviet and the soviet movement in other cities; there was a particularly nasty struggle in Moscow where the soviet was suppressed violently. Then he turned his forces on the peasants and brought the countryside under control, although it took most of 1906 to do this.

## 1906–14

For almost a whole year in 1905, the Tsar had lost control of the country. Nicholas II now had the opportunity to make some fundamental changes to the way Russia was run, to try to improve the conditions of the people and make the political system more representative. How well did he do?

### FOCUS ROUTE

What developments between 1906 and 1914 were:

- likely to reduce the chance of revolution in the future?
- likely to increase the chances of further revolution?

Note down your answers to these questions.

### 1 Political change

The Tsar did set up the Duma (parliament) as he had promised in the manifesto, but he curtailed its power drastically. It could not pass laws or control finance, and ministers were still responsible to the Tsar and not to the Duma. The electoral system was weighted in favour of the well-off and against the working classes and peasants. The revolutionary parties decided to boycott the Duma when they could not get any changes made. After a rocky beginning, the Duma did do some useful work, but it was clear that the Tsar was not prepared to make the jump to constitutional government.

### 2 Economic and social change

- The peasants

In the countryside, Stolypin, the chief minister, brought in land reforms to encourage higher production. He aimed to encourage the KULAKS to become efficient producers for the market. He allowed them to consolidate their land into one holding (previously the old strip system had been used) and to buy up the land of poorer, less efficient peasants. To some extent this worked and production did increase, leading to record harvests by 1913, although some historians maintain this was more to do with favourable weather conditions. Recent research suggests that peasants in some areas were more prosperous than previously thought. But the reforms had not gone far enough by 1914 to judge whether they were a permanent solution to Russia's agricultural problems, which were very complex. The reforms certainly had a serious

KULAK

Rich peasant who owned animals and hired labour.



downside: they produced a growing class of alienated poor peasants. Many drifted into the cities to work in the factories while others became disgruntled farm labourers.

b) The workers

Between 1906 and 1914 there was an industrial boom, with tremendous rates of growth in industries like coal, iron and oil. Huge modern factories grew up in the cities, employing large numbers of workers. Entrepreneurs and business people were very prosperous. However workers did not, on the whole, benefit from the increasing prosperity (although in some areas they did quite well). Average wages did not rise much above their pitiful 1903 levels. Conditions at home and in the workplace were just as dreadful as they had always been. As a result, there was a growing number of strikes before the First World War. Workers remained disillusioned with their economic and political progress.

### The downfall of the Tsar

The causes of the revolution in February 1917 are complex. We can identify two broad lines of thought amongst historians. The first suggests that Russia was beginning to make the changes required, that agriculture and industry were making real progress, and that there was some political progress which suggested the Tsar would make some concessions to parliamentary government in the not-so-distant future. Historians who take this line see the First World War as the main reason for the downfall of Tsar Nicholas II.

Other historians accept that progress had been made on the industrial front, but stress that the benefits had not filtered down to the working class who remained discontented and strike-prone in 1914. They maintain that the case for the success of the agricultural reforms has not been proven and point to the continued alienation and antagonism of the peasantry, who wanted more land. They claim that little real progress had been made in the political sphere and that the Tsar remained an entrenched autocrat, reluctant to give up any of his powers. The historians who take this line believe that the regime was unable to adapt to changing conditions and would have fallen even without the impact of the First World War. However, they agree that the war acted as a catalyst for the revolution and accelerated events.



#### Grigory Rasputin

Grigory Yefimovich, born into a Siberian peasant family, gained a reputation as a holy man, or 'starets', and the name Rasputin. It was rumoured that he belonged to the Klysty, a sect that found religious fulfilment and ecstasy through the senses and, in particular, sexual acts. Men and women flogged themselves and, it is said, engaged in sexual orgies as a way of achieving a religious experience. In 1905, Rasputin was introduced into polite society in St Petersburg and became known to the royal family as a holy man. He seemed to have an ability to control the haemophilia which afflicted the Tsar's son, Alexis. Rasputin appeared to be able to stop the bleeding associated with this disease. It is not known how, though he may have had some skill with herbal remedies. However, this convinced the Tsarina that he had been sent by God to save her son and this brought him an elevated position at the Russian court. Women from higher social circles flocked to him to ask for advice and healing or to carry petitions to the Tsar to advance their husbands' careers. There were rumours that Rasputin solicited sexual favours for this help and stories of orgies emerged. However, secret police reports and subsequent investigations seemed to show that his sexual activity – and he was very active – was restricted mainly to actresses and prostitutes rather than society women. His influence at court and his growing reputation for degeneracy caused Nicholas political problems. The Tsar censored newspaper reports about Rasputin heavily, which meant some papers appeared with huge white spaces where they had been removed. He fell out with the Duma over this and Rasputin's influential position at court. But the Tsar, largely because of the urgings of the Tsarina, continued to support Rasputin despite the political damage he was doing the royal family.