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Dedication

Keith Randell (1943–2002)

The Access to History series was conceived and developed by Keith, who created a series to ‘cater for students as they are, not as we might wish them to be’. He leaves a living legacy of a series that for over 20 years has provided a trusted, stimulating and well-loved accompaniment to post-16 study. Our aim with these new editions is to continue to offer students the best possible support for their studies.
Nicholas II’s early rule
1894–1905

The period 1905–14 was a testing time for Imperial Russia. At issue was the question of whether it could become a modern state. In 1905, the tsarist system was shaken by the most open challenge it had yet faced. It survived, but only by making concessions to its opponents. A parliament was granted and political parties were legalised. Whether such concessions weakened or strengthened tsardom is the underlying theme of this chapter, which sees Imperial Russia wrestling with its internal and external enemies. The key areas examined are:

★ Nicholas II: character and policies
★ Economic reform 1893–1903
★ The opponents of tsardom
★ The Russo-Japanese War 1904–5
★ The 1905 Revolution

Key dates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1890s</td>
<td>The great spurt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>Start of Nicholas II’s reign</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894–1906</td>
<td>Sergei Witte’s economic reforms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>Jewish Bund formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1898</td>
<td>Social Democrats (SD) party formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>Social Revolutionaries (SR) party formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1903</td>
<td>SD party split into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904–5</td>
<td>Russo-Japanese War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1904</td>
<td>Union of Liberation formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>Bloody Sunday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>All-Russian Union of Peasants formed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>October Manifesto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>Formation of the Kadets and the Octobrists</td>
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</table>
Nicholas II: character and policies

How did Nicholas II approach the problem of governing Russia?

Nicholas II came to the throne in 1894. It was an irony of history that, at the very time when Russia most needed a tsar of strength and imagination, it was a man of weakness and limited outlook who ruled the nation. Whatever his private virtues (he was, for example, a devoted husband and father), he never showed the statesmanship the times required. There are two main aspects to Nicholas II’s reign:

- the problems he faced as tsar at a particularly critical stage in Russian history
- the growth of opposition in Russia to the tsarist system.

The issue of modernity

The most pressing question facing Russia at the start of Nicholas’s reign was whether Imperial Russia could modernise itself sufficiently to be able to compete with the other European nations. Would the new tsar be a reformer or a reactionary? There was little doubt what the answer would be. The assassination of a progressive tsar, Alexander II, followed by a fierce period of repression under his successor Alexander III, had made it highly unlikely that the new tsar would reverse his predecessor’s policy. Furthermore, Nicholas’s upbringing and education made him suspicious of change. It was no surprise that he continued the repressive policies he had inherited. This further angered the intelligentsia and the critics of the tsarist regime; they began to prepare to challenge tsardom.

Nicholas II’s upbringing: the role of Pobedonostsev

As a young man, Nicholas had been tutored at court by Konstantin Pobedonostsev, a man of great influence in late Imperial Russia. Known as the ‘Grand Inquisitor’ because of his repressive attitudes, Pobedonostsev was an arch-conservative who had a deep distaste for all forms of democracy. He condemned the growth of parliamentary democracy in western Europe as a betrayal of their duty by the political leaders there. He dismissed the idea of representative government as ‘the great lie of our time’. To his mind, autocracy was the only possible government for Imperial Russia. Pobedonostsev personified the obstructions in the way of Russia’s necessary political and social reform. As personal tutor to Alexander III and Nicholas II, he played a major part in shaping the reactionary attitudes of the last two tsars. Nicholas took to heart the lessons he learned from Pobedonostsev.

One of the quirks of the Russian history of this period was that ‘the Reaction’, associated with Alexander III and Pobedonostsev, coincided with a time of remarkable economic expansion. It is this that gives added weight to the
argument that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the tsarist government through its reactionary policies threw away its last chance of survival. At a critical phase, when economic developments seemed to offer Russia the opportunity to modernise, tsardom showed a fatal resistance to change. By restricting itself to a narrow form of nationalism and orthodoxy, the tsarist government blindly denied itself the chance to adapt successfully to a changing world.

**Russification**

A policy of particular note that had begun under Alexander III and which Nicholas II carried on was **Russification**. This was a severely enforced policy of restricting the influence of the non-Russian national minorities by emphasising the superiority of all things Russian. The aim was to impose Russian ways on all the peoples within the empire.

Officials everywhere in the empire now had a vested interest in maintaining the dominance of Russian values at the expense of the other national cultures. Discrimination against non-Russians, which had previously been a hidden feature of Russian public life, became more open and vindictive in the 1890s. The nationalities that suffered most from this were the Baltic Germans, the Poles, the Finns, the Armenians and the Ukrainians. State interference in their education, religion and culture became widespread and systematic.

**Anti-Semitism**

Among the chief victims of Russification were the Jews. Over 600 new measures were introduced, imposing heavy social, political and economic restrictions on the Jewish population. Since the majority of Jews lived in **ghettos**, they were easily identifiable scapegoats who could be blamed for Russia’s difficulties. Anti-Semitism was deeply ingrained in tsarist Russia. **Pogroms** had long disfigured Russian history. A group of ultra-conservative Russian nationalists, known as the ‘Black Hundreds’, were notorious for their attacks on Jews. During the reign of Nicholas II the number of pogroms increased sharply. This was proof of the tsarist regime’s active encouragement of the terrorising of the Jews. But what was equally noticeable was the eagerness with which local communities followed the lead from above in organising the bloodletting.

**The response to Nicholas II’s policies**

The tight controls that Nicholas II tried to impose did not lessen opposition to tsardom. The reverse happened; despite greater police interference, opposition became more organised. A number of political parties, ranging from moderate reformers to violent revolutionaries, came into being. The government’s policies of reaction and Russification produced a situation in which many political and national groups grew increasingly frustrated by the mixture of coercion and incompetence that characterised the tsarist system.
The failings of Russification

As a policy, Russification proved remarkably ill-judged. At a critical stage in Russia’s development, when cohesion and unity were needed, its leaders chose to treat its national minorities, who made up half the population, as inferiors or potential enemies. The persecution of the Jews was especially ill-judged. It alienated the great mass of the 5 million Jews in the Russian population, large numbers of whom fled in desperation to western Europe and North America, carrying with them an abiding hatred of tsardom. Those who could not escape stayed to form a large and disaffected community within the empire. It was no coincidence that the 1890s witnessed a large influx of Jews into the various anti-tsarist movements in Russia. In 1897, Jews formed their own revolutionary ‘Bund’ or union.

Summary diagram: Nicholas II: character and policies

Nicholas II
lacked necessary political skills

Russification

Discrimination against non-Russians

Anti-Semitism

pogroms

Resistance through the Bund

Tsardom’s lost opportunity at a critical stage in its history

Economic reform 1893–1903

What methods did Witte use to develop the Russian economy?

For all the difficulties that Russia faced, the period was one of rapid economic expansion. For a time it seemed that Russia might become a modern industrial nation. This was largely due to the work of two outstanding ministers: Count Sergei Witte, who served during the early part of Nicholas II’s reign, and Peter Stolypin (see pages 46–50). In the face of resistance from the very regime they were trying to serve, Witte and Stolypin sought to modernise Russia.

In the 1890s, Russian industry grew so rapidly that the term the ‘great spurt’ was used to describe the period. A major reason for the exceptional growth
was the increase in the output of coal in Ukraine and of oil in the Caucasus. Economic historians are agreed that, although this sudden acceleration was the result of private enterprise, it was sustained by deliberate government policy. However, the motives of the tsarist government were military rather than economic. It is true that Russia’s capitalists did well out of the great spurt, but it was not the government’s primary intention to help them. Economic expansion attracted the tsar and his ministers because it was a means of improving the strength of the Russian armed forces. A growing industry would produce more and better guns, equipment and ships.

The outstanding individual involved in Russia’s development at this time was Sergei Witte. As Minister of Finance from 1892 to 1903, he set himself the huge task of modernising the Russian economy to a level where it could compete with the advanced nations of the West. To help bring this about, he invited foreign experts and workers to Russia to advise on industrial planning. Engineers and managers from France, Belgium, Britain, Germany and Sweden played a vital role in the great spurt.

Academically gifted and experienced in management, Witte was brought into government in 1892 as minister of finance. He set about modernising Russia’s backward economy. Despite constant criticism from his less talented colleagues, who resented his ability, he achieved a series of major financial and economic reforms that led to the great spurt of the 1890s, which suggested that Russia had the potential to become a modern industrial power. However, after a decade in office, he was dismissed by the tsar, who believed fabricated stories that Witte was implicated in a Jewish conspiracy to undermine the Russian state. Despite this, the tsar recalled him in 1905 to extricate Russia from its war with Japan, a task which Witte accomplished by skilfully negotiating a peace that left Russia militarily defeated but not diplomatically humiliated. Witte showed similar brilliance in drafting the October Manifesto, which enabled the tsar to emerge from the 1905 Revolution with his powers largely intact (see page 39). Witte’s efforts went unappreciated. The Empress Alexandra disliked him, an animosity that was shared among courtiers and government officials. From 1906, Nicholas II dispensed with his services altogether, thus depriving the government of its most capable minister during the final decade of Witte’s life.

Witte’s prickly personality and reluctance to suffer fools gladly meant that he easily made enemies. Yet, he remained Russia’s last best hope. His enlightened economic reforms showed what Russia might have accomplished had he remained in office long enough. In hindsight, there is a strong case for saying that the tsar’s dismissal of Witte, at a critical juncture in Russia’s fortunes, inadvertently threw away the best chance of his dynasty’s survival. Witte’s tragedy, and ultimately tsardom’s, was that he was never trusted by those in charge of the nation he was trying to save.

**KEY TERMS**

**Private enterprise**
Economic activity organised by individuals or companies, not the government.

**Capitalists** Financiers and factory owners.
State capitalism

While not opposed to private enterprise, Witte considered that modernisation could be achieved only through state capitalism. He was impressed by the results of the industrial revolutions in western Europe and the USA, and argued that Russia could successfully modernise by planning along the same lines. He admitted that, given the backwardness of Russia, this presented particular difficulties.

**SOURCE A**


The economic relations of Russia to Western Europe are fully comparable to the relations of colonial countries with their metropolises [mother countries]. The latter consider their colonies as advantageous markets in which they can freely sell the products of their labor and of their industry, and from which they can draw with a powerful hand the raw materials necessary for them. Russia was, and to a certain extent still is, such a hospitable colony for all industrially developed states, generously providing them with the cheap products of her soil and buying dearly the products of their labor. But there is a radical difference between Russia and a colony: Russia is an independent and strong power. She has the right and the strength not to want to be the handmaiden of states which are more developed economically.

Witte judged that, for Russia to avoid remaining ‘the handmaiden’ of the advanced industrial states, its greatest need was to acquire capital for investment in industry. To raise this, he negotiated large loans and investments from abroad, while imposing heavy taxes and high interest rates at home. At the same time as he encouraged the inflow of foreign capital, Witte limited the import of foreign goods. Protective tariffs were set up as a means of safeguarding Russia’s young domestic industries, such as steel production. In 1897, the Russian currency was put on the gold standard. The hope was that this would create financial stability and so encourage international investment in Russia. The aim was largely successful but it penalised the consumers at home since they had to pay the higher prices that traders introduced to keep pace with the increased value of the rouble. Furthermore, prices tended to rise as a result of tariffs making goods scarcer.

**The importance of the railways**

Much of the foreign capital that Witte was successful in raising was directly invested in railways. He believed that the modernisation of the Russian economy ultimately depended on developing an effective railway system. His enthusiasm was an important factor in the extraordinary increase in lines and rolling stock that took place between 1881 and 1913. It would not be an exaggeration to describe this as a transport revolution (see Figure 2.1).
Nicholas II’s early rule 1894–1905

Witte’s special project was the trans-Siberian railway, which was constructed between 1891 and 1902. The line stretched for 6000 km (3750 miles) from Moscow to Vladivostok (see the map on page 3) and was intended to connect the remoter regions of the central and eastern empire with the industrial west, and so encourage the migration of workers to the areas where they were most needed. However, it promised more than it delivered. Sections of it were still incomplete in 1914 and in the event it did not greatly improve east–west migration. The trans-Siberian railway proved more impressive as a symbol of Russian enterprise than as a project of real economic worth.

One of Witte’s main hopes was that the major improvements in transport would boost exports and foreign trade. The trade figures suggest that his hopes were largely fulfilled (see Table 2.1 and Figure 2.2 on page 20).

These figures of increased production are not so impressive when it is remembered that Russia was experiencing a massive growth in population. Production per capita was lower than the overall figures suggested (see Table 2.2). Although total production rose during this period, the average amount produced by each person dropped.

Table 2.1 The Russian economy: annual production (in millions of tonnes)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Coal</th>
<th>Pig iron</th>
<th>Oil</th>
<th>Grain*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>56</td>
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<td>1910</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>4.10</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1916</td>
<td>33.8</td>
<td>3.72</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>64</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

* European Russia only.

Table 2.2 Population of Imperial Russia 1885–1913

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>1885</th>
<th>1897</th>
<th>1913</th>
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<tr>
<td>European Russia</td>
<td>81,725,200</td>
<td>93,442,900</td>
<td>121,780,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasus</td>
<td>7,284,500</td>
<td>9,289,400</td>
<td>12,717,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siberia</td>
<td>4,313,700</td>
<td>5,758,800</td>
<td>9,894,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steppes and Urals</td>
<td>1,588,500</td>
<td>2,465,700</td>
<td>3,929,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central Asia</td>
<td>3,738,600</td>
<td>5,281,000</td>
<td>7,106,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>98,650,500</td>
<td>116,237,800</td>
<td>155,427,200</td>
</tr>
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</table>

KEY TERM

Per capita ‘Per head’, calculated by dividing the amount produced by the number of people in the population.
Nevertheless, Russia was enjoying real economic growth. Figure 2.3 shows how favourably its industrial output compared with other European countries. Again, one has to be cautious in interpreting the data. Given its backwardness, Russia was starting from a much lower level of production. For example, although its 96.8 per cent growth looks to be over twice that of Britain’s, it was playing catch-up and had a long way to go.
Witte’s problems

There is no doubt that Witte’s policies had a major impact on the expansion of the Russian economy. However, what can be questioned is whether the results were wholly beneficial for Russia. Critics have pointed to three drawbacks in his economic reforms:

- Witte made Russia too dependent on foreign loans and investments.
- In giving priority to heavy industry, Witte neglected vital light engineering areas, such as machine tool production, which would have helped to modernise manufacturing.
- Witte paid no attention to Russia’s agricultural needs.

Yet, any criticism of Witte should be balanced by reference to the problems he faced. The demands of the military commanders that their transport and equipment needs should have priority in economic planning too often interfered with his schemes for railway construction and the building of new industrial plant. Moreover, Witte’s freedom of action was restricted by the resistance to change that he met from the court and the government. The main purpose of his economic policies was to make the nation strong and thus protect tsardom against the disruptive forces in Russian society, but he was disliked by the royal court and the government, which seldom gave him the support he needed. In 1903, the tsar forced him to resign as finance minister.

Witte was an abrasive individual who made enemies easily, but in ability he towered above all the other ministers and officials in the government. His tragedy was that despite his great talents, which, if properly recognised, might have led Russia towards peaceful modernisation, he was never fully trusted by the people of the tsarist court and system he was trying to save.

The end of the great spurt by 1900

The improvement of the Russian economy in the 1890s was not simply the result of the work of Witte. It was part of a worldwide industrial boom. However, by the turn of the century, the boom had ended and a serious international trade recession had set in. The consequences for Russia were especially serious. The industrial expansion at the end the century had led to a ballooning of the population of the towns and cities (see Table 2.3 on page 22). This increase had not been organised or supervised; the facilities for accommodating the influx of workers were wholly inadequate. The result was severe overcrowding. Furthermore, when boom turned to recession there was widespread unemployment which increased unrest in the cities and urban areas.

**KEY TERM**

**Trade recession** A fall in the demand for goods, which leads to production being cut back and workers laid off.
Table 2.3 Growth of population in Russia’s two main cities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>St Petersburg</th>
<th>Moscow</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>St Petersburg</th>
<th>Moscow</th>
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<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>928,000</td>
<td>753,500</td>
<td>1900</td>
<td>1,439,600</td>
<td>1,345,000</td>
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<td>1890</td>
<td>1,033,600</td>
<td>1,038,600</td>
<td>1910</td>
<td>1,905,600</td>
<td>1,617,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>1,264,700</td>
<td>1,174,000</td>
<td>1914</td>
<td>2,217,500</td>
<td>1,762,700</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary diagram: Economic reform 1893–1903

Key developments
- Private enterprise
- State capitalism

Helped to create

The great spurt

Factors
- Population growth
- Urban growth
- Witte’s reforms

Witte’s reforms:
- Foreign loans
- Capital investment
- Industrialisation
- Railways

Recession

Worker unrest

3. The opponents of tsardom

What forms did opposition to tsardom take?

Two main groups opposed to tsardom can be identified in Nicholas II’s reign: revolutionaries and reformers (liberals).

Revolutionaries

The revolutionaries comprised three major groups:
- Populists
- Social Revolutionaries (SRs)
- Social Democrats (SDs).
The Populists (Narodniki)

The Populists regarded the future of Russia as being in the hands of the peasants who made up the overwhelming mass of the population. The peasants must take the lead in transforming Russia, beginning with the overthrow of the tsarist system itself.

Populism dated from the 1870s. As with all the significant political movements of this period, the Populist leaders were drawn, not from the peasants, but from the middle and upper classes. These leaders regarded it as their duty to educate the uninformed peasantry into an awareness of its revolutionary role. This involved ‘going to the people’, a policy under which the educated Populists went from the universities into the countryside to live for a period with the peasants in an attempt to turn them into revolutionaries. The policy was seldom a success. The peasants tended to regard the students as airy-fairy thinkers and prattlers who had no knowledge of real life.

In desperation, some Populists turned to terrorism as the only way of achieving their aims. In 1879, a group calling itself ‘The People’s Will’ was founded with the declared intention of murdering members of the ruling class. This movement, which was no more than 400 strong, gained notoriety two years later when it successfully planned the assassination of Alexander II, who was blown to pieces by a bomb. However, this act weakened rather than strengthened the Populist movement. The murder of a tsar who had initiated many reforms seemed to discredit the idea of reform itself and so justified the repression imposed in the wake of the assassination.

The importance of Populism lay in its methods rather than in its ideas. Its concept of a peasant-based revolution was unrealistic; the Russian peasantry were simply not interested in political revolution. What was lasting about Populism was the part it played in establishing a violent anti-tsarist tradition. All the revolutionaries in Russia after 1870 were influenced, if not inspired, by the example of the Populist challenge to tsardom.

The Social Revolutionaries (SRs)

The Social Revolutionary Party grew directly out of the Populist movement. The economic spurt of the 1890s had produced a quickening of interest in political and social issues. Seeing this as an opportunity to gain recruits from the rapidly growing urban workforce, the SRs began to agitate among the workers. The intention was to widen the concept of the ‘people’, so that it encompassed not simply the peasants but all those in society who had reasons for wishing to see the end of tsardom.

An important figure in the reshaping of Populist strategy was Victor Chernov, who played a key part in the formation of the Social Revolutionary Party in 1901 and became its leader. He was a member of the intelligentsia, and sought to provide a firmer base for Populism than its previous passionate but vague ideas.
had produced. However, as with all the revolutionary groups in tsarist Russia, the SRs were weakened by disagreements among themselves. Leon Trotsky, who was later to play a major role as a revolutionary, pointed to this division when he described the SRs as being made up of two competing groups: ‘Left Social Revolutionaries’ and ‘Right Social Revolutionaries’.

In distinguishing between the left and the right elements, Trotsky was referring to the division of the SRs into anarchists and revolutionaries. The Left SRs were the faction who wanted to continue the policy of terrorism inherited from ‘The People’s Will’. The Right SRs were the more moderate element, who, while believing in revolution as their ultimate goal, were prepared to co-operate with other parties in working for an immediate improvement in the conditions of the workers and peasants. Between 1901 and 1905, it was the terrorist faction that dominated. During those years the SRs were responsible for over 2000 political assassinations, including Plehve, the interior minister, and the tsar’s uncle, the Grand Duke Sergei. These were spectacular successes but they did little to bring about the desired link with the urban workers.

The 1905 Revolution, which saw the first serious open challenge to tsardom in Nicholas II’s reign (see page 35), brought more gains to the liberals than to the revolutionaries. One effect of this was that the more moderate Right SRs gained greater influence over party policy. This began to show dividends. From 1906, the SRs experienced a growing support from the professional classes, from the trade unions and from the All-Russian Union of Peasants, which had been set up in 1905. At its first congress in 1906, the SR Party committed itself to revolutionary socialism and gave a special pledge to the peasants that it would end ‘the bourgeois principle of private ownership by returning the land to those who worked it’.

It was their land policy that largely explains why the SRs remained the most popular party with the peasants. However, at the time, the congress decisions brought disruption rather than unity. The left wing protested that the party’s programme ignored the industrial workers, while the right asserted that congress policy was unworkable in current Russian conditions. Chernov tried to hold the factions together, but from 1906 onwards the SRs were a collection of radical groups rather than a united party. Nevertheless, until they were outlawed by the Bolsheviks after the 1917 Revolution (see page 171), the SRs remained the party with the largest popular following in Russia.

The Social Democrats (SDs)

The Social Democrats came into being in 1898; their aim was to achieve revolution in Russia by following the ideas of Karl Marx (1818–83), the German revolutionary, who had advanced the idea that human society operated according to scientific principles. He had asserted that, just as the physical universe was governed by the laws of chemistry and physics, so too, the behaviour of human beings was determined by social laws. These could be
scientifically studied and applied. Marx claimed that the critical determinant of human behaviour was **class struggle**, a process that operated throughout history. He referred to this process as the **dialectic**.

For revolutionaries in the nineteenth century, the most exciting aspect of Marx’s analysis was his conviction that the contemporary industrial era marked the final stage of the dialectical class struggle. Human history was about to reach its culmination in the revolutionary victory of the **proletariat** over the **bourgeoisie**, which would usher in ‘the dictatorship of the proletariat’. This dictatorship would be the last but one stage of history in which the workers, having overthrown the bourgeoisie in revolution and taken power, would hunt down and destroy all the surviving reactionaries. It would be a violent and bloody affair but, once these final class enemies had been obliterated, all conflict would end and the perfect, harmonious society would emerge.

The attraction of Marx for Russian revolutionaries is easy to understand. His ideas had been known in Russia for some time, but what gave them particular relevance was the great spurt of the 1890s. This promised to create the industrial conditions in Russia that would make a successful revolution possible. The previously unfocused hopes for revolution could now be directed on the industrial working class.

The first Marxist revolutionary of note in Russia was **George Plekhanov**. He had translated Marx’s writings into Russian and had worked to promote the idea of proletarian revolution. Despite his pioneering work, and his founding of the SD Party, a number of the members soon became impatient with Plekhanov’s leadership. They found him too theoretical in his approach; they wanted a much more active revolutionary programme. The outstanding spokesman for this viewpoint was Vladimir Ulyanov, better known as Lenin.

**Lenin and Marxism**

By the age of 20, Lenin’s study of Marx’s writings had turned him into a committed Marxist for whom revolution was a way of life. By the age of 30, his dedication to the cause of revolution in Russia had led to arrest, imprisonment and internal exile. Indeed, he was in exile in Siberia when the SD Party was formed in 1898.

Lenin’s greatest single achievement as a revolutionary was to reshape Marxist theory to make it fit Russian conditions. The instrument that he chose for this was the Bolshevik Party. Because the party was the vehicle of historical change, its role was not to win large-scale backing, but to direct the revolution from above, regardless of the scale of popular support. ‘No revolution’, Lenin wrote, ‘ever waits for formal majorities.’ (See page 104 for a full profile of Lenin.)
Lenin’s impact on the SDs

When Lenin returned from exile to western Russia in 1900, he set about turning the SDs into his idea of what a truly revolutionary party must be. With a colleague, Julius Martov, he founded a party newspaper, *Iskra* (*The Spark*), which he used as the chief means of putting his case to the party members. Lenin criticised Plekhanov for being more interested in reform than revolution. He said that under Plekhanov the SDs, instead of transforming the workers into a revolutionary force for the overthrow of capitalism, were following a policy of ‘economism’. Lenin wanted living and working conditions to get worse, not better. In that way the bitterness of the workers would increase, and so drive the Russian proletariat to revolution.

In 1902, Lenin wrote his strongest attack yet on Plekhanov in a pamphlet called, *What Is To Be Done?* In it he berated him for continuing to seek allies among as broad a group of anti-tsarist elements as possible. Lenin insisted that this would lead nowhere. Revolution in Russia was possible only if it was organised and led by a party of dedicated, professional revolutionaries.

For Lenin, revolution was not a haphazard affair; it was a matter of applied science. He regarded the teachings of Karl Marx as having already provided the key to understanding how revolutions operated. It was the task of those select members of the SD Party who understood scientific Marxism to lead the way in Russia. The workers could not be left to themselves; they did not know enough. They had to be directed. It was the historical role of the informed members of the SD Party to provide that direction. Only they could rescue the Russian working class and convert it to true socialism.

The Bolshevik–Menshevik split

The dispute between Lenin and Plekhanov came to a head during the second congress of the SD Party in 1903. Plekhanov tried to avoid confrontation, but Lenin deliberately made an issue of who had the right to belong to the party. His aim was to force members to choose between Plekhanov’s idea of a broad-based party, open to all revolutionaries, and his own concept of a small, tightly knit and exclusive party. The congress that met in a number of different places, including Brussels and London, was a heated affair, which frequently descended into a series of slanging matches over points of procedure. The London police, who had been asked by the Russian authorities to keep an eye on proceedings, tended to find the SDs a comical bunch. Their reports spoke of ‘funny foreign gentlemen’ all speaking at the same time and trying to out-shout each other.

No matter how much the SDs may have amused the London bobbies, they took themselves very seriously. A deep divide developed between Lenin and one of his *Iskra* co-editors, Julius Martov, who shared Plekhanov’s viewpoint about membership. Their quarrel was as much to do with personality as with politics. Martov believed that behind Lenin’s tactics was a fierce determination to become dictator of the party. Martov’s view was supported by Alexander
Potresov, another co-editor of Iskra, who wrote the description of Lenin in Source B.

**SOURCE B**


*Lenin [showed] great cunning and a readiness to do anything to make his opinion prevail. Frequently my colleagues and I felt out of place in our own newspaper office. Lenin divided the world sharply between those who were with him and those who were against him. For him there existed no personal or social relationship outside of the two classes. When the political principle was enunciated that in the fight against the common enemy – the Tsarist government – it was desirable to present a common front by combining with other groups and parties, Lenin accepted it reluctantly and only in theory. In practice, it remained an idle phrase. He could not have acted on that principle even if he had wanted to, because he was incapable of co-operating with other people. It went against his grain.*

In a series of votes, the SD congress showed itself to be evenly divided between Lenin and Martov. However, after a particular set of divisions had gone in his favour, Lenin claimed that he and his supporters were the majority. This led to their being called **Bolsheviks** while Martov’s group became known as **Mensheviks**. Initially, the main point dividing Bolsheviks and Mensheviks was simply one of procedure. However, following the split in 1903 the differences between them hardened into a set of opposed attitudes. These are shown in Figure 2.4.

By 1912, Bolsheviks and Mensheviks had become two distinct, conflicting Marxist parties. Lenin deliberately emphasised the difference between himself and Martov by resigning from the editorial board of *Iskra* and starting his own journal, *Vperyod (Forward)*, as an instrument for Bolshevik attacks on the Mensheviks. A Bolshevik daily paper, *Pravda (The Truth)*, was first published in 1912.

**Lenin and the Bolsheviks before 1917**

An important point to note is that the later success of Bolshevism in the October Revolution has tempted writers to overstate the importance of Lenin in the period before 1917. For example, Trotsky, who joined Lenin in 1917 after having been a Menshevik, argued in his later writings that the Bolsheviks had been systematically preparing the ground for revolution since 1903. But the fact was that during the years 1904–17 Lenin was largely absent from Russia. He lived variously in Finland, France, Switzerland and Austria, and his visits to Russia were rare and fleeting. Although he continued from exile to issue a constant stream of instructions to his followers, he and they played only a minor role in events in Russia before 1917.
Bolshevik tactics

Lenin and his fellow exiles set up training schools for revolutionaries who were then smuggled back into Russia to infiltrate worker organisations such as the trade unions. The Bolsheviks who remained in Russia spent their time trying to raise money for their party. This frequently involved direct terrorism and violence; post offices were favourite targets for Bolshevik attack. In one notorious episode in Tiflis (present-day Tbilisi) in Georgia, a Bolshevik gang bomb-blasted their way into a post office and killed some twenty people before making off with a quarter of a million roubles. The money stolen in such raids was used to finance the printing of masses of handbills, leaflets and newspapers attacking the tsarist regime and calling for revolution.

Yet, the truth was that, despite such activities, Lenin's revolutionaries were regarded by the authorities during this period as merely a fringe group of extremists. Interestingly, the Bolsheviks were not listed by the police as a major challenge to the tsarist system. In the pre-1914 period the numerical strength of the Bolsheviks varied between 5000 and 10,000; even in February 1917 it was no more than 25,000. Before 1917, the Mensheviks invariably outnumbered them. Numbers, of course, are not everything. Determination is arguably more important. Whatever the apparent lack of influence of Lenin's Bolsheviks before 1917, the fact is that when a revolutionary situation developed in 1917 it was they who proved the best prepared to seize the opportunity to take over government (see page 118). The Bolsheviks' readiness was one of Lenin's major political achievements.

**KEY TERM**

'Democratic centralism'

Lenin's notion that democracy in the Bolshevik Party lay in obedience to the authority and instructions of the leaders. In practice, Bolsheviks did what Lenin told them to do.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Menshevik view</th>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>Bolshevik view</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Russia not yet ready for proletarian revolution – the bourgeois stage had to occur first.</td>
<td>Revolution</td>
<td>Bourgeois and proletarian stages could be telescoped into one revolution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A mass organisation with membership open to all revolutionaries.</td>
<td>The party</td>
<td>A tight-knit, exclusive, organisation of professional revolutionaries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open, democratic discussion within the party – decisions arrived at by votes of members.</td>
<td>Decision-making</td>
<td>Authority to be exercised by the central committee of the party – this was described as 'democratic centralism'.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Alliance with all other revolutionary and bourgeois liberal parties.</td>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>• No co-operation with other parties.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Support of trade unions in pursuing better wages and conditions for workers ('economism').</td>
<td></td>
<td>• 'Economism' dismissed as playing into hands of bourgeoisie.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Aimed to turn workers into revolutionaries.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2.4** Main differences between the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks.
Reformers and Liberals

There were a number of reforming groups seeking change. These are usually referred to as liberals but they never came together to form a common front. Until the issuing of the October Manifesto in 1905 (see page 40), political parties had been illegal in Russia. This had not actually prevented their formation, but it had made it very difficult for them to develop as genuinely democratic bodies. There was no tradition of open debate. Since they were denied legal recognition, they often resorted to extreme methods in order to spread their ideas. As a result, during the brief period of their permitted existence from 1905 to 1921, before they were again outlawed, the Russian political parties proved to be suspicious and intolerant of each other. This made co-operation and collective action difficult to organise. Yet, although they were to have a short and inglorious life, the Russian liberal parties should not be ignored. In historical study, losers deserve as much attention as winners.

The economic boom of the 1890s saw the rapid development of a small but ambitious class of industrialists, lawyers and financiers. It was among such social groups that liberal ideas for the modernising of Russia began to take hold. There was also often a strong national element in Russian liberalism. The national minorities viewed the liberal movement as a means of advancing their claim to be independent of Russian imperial control. Three principal liberal parties came to prominence in the pre-1914 period: the Union of Liberation, the Octobrists and the Kadets.

Union of Liberation

The first significant reforming movement to emerge was the Union (also sometimes called League) of Liberation. Its principal leaders were academics Paul Milyukov and Peter Struve. Formed in 1904, the Union drew up a programme which expressed its basic aim.

**SOURCE C**


*The first and foremost aim of the Union of Liberation is the liberation of Russia. Considering political liberty in even its most minimal form completely incompatible with the absolute character of the Russian monarchy, the union will seek before all else the abolition of autocracy and the establishment in Russia of a constitutional regime. In determining the concrete forms in which a constitutional regime can be reduced to Russia, the Union of Liberation will make all efforts to have the political problems resolved in the spirit of extensive democracy. Above all, it recognises as fundamentally essential that the principle of universal equal, secret, and direct elections be made the basis of the political reform.*

**KEY FIGURES**

**Paul Milyukov (1859–1943)**

An outstanding liberal critic of tsardom, he grew increasingly disillusioned with the tsar and doubted that the system he represented could be saved.

**Peter Struve (1870–1944)**

A radical thinker and writer who had first been attracted to Marxism and for a short time was an SD member.

According to Source C, what is the basic aim of the Union of Liberation?
The union tried to bring the various liberal groups together by pointing out where there was common ground between them. Its influence helped to prepare the way for the 1905 Revolution and it continued to operate as a party until 1917. However, the union was unable to create a single coherent reforming movement with a single purpose. The union’s deeper significance was in indicating the range of anti-tsarist feeling that existed and in advancing the arguments and ideas that the more progressive members of the government, such as Witte, took to heart. The union’s programme was expressed in the type of language with which all liberal and reforming parties subsequently asserted their claims.

**The Octobrists**

This group dated from the issuing of the tsar’s manifesto of October 1905, which created the *duma*. The Octobrists were moderates who were basically loyal to the tsar and his government. They believed in the maintenance of the Russian empire and regarded the manifesto and the establishment of the *duma* as major constitutional advances.

The Octobrists were mainly drawn from the larger commercial, industrial and landowning interests. Their leading members were Alexander Guchkov and Mikhail Rodzianko, both of whom were later to take a major part in the Provisional Government of 1917 (see page 99). How relatively restricted the Octobrists were in their aims can be gauged from their programme, issued in November 1905, which called for unity among all those who wanted the ‘rule of law’. It appealed for the continuation of a ‘strong and authoritative regime’ to work with ‘the representatives of the people’ in bringing peace to the country.

The limited aims of the Octobrists led to their being dismissed by revolutionaries as bourgeois reactionaries who were unwilling to challenge the existing system. This was not wholly accurate. In the *dumas*, the Octobrists frequently voiced serious criticisms of the short-sightedness or incompetence of the tsarist government. They may not have wanted the overthrow of tsardom, but they were very willing to point out its failings.

**The Constitutional Democrats (Kadets)**

The Constitutional Democrats also came into being as a party at the time of the 1905 Revolution. The Kadets, the largest of the liberal parties, wanted Russia to develop as a *constitutional monarchy* in which the powers of the tsar would be restricted by a democratically elected constituent (national) assembly. They believed that such a body, representative of the whole of Russia, would be able to settle the nation’s outstanding social, political and economic problems. Lenin dismissed this as bourgeois political naivety, but there is no doubt that the dream of a constituent assembly remained a source of inspiration to Russian reformers in the period before the 1917 Revolution.
The Kadet Party contained progressive landlords, the smaller industrial entrepreneurs and members of the professions. Academics were prominent in it, as typified by its leader, Paul Milyukov, who was a professor of history and had been a founder member of the Union of Liberation. In the *duma*, the Kadets proved to be the most outspoken critics of the tsarist system. They were to play a significant role in the events surrounding the February Revolution in 1917 (see page 86).

**The Kadet Programme**

- An All-Russian Constituent Assembly.
- Full equality and civil rights for all citizens.
- The ending of censorship.
- The abolition of the mortgage repayments on land.
- The recognition of trade unions and the right to strike.
- The introduction of universal, free education.

### Summary diagram: The opponents of tsardom

- **Revolutionaries**
  - Marxists
  - SDs (1898)
  - The People’s Will (1879)
  - SRs (1901)
- **Populists**
- **Liberals**
- **Nationalists**
- **Bolsheviks** (1903)
- **Mensheviks**
- 1905 Revolution
- October Manifesto
- Octobrists (1905)
- Kadets (1905)
The Russo-Japanese War 1904–5

Why did Russia go to war with Japan in 1904?

The foreign policy that Nicholas II inherited and continued was largely determined by the size of the Russian empire. The protection of its many frontiers was a constant preoccupation. In 1904, Nicholas II faced his first major test in foreign affairs when his country went to war with its far-eastern neighbour, Japan. It was a war largely of Russia’s own making. The Russian government had three main motives:

- to pursue an expansionist policy in the Far East, to make up for what it saw as its relative decline in Europe
- to obtain an ice-free port, something for which Russia had yearned for centuries, all its major ports being unusable in the winter months when they froze
- to distract attention from Russia’s domestic troubles by rallying the nation in a patriotic struggle.

In regard to the last motive, it used to be thought that Vyacheslav Plehve, the interior minister, was the main force pushing for war. His words ‘We need a small, victorious war to avert a revolution’ were often quoted. However, research has shown that Plehve was deliberately misrepresented by his political opponent, Witte. We now know that Plehve was reluctant to go to war, whereas Witte, wishing to see Russia expand economically into the Far East, knew full well that this made conflict with Japan a very strong possibility.

The path to war

The Russians looked on Japan as an inferior nation and no match for themselves. They expected an easy victory. Pretexts for war were not hard to find. Territorial disputes between Russia and Japan over Korea and Manchuria were long-standing. In 1904, the Russian government curtly rejected Japanese proposals for the settlement of the two countries’ rival claims to Korea. The Russian hope was that this would provoke a military response from the Japanese. It did: Japan opened hostilities by attacking the Russian fleet in Port Arthur.

The course of the conflict

The war itself soon revealed that Russia had greatly underestimated the strength of Japan. It was not the backward state the Russians had imagined. Under the Emperor Meiji (1869–1914), Japan had embarked upon a series of major reforms aimed at rapid modernisation along Western lines. The Japanese army and navy were far better prepared and equipped than the Russian forces and won a series
of striking victories over them. For Russia, the conflict was a tale of confusion and disaster. After a long siege, Port Arthur fell to Japan in January 1905. The following month, the Japanese exploited their advantage by seizing the key Manchurian town of Mukden.

The final humiliation for Russia came at sea. The Russian Baltic fleet, dispatched to the Far East in 1904, took eight months to reach its destination, only to be blown out of the water immediately on its arrival by the Japanese fleet at Tsushima in May 1905. Such defeats obliged the tsarist government to make peace. In the Treaty of Portsmouth, Russia agreed to withdraw its remaining forces from Manchuria and accepted Japanese control of Korea and Port Arthur.
Russia’s defeat

Russia lost the war not because its troops fought badly, but because its military leaders had not prepared effectively:

- The commanders understood neither the enemy they were fighting nor the territory in which the struggle took place.
- Their unimaginative strategy allowed the Japanese to outmanoeuvre the Russian forces.
- The distance over which men and materials had to be transported from western Russia made it impossible to provide adequate reinforcements and supplies.
- The trans-Siberian railway, still incomplete in a number of sections, proved of little value. Russia’s defeat at the hands of a small, supposedly inferior, Asian country was a national humiliation.

Within Russia, the incompetence of the government, which the war glaringly exposed, excited the social unrest that it had been specifically designed to dampen. Russia’s dismal performance was a potent factor in the increasing tension which eventually led to an open challenge to tsardom – the 1905 Revolution.

Summary diagram: The Russo-Japanese War 1904–5

Causes
- Russian expansionism
- Need for an ice-free port
- To distract from home problems

Course
- Port Arthur fell to Japan in January 1905
- Russian surrender of Mukden, February 1905
- Russian fleet destroyed at Tsushima, May 1905
- Russian surrender

Outcome
- Loss of Manchuria, Korea and Port Arthur to Japan

Reasons for Russian defeat
- Underestimation of Japanese strength
- Inadequate military planning
- Poor strategy
- Japan’s readiness, skill and spirit
The 1905 Revolution

How far was the tsarist government responsible for the 1905 Revolution?

The reasons for the revolution

The situation created by the government’s policy of political repression was graphically described by Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), the world-renowned Russian novelist and philosopher. In 1902, in an ‘Open address to Nicholas II’, he detailed the persecution under which Russia groaned. Prisons were overflowing with convicts innocent of any real crime, the city streets were full of soldiers ready to shoot the people on a whim, and the censors’ power stretched everywhere, denying freedom of religious and political expression. Things were no better in the countryside, where famine was a constant source of peasant misery. Presiding over this grim scene, Tolstoy asserted, was a government that squeezed money from the people through heavy taxation but was incapable of providing leadership. The result was ‘the general dissatisfaction of all classes with the government and their open hostility against it’. Tolstoy’s dispiriting conclusion was that it was ‘impossible to maintain this form of government except by violence’.

The bleak picture which Tolstoy painted did not necessarily mean that confrontation, still less revolution, was unavoidable. After all, if oppression is applied firmly enough it prevents effective challenges to government. What weakened the tsarist regime in the period before 1917 was not its tyranny but its incompetence. It is certainly true that the crisis that occurred in Russia in 1905 was in large measure due to the mishandling of the situation by the tsar and his government. This was shown by the speed with which the government reasserted its authority once it had recovered its nerve.

The year 1905 marked the first time the tsarist government had been faced by a combination of the three main opposition classes in Russia: the industrial workers, the peasantry and the reformist middle class. This was the broad-based revolt that most revolutionaries had been awaiting. Yet, when it came, it was accidental rather than planned. Despite the efforts of the various revolutionary parties to politicise events, the strikes and demonstrations in the pre-1905 period had been the result of economic rather than political factors. They had been a reaction to industrial recession and bad harvests. It was the tsarist regime’s ill-judged policies that turned the disturbances of 1905 into a direct challenge to its own authority.
The course of events

**Bloody Sunday**

The 1905 Revolution began with what has become known as Bloody Sunday. On 22 January, Father Georgi Gapon, an Orthodox priest, attempted to lead a peaceful march of workers and their families to the Winter Palace in St Petersburg. The marchers’ intention was to present a loyal petition to the tsar, begging him to use his royal authority to relieve their desperate conditions. However, the march induced panic in the police forces in the capital. The marchers were fired on and charged by cavalry. There are no precise casualty figures, but estimates suggest that up to 200 marchers may have been killed, with hundreds more being injured. The deaths were depicted by opponents of the tsarist regime as a deliberate massacre of unarmed petitioners. Although Nicholas II was in fact absent from St Petersburg when these events took place, they gravely damaged the traditional image of the tsar as the ‘Little Father’. In the midst of the death and confusion, Gapon had repeatedly cried out: ‘There is no God any longer. There is no Tsar.’

**Disorder spreads**

The immediate reaction to Bloody Sunday in Russia at large was a widespread outbreak of disorder, which increased as the year went on. Strikes occurred in all the major cities and towns. Terrorism against government officials and landlords, much of it organised by the Social Revolutionaries, spread to the countryside. The situation was made worse by Russia’s humiliation in the war against Japan (see page 32). The government was blamed for Russia’s defeat, which led to further outrages, including the assassination of Plehve by SR terrorists. Public buildings in towns and large private estates in the country were attacked. Land and properties were seized by the peasants, who then squatted in the landlords’ houses. An important factor motivating the peasants was the fear that the government was about to repossess the homes of those families who had failed to pay off the mortgages taken out in the post-emancipation years (see page 46).

The unrest and the government’s difficulties in containing it encouraged the non-Russian minorities to assert themselves. Georgia declared itself an independent state, the Poles demanded **autonomy** and the Jews pressed for equal rights. In May, Paul Milyukov, leader of the Union of Liberation, persuaded the majority of the liberal groups to join in forming a ‘Union of Unions’, with the aim of organising a broad-based alliance that would include the peasants and the factory workers. A ‘Union of Unions’ declaration was issued, which referred to the government as ‘a terrible menace’ and called for a constituent assembly to replace ‘the gang of robbers’ now in power. It was from this Union of Unions that the Kadet party, also led by Milyukov, would be formed in 1905 (see page 31).
The summer of 1905 brought the still more disturbing news for the tsarist authorities of mutinies in the army and navy. The rank and file soldiers in the army were peasants who were naturally reluctant to attack their own kind – workers on strike or rebellious peasants in the countryside. There were several instances of troops disobeying orders to shoot unarmed strikers or to use force to drive peasants from the properties they had occupied.

In June there were even worse tidings for the government. The crew of the battleship Prince Potemkin, of the Black Sea naval squadron, mutinied while at sea. The incident began as a protest by the sailors at having to eat rotting food and drink foul water; particular horrors were borsch, and scraps of meat crawling with maggots. The sailors elected a representative, Peter Vakulenchuk, to approach the captain with their complaints. The captain's immediate response was to have the man shot. In retaliation, the crew attacked the officers, killed several of them and then took over the ship. This was a desperate act and could have worked only if the other ships in the squadron had mutinied also.

Yet, by the end of 1905, Gapon had returned to St Petersburg, declaring that he no longer believed in revolution and that he wished to help the government to track down its enemies. This may have been a ruse. Perhaps he intended to infiltrate government circles as an SD spy. The only hard fact is that in March 1906 he was murdered, apparently by Okhrana agents, although even this is unclear.

Modern historians tend to agree that Gapon was naïve politically and became involved in events he never fully grasped. A contemporary was once asked whether Gapon was a supporter of constitutionalism. He replied, 'Support it? He can't even say it.' Whatever Gapon's real intentions may have been, his lack of understanding of political realities made him a fascinating but ultimately powerless participant in the 1905 Revolution.

**KEY TERMS**

**Double-agent**
A government spy who pretends to be working for the opposition against the authorities but who reports plans and secrets back to the authorities.

**Borsch** A thin soup made from rotting beetroot.
But they did not; despite the equally grim conditions in the other ships, the captains managed to maintain control. The crew of the Potemkin was on its own.

Hoping to arouse support on land, the crew sailed to the port of Odessa, where a serious anti-government strike was taking place. The strikers welcomed the crew as heroes and formally honoured the body of Vakulenchuk by laying it on an elevated platform and surrounding it with flowers. It was a defiant gesture of solidarity but it enraged the authorities, who could not tolerate strikers and mutineers making common cause. Troops were ordered to disperse the crowds who had gathered in the harbour at the foot of a deep and wide flight of steps. With bayonets fixed, the soldiers marched resolutely down the steps, trampling on those who fell in front of them and driving hundreds into the sea. The civilian death toll ran into thousands.

The massacre forced the Potemkin to leave Odessa. Since no other ships had sided with them, the sailors decided to cut their losses. They sailed around the Black Sea looking for a safer area to land. Eventually they abandoned the ship in a Romanian port, hoping to find sanctuary for themselves in this remoter part of the Russian empire.
Although the mutiny was restricted to one ship, there was no doubt that the affair was deeply troubling to the Russian authorities. A government that cannot rely on the loyalty of its armed services, particularly in time of war, is in a very vulnerable position. The end of the Russo-Japanese War in August did little to ease the situation. Indeed, Witte feared that the returning troops would join the revolution. If this happened, he said, ‘then everything would collapse’.

**Witte’s role**

Nicholas II had shown his distaste for Sergei Witte years earlier when he had relieved him of his post as finance minister after ten years’ loyal service (see page 17). However, it was to Witte that the tsar now turned in June 1905. Witte’s first task was to negotiate peace terms with the Japanese. With this successfully completed, he then became chairman of the council of ministers, the effective head of the tsar’s government. Yet, Witte remained frustrated by the inability of the tsar and his ministers to understand the crisis Russia was in. He referred to government policy as a ‘mixture of cowardice, blindness and stupidity’. Nevertheless, he remained at his post, driven by a sense of duty to do his best to steer the regime through its difficulties.

**Failure of the August Manifesto**

It was on Witte’s advice that the tsar issued the August Manifesto, an attempt to lessen the tensions by making concessions, the principal one being a promise to create a state assembly of elected representatives of the 51 provinces of the empire, which would begin sitting in January 1906. However, the powers the assembly would have were not clearly defined. Moreover, since the tsar added the clause, ‘We reserve to ourselves exclusively the care of perfecting the organisation of the Assembly’, the clear implication was that he did not intend his royal authority to be restricted in any way. The limited concession the manifesto represented did not work. In September a series of strikes had begun in both St Petersburg and Moscow. Striking workers were joined by striking students, whose activities brought the universities to a standstill and added to the general disorder in the capital.

**Soviets**

By October 1905, the industrial unrest had grown into a general strike. It was in this atmosphere that a development of particular moment occurred. In a number of cities, most notably in St Petersburg and Moscow, workers formed themselves into an elected soviet. The soviets began as organisations to represent the workers’ demands for better conditions, but their potential as bases for political agitation was immediately recognised by revolutionaries. The Menshevik, Leon Trotsky, became chairman of the St Petersburg soviet and organiser of several strikes in the capital.
Government recovery

By October, the tsar was faced by the most united opposition in Romanov history. But, recognising the danger, the regime now began to show the sense of purpose that it had so far lacked. Concession was unavoidable, but, by giving ground, the government intended to divide the opposition forces ranged against it:

- The liberals were the first to be appeased. On Witte’s advice, the tsar issued the October Manifesto in which, going further than he had in the August Manifesto, he accepted the creation of a legislative duma: ‘Our will is that no law can be made without the agreement of the State Duma.’ Since the manifesto, which Witte had written, also contained a promise to introduce a range of civil rights, including freedom of speech, assembly and worship, and the legalising of trade unions, the liberals could claim a remarkable success. Their appetite for reform was satisfied, at least temporarily.

- The peasants were the next to be pacified by an announcement in November that the mortgage repayments which had so troubled them were to be progressively reduced and then abolished altogether. The response was an immediate drop in the number of land-seizures by the peasants and a decline in the general lawlessness in the countryside.

- Having won over the liberals and peasants, the government was now seriously opposed by only one major group – the industrial workers. Here the policy was one not of concession but of suppression. The government felt strong enough to attempt to crush the soviets. Despite the mutinies earlier in the year, the troops who returned from the Far East at the end of the war proved sufficiently loyal to be used against the strikers. After a five-day siege, the headquarters of the St Petersburg soviet were stormed and the ringleaders, including Trotsky, were arrested. The destruction of an uprising in Moscow proved even more violent.

Moscow uprising suppressed

On 7 December, a group of Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and SRs came together in the recently formed Moscow soviet to organise a general strike. Encouraged by their success in this, they then seized a number of key installations, including post offices and railway stations, in an attempt to take over the whole city. However, tsarist regiments, some of whom had recently suppressed the St Petersburg soviet, were rushed to Moscow. There they used heavy artillery to force the insurgents into an increasingly confined area. To avoid being slaughtered, the soviet resisters surrendered on 18 December. Lenin, who had encouraged the uprising but had played no direct part in it, arrived in Moscow just in time to witness the flames of the gutted soviet buildings, set ablaze by government troops. The twelve-day uprising had led to the deaths of over 1000 people.
The significance of the 1905 Revolution

A notable feature of the 1905 Revolution was how minor a part was played by the revolutionaries. Hardly any of them were in St Petersburg or Moscow when it began. Revolution occurred in spite, rather than because, of them. With the exception of Trotsky, none of the SDs made an impact on the course of events. This throws doubt on the notion of 1905 as a revolution.

There is the further fact that in a number of important respects tsardom emerged from the disturbances stronger rather than weaker. Despite its disastrous failure in the war against Japan, which produced protest throughout Russia and united the classes in opposition, the tsarist regime survived 1905 remarkably unscathed. The mutinies in the armed services did not spread and did not continue after the war. Loyal troops returned to destroy the soviets. The readiness of the liberals and the peasants to accept the government’s political and economic bribes indicated that neither of those groups was genuinely ready for revolution.

It is true that the tsar appeared to grant significant concessions in the October Manifesto, but these were expedients rather than real reforms. The duma was not intended to be, nor did it become, a limitation on the tsar’s autocratic powers. This was evident from the Fundamental Laws, which Nicholas II promulgated in April 1906: ‘The Sovereign Emperor possesses the initiative in all legislative matters … The Sovereign Emperor ratifies the laws. No law can come into force without his approval.’

The lesson of the 1905 Revolution

What 1905 showed was that as long as the tsarist government kept its nerve and the army remained loyal, the forces of protest would find it very difficult to mount a serious challenge. The events of 1905 also raised questions about the extent to which the liberals wanted change in Russia. Few of them enjoyed their experience of mixing with the workers during the revolution. They found proletarian coarseness unattractive and were frightened by the primitive forces they had helped to unleash. One middle-class proprietor, who had thrown his house open to the strikers, remarked on the difficulty of sustaining his belief in the goodness of people who abused his hospitality by molesting his daughters, urinating on his carpets and stealing everything they could carry. Peter Struve, who had been a founder member of the Union of Liberation before joining the Kadets in 1905, spoke for all frightened liberals when he said ‘Thank God for the tsar, who has saved us from the people.’

Leon Trotsky reflected that 1905 had failed as a revolution because the protestors were disunited and inexperienced. Furthermore, the liberals had backed out of the revolution and betrayed the workers by leaving them to be crushed by government troops. He concluded that the tsarist system, ‘although with a few broken ribs, had come out of the experience of 1905 alive and strong’. 
Summary diagram: The 1905 Revolution

Reasons for the 1905 Revolution
- Government’s own responsibility
  - Repression  
  - Taxation
  - Incompetent leadership
  - Social unrest
  - Economic recession
  - Bad harvests
  - Peasants’ anger over mortgage repayments
  - Workers’ anger over unemployment and falling wages
  - Russia’s dismal performance against Japan

Events of 1905–6
- Bloody Sunday: role of Gapon
- Strikes in the major cities
- Milyukov led the liberal groups in a ‘Union of Unions’
- Peasants’ seizure of land
- Soviets formed
- Mutinies in the services
- Return of Witte
- Tsar issued October Manifesto

Government recovery
- Liberals placated
- Peasants bought off
- Workers crushed
- Fundamental Laws restated tsar’s absolute power

Significance of 1905
- First broad-based challenge to tsardom, but was it a revolution?

Lessons of 1905
- Russian government unmoved if it kept its nerve. Opposition lacked unity and direction
Chapter summary

Led by a tsar and a government that were reluctant to engage in reform, Russia faced the problem of how to achieve modernity. The answer of tsardom’s leading statesman, Witte, was to shape the economy in such a way that the nation could compete at parity with its European rivals. He encouraged industrial expansion and urged the state to take the lead in this by encouraging foreign investments. His efforts undoubtedly contributed to Russia’s achieving the ‘great spurt’ of the 1890s.

Notwithstanding its economic growth, Russia’s slowness in reforming politically led to the development of opposition from liberals and revolutionaries. While liberals believed that tsardom could be reformed into a constitutional monarchy, revolutionaries were convinced that only by the destruction of tsardom could Russia be modernised. Choosing to go to war with Japan in 1904, the government was shocked by Russia’s defeat, which proved a major factor in the outbreak of the 1905 Revolution when a loose alliance of peasants, industrial workers and liberals joined in resistance and protest. The government recovered its nerve and survived for the time being by satisfying the peasants with the cancelling of their mortgage repayments, placating the liberals by political concessions, and physically suppressing the protesting workers.

Refresher questions

Use these questions to remind yourself of the key material covered in this chapter.

1. Why was it so difficult for Russia to reform itself?
2. What was Russification intended to achieve?
3. What methods did Sergei Witte use to develop the Russian economy?
4. How successful were Witte’s policies?
5. What were the main ideas of the Social Revolutionaries (SRs)?
6. What was the impact of Marxism on the Social Democrats (SDs)?
7. What led to the divide in the SD Party?
8. How strong were the Bolsheviks before 1917?
9. What had encouraged the growth of a liberal movement in tsarist Russia?
10. How sweeping was the Kadet Programme for the reform of tsarist Russia?
11. How critical were the Octobrists of the tsarist system?
12. Why did Russia perform so badly in the Russo-Japanese war?
13. What pattern did the 1905 Revolution follow?
14. Why was the Potemkin mutiny such a serious threat to the tsarist regime?
15. What steps did the government take to deal with the challenge facing it in 1905?
Question practice

ESSAY QUESTIONS

1 ‘The only policy Nicholas II’s government genuinely followed between 1894 and 1904 was one of repression.’ How far do you agree with this statement?

2 How far did Witte succeed in his plans to reform Russian industry in the years 1892–1903?

3 How accurate is it to say that by 1905, Russia’s revolutionary parties had failed to make any real advance towards their goal of undermining tsardom?

4 To what extent was the 1905 Revolution the result of the mistakes made by the tsarist regime?

SOURCE QUESTIONS

1 Why is Source 1 valuable to the historian for an enquiry into the causes of Bloody Sunday in January 1905? Explain your answer, using the source, the information given about it and your own knowledge of the historical context.

2 How much weight do you give the evidence of Source 1 for an enquiry into the attitude of the Petrograd workers towards the tsar in January 1905? Explain your answer, using the source, the information given about it and your own knowledge of the historical context.

SOURCE 1

From a petition intended to be delivered by striking industrial workers to Tsar Nicholas II on Sunday 9 January 1905 (‘Bloody Sunday’), quoted in Lionel Kochan, Russia in Revolution 1890–1918, Granada, 1966, p. 99.

We working men and inhabitants of St Petersburg, our wives and children, and our parents, helpless and aged men and women, have come to You, our ruler, in quest of justice and protection. We have no strength at all, O Sovereign. Our patience is at an end. We are approaching that terrible moment when death is better than continuance of intolerable sufferings.

Our first request was that our employers should discuss with us but this they refused to do. They regarded as illegal our other demands: reduction of the working day to eight hours, the fixing of wage rates in consultation with us, and investigation of our grievances against the factory managements. We have been in bondage [slavery] with the help and co-operation of Your officials. Anyone who dares to speak up in defence of the interests of the working class and ordinary people is jailed or exiled. Is this, O Sovereign, in accordance with the laws of God, by whose grace you reign?