



› Chapter 8: Russia, 1905–41

FOCUS POINTS

This chapter will help you to answer these questions:

- Why did the Tsarist regime collapse in 1917?
- How did the Bolsheviks gain power, and how did they consolidate their rule?
- How did Stalin gain and hold on to power?
- What was the impact of Stalin's economic policies?

8.0 What is this Depth study about?

In 1913, the Russian Empire covered one-sixth of the world's land surface. That year the tsar, Nicholas II, celebrated the 300th anniversary of his family's reign. The Russian monarchy seemed very secure. However, five years later, Russia had been transformed by two revolutions. In 1917, the Provisional Government ruled for a few months, before communists seized power in November. The communist government was led by Vladimir Lenin until his death in 1924, then Joseph Stalin rose to power by 1929.

Despite these dramatic changes, many features of life in Russia remained the same. Society was still mostly rural. Many people in Russia described the economy as 'backward' because it had been left behind by the Industrial Revolution that swept the rest of Europe in the 1800s. Stalin ruled as a dictator, but in the years before 1941, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was modernised, affecting the lives of millions of people.

After such a long period of stability, what caused Russia to have two revolutions in 1917? What were the consequences of these revolutions, and how were people's lives altered as a result?



Figure 8.1: A photograph of Tsar Nicholas II, taken in 1913, when the Romanov family were celebrating 300 years on the Russian throne. Nicholas II became tsar, age 26, after his father, Tsar Alexander III, died in 1894. Nicholas is surrounded by his four daughters, his wife Alexandra (center back) and his only son, Alexei (second from the right).

KEY FIGURE

Nicholas II (1868–1917)

Nicholas II became tsar in 1894 aged 26. He did not feel well prepared for political leadership but he was committed to **autocracy**, believing it was the best form of government for Russia. He was devoted to his wife, Alexandra, and to his children but was easily influenced and took advice from his wife and her favoured advisers. Nicholas believed that he needed to know the business of government in great detail, and often interfered in the work of his ministers. However, he did not really understand the extent of the social, political and economic changes that Russia needed. Nicholas lost the support of his government and his generals after 1915 and was forced to abdicate in March 1917. He and his family were shot by the Bolsheviks in July 1918, at a key point in the Russian Civil War.



KEY TERM

autocracy: a system of government in which one leader, often a monarch, has absolute power

8.1 Why did the Tsarist regime collapse in 1917?

FOCUS POINTS

This topic will help you to answer these questions:

- How well did the Tsarist regime deal with the difficulties of ruling Russia up to 1914?
- How did the tsar survive the 1905 Revolution?
- How far was the tsar weakened by the First World War?
- Why was the revolution of March 1917 successful?

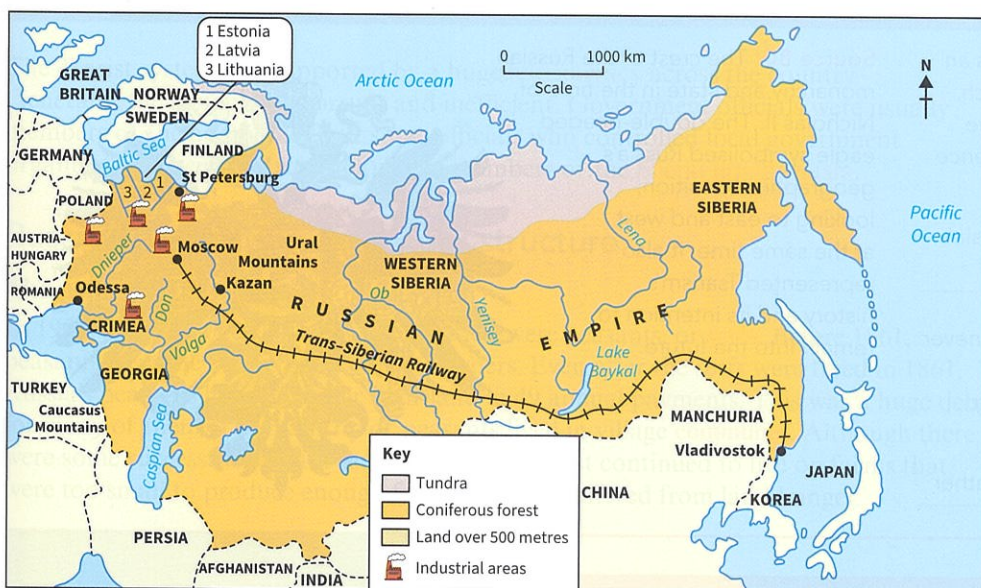


Figure 8.2: A map showing Russia's natural landscape, main cities and industrial centres before 1914

How well did the Tsarist regime deal with the difficulties of ruling Russia up to 1914?

The Russian Empire

In 1914, the Russian Empire appeared strong, but its size slowed communications and its long borders exposed it to attack. Only 44% of Russia's population were ethnic Russians. Most Russians followed the Russian Orthodox Christian faith. The government, based in the capital, St Petersburg, was dominated by Russians, who tried to unite the empire through a process known as **Russification**. These policies were extremely unpopular, and many national minorities wanted greater independence. Persecution of Jewish people was particularly harsh, and the government even encouraged **pogroms**.

KEY TERMS

Russification: the official policy of forcing non-Russians to accept the Russian language and Russian rules in schools and in local government

pogroms: riots or semi-organised violence directed against Jewish people and their property

Tsarist government

Tsar Nicholas II was the head of an outdated system of government. He was the supreme ruler, holding all power and authority. He was a caring family man, but he was not an effective monarch and there was little coordination of policymaking. Unlike many other countries at the time, Russia had no political opposition and no elections, because there was no parliament.

Nicholas often took advice from his wife, Alexandra, in his dedication to maintaining the Tsarist regime. The tsarina was German by birth, and she did not speak Russian fluently. She was so shy that the royal couple avoided hosting social events, and they lacked support from the **aristocracy**, which made up 1.5% of the population but owned 25% of the land and held a lot of power.

KEY TERM

aristocracy: a class of people who hold high social rank

SOURCES 8A, 8B & 8C

The Emperor of all the Russias is an autocratic and unlimited monarch. God commands that his supreme power be obeyed out of conscience as well as fear.

Source 8A: An extract from Russia's Fundamental Laws of Tsarism

I am not prepared to be a tsar. I never wanted to become one. I know nothing of the business of ruling.

Source 8B: A comment from Nicholas II on the death of his father

Source 8C: The crest of the Russian monarchy and state in the time of Nicholas II. The double-headed eagle symbolised Russia's geographical position, looking to east and west at the same time. It also represented Tsarism's history and its intention to remain into the future.



SOURCE ANALYSIS 8.1

Study Sources 8A, 8B and 8C.

- a What does each of the following phrases from Source 8A mean?
 - 'Emperor of all the Russias'
 - 'autocratic and unlimited monarch'
 - 'God commands that his supreme power be obeyed'
 - 'obeyed out of conscience as well as fear'.
- b How might the Fundamental Laws protect Nicholas, even if he was not an effective ruler?
- c Compare and interpret these three sources. What can you learn from them about the reasons why Nicholas II found ruling Russia difficult?

ACTIVITY 8.1

Nicholas II kept a diary in which he detailed his daily activities, as well as his thoughts and feelings. Imagine you are the tsar. Write a diary entry in which you explain how well you feel you are suited to the role. Consider:

- how you think Nicholas II's family life might have affected his ability to rule Russia
- how Nicholas's own personality might have caused difficulties with ruling Russia.

Share some examples of your diary entries as a class and discuss what characteristics come across from them. How might this have set the Russian up for disaster?

The Tsarist system was supported by a huge **bureaucracy** across the country. Generally, the system was corrupt and inefficient. Government officials were usually members of the aristocracy, but some officials who controlled local government organisations (*zemstvo*) were reforming members of the **liberal intelligentsia**.

Russia's population and social structure

The peasantry

In 1900, around 80% of Russia's population were peasants, or **serfs**. Before 1861, peasants were the property of the landowners. Even after the serfs were freed in 1861, Russia's peasants had to pay for their land in 49 annual payments. This was a huge debt for many of them. The majority of peasants lived in village **communes**. Although there were some successful peasant farmers (**kulaks**), most continued to live on farms that were too small to produce enough food, and they suffered from land hunger.

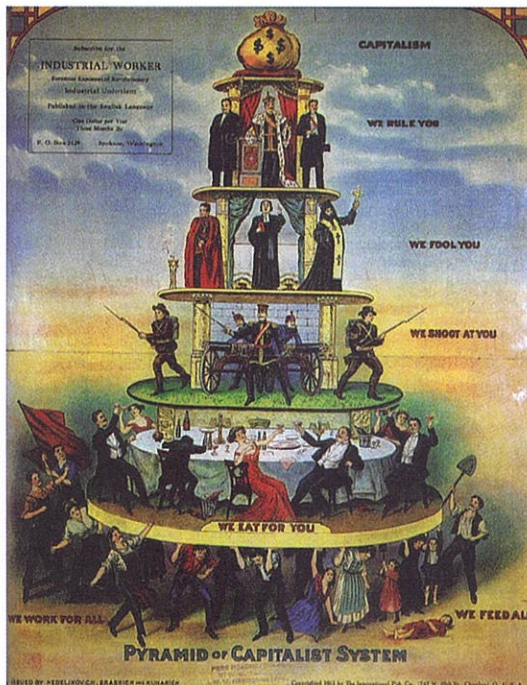


Figure 8.3: A Russian cartoon from 1901 criticising the 'social pyramid'. From the top, the images and labels show: the royal family (we reign over you); the aristocracy (we rule you); the Church (we fool you); the army (we shoot at you); capitalists (we eat for you); workers (we work for you); peasants

KEY TERMS

bureaucracy:

a system for managing a country or organisation operated by a large number of officials who follow the rules very carefully

liberal intelligentsia:

a group of educated people (doctors, lawyers, teachers, writers and other professionals) who were active in political leadership. They became frustrated at the 'backwardness' of tsarism

serfs: peasants who were forced to work for a landowner. Serfdom was common in Europe in the Middle Ages, but Russia's system lasted longer than in most other places

commune: a community of people who live together and share property, resources and labour

kulaks: wealthier peasants (the word 'kulak' means 'fist' or 'tight-fisted': mean with money)

Government control

The government's response to political problems was almost always to repress rather than to reform. Opposition parties were illegal, and political **dissenters** were executed or sent into exile in Siberia or abroad. The government's methods of control were generally very effective.

- The Okhrana was formed to combat anti-government activity. It used techniques such as spying, opening mail, bugging rooms and tapping telephone lines.
- Laws gave police and local governors emergency powers to arrest and imprison suspects, to close down and fine newspapers, to shut down local parliaments, and to control what was published.
- The army was regularly used to control the population, especially the peasantry.
- Since the government lacked a network of state control in many areas, it relied heavily upon the Russian Orthodox Church. The Church used its spiritual authority to teach the Russian people that obedience to the tsar was their duty.

KEY TERM

dissenter: someone who strongly and publicly disagrees with something, especially a political position

FOCUS TASK 8.1

- a In pairs, discuss how the tsar could use each of the four methods described above to keep different kinds of people under control. Make notes of your ideas.
- b In your pairs, copy and complete the following table to summarise the problems Nicholas II faced in ruling Russia before 1905. When you have completed it, join up with another pair and compare your tables. Add any notes to your table that you may have missed out.

	The empire	Tsarism and Nicholas II's style of government	Population	Economy	Opposition to Tsarism
Non-urgent problems					
Urgent problems					

- c Which of Russia's difficulties were unavoidable, which were created by the government, and which were worsened by the Russian government? Draw up three lists with your partner.

THINKING SKILLS

Imagine you are Sergei Witte, head of the tsar's Committee of Ministers, in 1904. Using the table of problems you created in Focus task 8.1, what would you advise Nicholas II was the most serious problem? Write the tsar a letter, asking for a meeting to discuss this problem and explaining to him why it deserves his attention.