

important issues and developments. In another sense, it presents a problem in that it tends to lead to the assumption that the significance of pre-1917 Russian history can be measured only by reference to the Revolution. This can create an historical imbalance. To avoid this, it is best to think of chapters 1–4 (describing and analysing the developments between 1881 and 1917) as dealing with a topic that is important in its own right. The causal connections between events before and after 1917 are introduced in chapters 5 and 6; it is soon enough to think of the Revolution then.

If you are using this book purely as a means of studying the 1917 Revolution, chapters 5 and 6 onwards should provide an adequate introduction and treatment, but, since the war played such a critical role in preparing Russia for revolution, it would be safer to take your study back at least to 1914.

Economic developments are of central importance in the history of all countries, but they have a particular significance in Russian history. It was the economic situation which prepared the ground for the Revolution in 1917 and it was economic needs that determined the character of the Bolshevik regime that replaced tsardom after 1917. The student wishing to gain a sure grasp of economic trends in this period is advised to pay special attention to chapters 2, 3 and 8. Chapter 2 also introduces the reader to the main features of tsarist Russia and would make useful reading even for those intending to begin their studies with the Revolution itself.

Examiners are becoming increasingly interested in the period of the Bolshevik consolidation of power. A great deal of controversy revolves round the question of whether the later tyranny of Stalinism was prefigured in the system already established by Lenin's government before 1924. Chapters 7 and 8 will introduce the main developments and arguments relating to this theme.

At all levels of historical study considerable attention is now being directed towards an understanding of historiography – the writing and interpretation of history. The period of Russian history covered by this book is an extremely rich area for historiographical analysis. Chapters 1 and 9, in particular, offer a number of helpful pointers towards this aspect of the study of history.

Imperial Russia

1 Introduction

In appearance, Russia in 1881 was a great empire. It covered over eight million square miles, an area equivalent to two and a half times the size of the USA. At its widest points, from west to east, it stretched for 5000 miles; at its longest points, north to south, it measured 2000 miles. It covered a large part of two continents. European Russia extended eastward from the borders of Poland to the Urals mountain range. Asiatic Russia extended eastward from the Urals to the Pacific Ocean. The greater part of the population, which quadrupled from 40 million to 165 million between 1815 and 1914, was concentrated in European Russia. It was in that part of the empire that the major historical developments had occurred and it was there that Russia's principal cities, Moscow and St Petersburg, the capital, were situated.

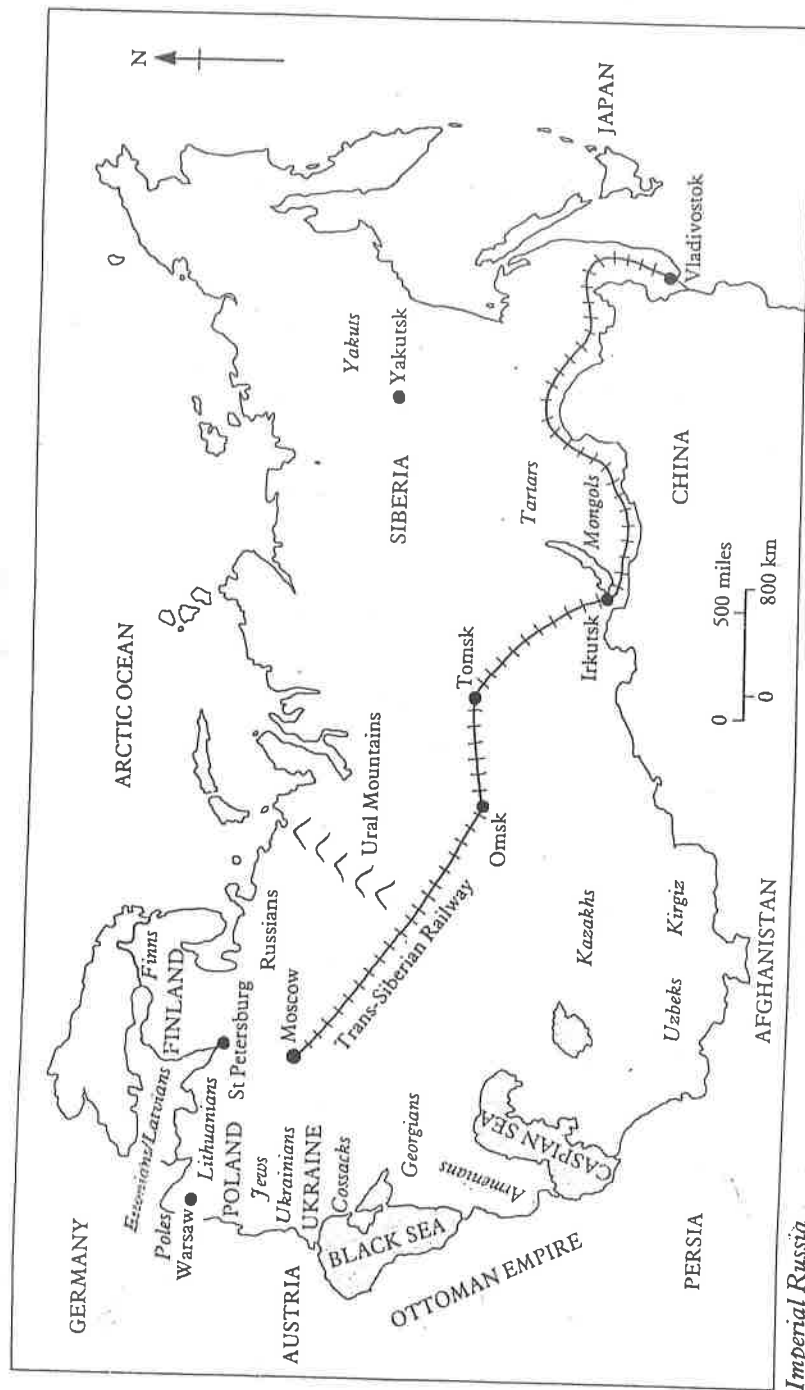
The sheer size of the Russian Empire tended to give an impression of great strength. This was misleading. The population contained a wide variety of peoples of different race, language, religion and culture. The difficulty of controlling and maintaining such a disparate number of peoples over such a vast territory had long been a major problem for Russian governments.

The major nationalities of the Russian Empire according to the census of 1897 (in millions, defined according to mother tongue)

Great Russian	55.6	Lithuanian	1.2
Ukrainian	22.4	Armenian	1.2
Polish	7.9	Romanian/Moldavian	1.1
White Russian	5.8	Estonian	1.0
Jewish (defined by faith)	5.0	Mordvinian	1.0
Kirgiz/Kaisats	4.0	Georgian	0.8
Tartar	3.4	Tadzhik	0.3
Finnish	3.1	Turkmenian	0.3
German	1.8	Greek	0.2
Latvian	1.4	Bulgarian	0.2
Bashkir	1.3		

2 The Tsarist Government

The peoples of the Russian Empire were governed by one person, the tsar (emperor). Since 1613 the Russian tsars had been members of the Romanov dynasty. By law and tradition, the tsar was the absolute ruler. Article I of the 'Fundamental Laws of the Empire', issued by Nicholas I in 1832, declared:



The Emperor of all the Russias is an autocratic and unlimited monarch; God himself ordains that all must bow to his supreme power, not only out of fear but also out of conscience.

There were three official bodies through which the tsar exercised his authority: the Imperial Council – a group of honorary advisers directly responsible to the tsar; the Cabinet of Ministers – concerned with the running of the various government departments; and the Senate – concerned with supervising the operation of the law. These bodies were much less powerful than their titles suggest. They were appointed, not elected, and their role was wholly advisory or administrative. In no way did they restrict the power of the tsar, whose word was the final authority in all matters of state and of law.

That the notion of an absolute, divinely-appointed monarch still prevailed in Russia in the late nineteenth century is a clear indication of how politically backward the country was in relation to the other major powers of Europe. It is true that many other states were monarchies (for example, Germany, Britain and Austria-Hungary), but in each of them there had been significant moves towards parliamentary or representative government. Although she had been frequently and closely involved in European diplomatic and military affairs, Russia had remained outside the mainstream of European political thought. Progressive tsars such as Peter I (1683–1725), Catherine II (1762–96) and Alexander II (1855–81) had taken bold steps to modernise the country, but their reforms had not included the extension of political rights or freedoms. In Russia in 1881 it was still a criminal offence to oppose the tsar or his government. There was no parliament, and political parties were not officially tolerated. State censorship was imposed on the press and on published books. Although this did not prevent liberal ideas from seeping into Russia, it did mean that they could not be openly advocated. The result was that supporters of reform or change had to go underground. In the nineteenth century there had grown up in Russia a wide variety of secret societies dedicated to political reform or revolution. But these groups were frequently infiltrated by agents of the *Okhrana*, the tsar's secret police. As a result, raids, arrests, imprisonment and general harassment were regular occurrences.

* Among Russia's governing classes there was a deeply ingrained prejudice against granting rights to the mass of the people. Over four-fifths of the population were peasants. They were predominantly illiterate and uneducated. Their sheer size as a social class and their uncivilised ways led to their being regarded with a mixture of fear and contempt by the small, educated, governing elite. The idea of the fundamental irresponsibility of the 'dark masses' who could be held in check only by severe repression was expressed by Alexandra, the wife of the last tsar, Nicholas II (1894–1917): 'Russia needs and loves the feel of the whip.' The denial of free expression tended to drive political

activists towards extremism. The outstanding example of this was the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 by a terrorist group known as 'The People's Will' (see page 37). In a society in which state oppression viewed with revolutionary terrorism, moderate opinion could make little headway. There was no middle ground on which a tradition of ordered political debate could develop.

3 The Russian Orthodox Church

The tsars were fully supported in their claims to autocracy by one of the great pillars of the Russian system, the Orthodox Church. This was a branch of Christianity which since the fifteenth century had been entirely independent of any outside authority such as the papacy. Its detachment from foreign influence had given it an essentially Russian character. The beauty of its liturgy and music had long been an outstanding expression of Russian culture. However, by the late nineteenth century it had become an essentially conservative body, opposed to political change and wholly committed to the preservation of the tsarist system in its reactionary form. The Church did contain some priests who strongly sympathised with the political revolutionaries, but as an institution it used its spiritual authority to teach the Russian people that it was their duty to be totally obedient to the tsar as God's anointed. The catechism of the Church (the primer used for instructing the people in the essential points of the faith) included the statement that 'God commands us to love and obey from the inmost recesses of our heart every authority, and particularly the tsar'.

4 The Social and Economic Structure of Tsarist Russia

a) Social Classes

An impression of the social structure of Russia in the nineteenth century can be gained from the following figures from the 1897 census, showing the distribution of the population, defined by class.

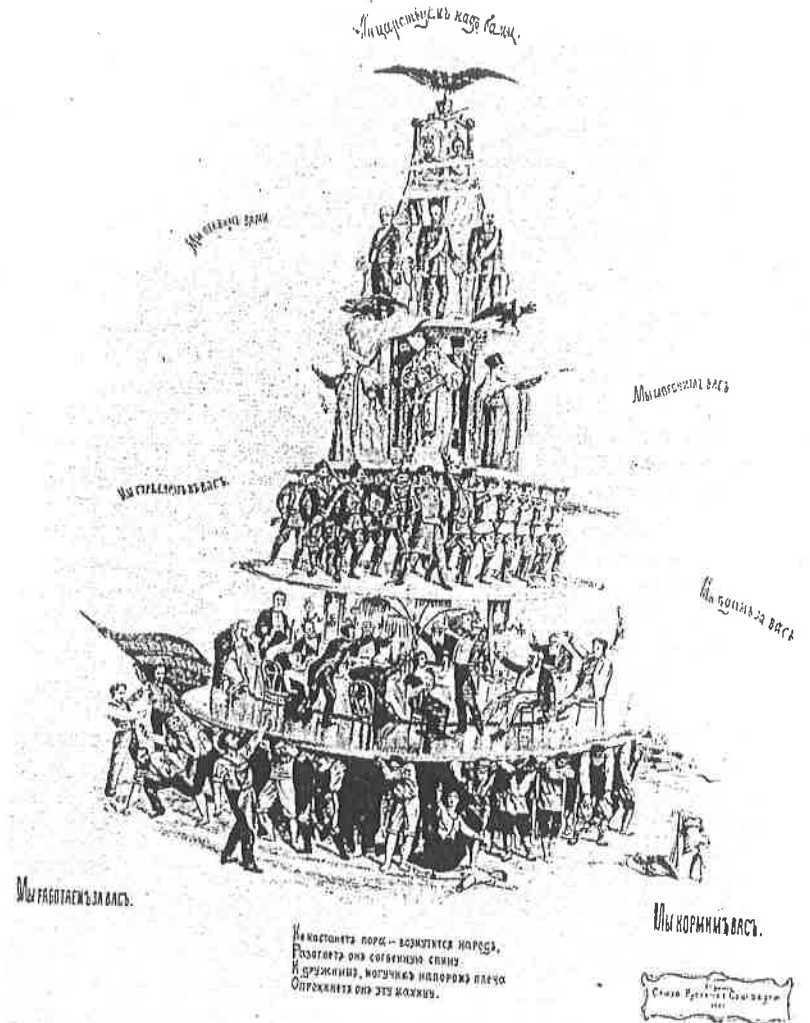
Ruling class (tsar, court, and government)	0.5%
Upper class (nobility, higher clergy, military officers)	12.0%
Commercial class (merchants, factory owners, financiers)	1.5%
Working class (factory workers and small traders)	4.0%
Peasants (land dwellers and agricultural workers)	82.0%

The outstanding features of this structure were the comparatively small commercial, professional and working classes and the huge preponderance of peasants in the population. Until 1861, half of the peasantry had only serf status; that is to say, they were the legal property of the landowners who made up the Russian nobility. The other half of the peasantry were only marginally freer than the serfs. They were

Go through what Serfdom meant

discuss potentially volatile social environment

The Russian caption for each layer of the pyramid means, in descending order: *We rule you!*; *We persecute you!*; *We shoot you!* and *We exploit you!*



The social pyramid in imperial Russia – a socialist cartoon of 1900

referred to as state peasants, a term which indicated that, although they were not the possession of an individual landowner, they were technically the property of the state and were, therefore, subject to the authority of government agents and officials in the countryside. In 1861, in an attempt to produce greater stability and security in the rural areas, Tsar Alexander II had issued an Emancipation Decree abolishing serfdom.

b) Industry

The striking disproportion between the size of the urban professional and working classes and that of the rural peasants illustrated a critical aspect of imperial Russia; namely, her lack of economic development. The low numbers of urban workers indicated that Russia had not experienced the major industrial expansion that had occurred in the nineteenth century in such countries as Germany, Britain and the USA. This is not to say that Russia was entirely without industry. The Urals region produced considerable amounts of iron and the chief western cities, Moscow and St Petersburg, had extensive textile factories. Most villages had a smelting-works, and most peasant homes engaged in some form of cottage-industry, producing wooden, flaxen or woollen goods to supplement their income from farming. However, these activities were all relatively small-scale. The sheer size of Russia and her undeveloped system of roads and railways had proved an important limitation on industrial growth. An additional restriction had been the absence of an effective banking system. Russia did not have access to the readily-available capital for investment in industry that had stimulated developments in other countries. These factors had discouraged the rise of an entrepreneurial spirit, that dynamic, expansionist attitude that characterised western capitalism in this period.

c) Agriculture and the Peasantry

The lack of industrial enterprise in Russia was not compensated for by an efficient, productive system of agriculture. Even though four-fifths of the population were peasants, a thriving agrarian economy had not arisen. Indeed, the land in Russia was a source of national weakness rather than strength. The empire's vast acres were not all good farming country. Much of Russia lay too far north to enjoy a climate or a soil conducive to crop-growing or cattle-grazing. Land suitable for arable farming was restricted mainly to the Black Earth region, the area of European Russia stretching from the Ukraine in the west to Kazakhstan in the east. In addition, the size of the peasant population created its own problems. There was simply not enough land to go round. The peasants were entitled to buy land under the terms of the Emancipation Decree of 1861, but they invariably found its price excessively high.

This was caused both by a scarcity of suitable farming territory and by the government's taxation of property sales, imposed in order to raise the revenue needed to compensate the landowners for the losses caused by emancipation. The only way the peasants could raise the money to buy land was by borrowing from a special fund provided by the government. Consequently, those peasants who did manage to purchase property found themselves burdened with large mortgage repayments which would take them and their families generations to repay.

The high cost of land meant that few peasant families could afford to buy more than a few acres. The small areas that were purchased were normally subdivided into narrow strips in an attempt to provide each household within the family with some property, no matter how little. The result was greater inefficiency. The strip system, involving the use of antiquated farming implements and techniques, had long ago been abandoned in the agriculturally advanced nations. Its continuation in Russia was a major cause of her relative incapacity as a food-producing nation.

The existence in the second half of the nineteenth century of a largely illiterate peasantry, deeply conservative and resistant to change, and for the most part living in conditions of extreme poverty, was a testament to the social, political and economic backwardness of imperial Russia. Various attempts to educate the peasants had been made in the past, but such efforts had been undermined by the fear among the ruling class that any improvement in the conditions of the 'dark masses' might threaten its own privileges. It was commonplace for officials in Russia to speak of the 'safe ignorance' of the uneducated population, implying that any attempt to raise the educational standards of the masses would prove both socially and politically dangerous.

5 The Army

One method of keeping the peasant masses in check was to conscript numbers of them into the Russian armed services. The lower ranks of the army and navy were largely filled by enforced enlistment. As well as maintaining recruitment, conscription was frequently used as a form of punishment for law-breakers. The dread of conscription among ordinary Russians derived from their awareness that life in the army was invariably a brutalising experience. The Russian army was notorious in Europe for the severity of its discipline and the grimness of the conditions in which its soldiers lived. Special military camps had been set up in the remoter, more inhospitable regions of the empire which operated as penal colonies rather than as training establishments. It has been calculated that the rigours of service life had accounted for the deaths of over one million soldiers in peacetime during the reign of Nicholas I (1825-55). Throughout the nineteenth century the imperial Russian army maintained a strength of around one and a half million