Famine-stricken villagers who have left their homes on the way to St Petersburg during the famine of 1891-2 (artist's impression).

Reform and the abolition of serfdom

Sergei Witte: 'Your Majesty has 130 million subjects. Of them, barely more than half live, the rest vegetate.'

The first step towards rapid industrialisation was for serfdom (enforced labour) to be abolished. This medieval institution was no longer valid in a nation looking to modernise and had long been an inefficient system, hindering large-scale production and preventing a potential labour force from moving to industrialised areas. The new tsar, Alexander II (1855-1881), had not only inherited the economic problems of the Crimean War, but also the fallout from several peasant rebellions; this arguably left him with a responsibility, and an opportunity, to reform Russia.

In 1861 the Edict of Emancipation was presented by Alexander II. The Edict vowed to eliminate serfdom, modernise Russian agriculture and transform Russian society. More than one-half of the peasant population, or 40 million crown and private peasants, were liberated. According to the Edict, peasants were granted their own homes and patches of land, purchased by the government and redeemed by the peasants in payments over forty-nine years or paid off in service to the landlord. Peasants were forced to accept the land granted to them and immediately became responsible for the redemption payments (taxes). Instead of the peasants being indebted to landlords, they were now obliged to the mir or village commune, which had the power to redistribute land and act in the collective interests of all peasants in the village. The mir took responsibility for the collection of taxes and dues, as well as land cultivation. Peasants were now free to marry and own land in a collective with the mir. Peasants were no longer able to be bought or sold.

Despite these significant reforms, peasant hopes remained largely unfulfilled. Most were still bound to a particular plot of land, requiring

DID YOU KNOW?

In Leo Tolstoy's novel Anna Karenina, two characters of noble birth are discussing self-interest. One says to the other: 'It was not self-interest that induced us to work for the emancipation of the serfs, but we did work for it.' The other replies: 'The emancipation of the serfs was a different matter. There self-interest did come in. We longed to throw off that yoke [harness] that crushed all decent people alike.'
permission from the Land Assembly to leave their mir. Inefficient and outdated farming techniques also continued during this time, relying on a three field system, rather than modern processes of crop rotation and artificial fertilisation, making farming a burdensome, rather than profitable, activity. Harsh climate, poor harvests, population increases and disease had a devastating impact on the peasant population in 1881-82. Seventeen provinces were plunged into famine by the autumn of 1881, followed by a devastating outbreak of cholera and typhus, killing half-a-million people by the end of 1892. The ineffective political response to the crisis exacerbated the situation. Rumours surfaced that the bureaucracy was witholding food deliveries until 'statistical proof' was given to show that people could not feed themselves. A general ill-feeling towards the regime began to sweep across the affected provinces.

Russian peasants in front of their home. Ca. 1890s.

Further reform

Nikolai Tolstoy: 'Autocracy is a superannuated form of government that may suit the needs of a Central African tribe, but not those of the Russian people, who are increasingly assimilating the culture of the rest of the world.'

Other reforms followed in this period. Elected local bodies, zemstvos, were established, leading many to hope for a nationally-elected duma, parliament, to follow. Zemstvos were largely conservative organisations with limited power. These organisations were responsible for local reform, with the aim of joining local peasants and former landlords in productive working relationships. Under these groups primary schools were established, along with improvements in health, agricultural science and public works.

Reforms to the legal system occurred during the reign of Alexander II, including the introduction of equality for all under the law, public trial by jury and the right to a defence lawyer. However, some traces of corruption
still existed within the judicial system, with government officials tried under different rules and courts than peasants. Alexander II relaxed censorship laws and reformed the education system, resulting in secondary education being available to a wider demographic, a luxury previously restricted only to the nobility. Attempts were also made to restore the independence of universities. In 1874 the army was reorganised, reducing military service from twenty-five years to six, modernising training methods and doing away with brutal discipline practices. Alexander's reforms, while raising hope in the general populace, did little to quell discontent. The changes preserved the tradition of a privileged official class and thus strengthened the basis of revolutionary thought.

A

ACTIVITY 6

DOCUMENT:

Extract from The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia Manifesto of February 1861.

By the Grace of God WE, Alexander II, Emperor and Autocrat of All Russia, King of Poland, Grand Duke of Finland, etc., make known to all OUR faithful subjects...

...On the basis of the above-mentioned new arrangements, the serfs will receive in time the full rights of free rural inhabitants.

The nobles, while retaining their property rights to all the lands belonging to them, grant the peasants perpetual use of their household plots in return for a specified obligation... While enjoying these land allotments, the peasants are obliged, in return, to fulfil obligations to the noblemen fixed by the same arrangements. In this status, which is temporary, the peasants are temporarily bound.

At the same time, they are granted the right to purchase their household plots, and, with the consent of the nobles, they may acquire in full ownership the arable lands and other properties which are allotted them for permanent use. Following such acquisition of full ownership of land, the peasants will be freed from their obligations to the nobles for the land thus purchased and will become free peasant landowners.

A special decree dealing with household serfs will establish a temporary status for them, adapted to their occupations and their needs. At the end of two years from the day of the promulgation of this decree, they shall receive full freedom and some temporary benefits...

...Given at St. Petersburg, March 3, the year of Grace 1861, and the seventh of OUR reign. Alexander II.18

Document Analysis

Read the extract from The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia Manifesto.

1 Identify the liberties granted to serfs.

2 Identify the powers retained by nobles.

3 Using this book and at least TWO other sources, explain the extent to which the The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia Manifesto altered the position of the peasants in Imperial Russia.

One revolutionary group that emerged during this period was the Populists, or Narodniki. Members of the group infiltrated the general society with the aim of educating the masses. Populists believed that peasants and (to a lesser extent) industrial workers were already socialist by nature due to their communal lifestyle and felt that revolution could be achieved through education. This approach failed in the 1870s, prompting many Populists to turn to terror and assassination. It was out of this group that the revolutionary movement called the People’s Will (Narodnaya Volya) emerged.

**Terrorism**

Founded in 1879, the People’s Will adopted terror as a weapon against the tsarist state. The group advocated the death of the tsar and government officials. In 1881 the group succeeded in assassinating Tsar Alexander II. Rather than forcing the end of autocracy, the assassination resulted in the extension of autocratic repression in a period known as ‘The Reaction’. Alexander III reacted with a firm hand, crushing virtually all political opposition through the use of his secret police, the Okhrana. Leaders of the People’s Will were immediately executed, followers arrested and a strict regime of repression and censorship followed. Not only did Alexander III rely on the Okhrana for protection – he exiled his opponents to Siberia.

**‘Russification’ and the treatment of minorities**

Russia was truly a multicultural and multilingual empire and to a certain extent different ethnic groups were left to their own devices on a day-to-day basis, provided they conformed to the laws of the state. Tsarist authorities, however, were concerned about the potential of different ethnic and nationalistic groups to destabilise Russia. Of particular concern was the fact that the Russian nationality accounted for less than half the total population and was the slowest growing ethnicity in the Empire.

To combat this problem Tsar Alexander III embarked upon a program of ‘Russification’ in the 1890s, a process conceived in the 1770s as a way of ensuring allegiance to the Russian state. Later the program tried to turn all peoples of the Russian Empire into ‘Great Russians’, sharing language and culture, a process Alexander believed would enable Russia to modernise.

However, partly because of the influence of nationalist movements in Europe throughout the nineteenth century, most people identified as Poles, Jews, Lithuanians and so on, rather than as members of the Russian Empire. Despite the efforts of the central authorities, the idea of ‘Russian-ness’ was difficult to impose, as shown by the observations below:

The peasants speak the Little Russian dialect; a small group...now professes a Ukrainian identity distinct from that of the Great Russians. Were one to ask an average peasant in the Ukraine his nationality, he would answer that he is Greek Orthodox; if pressed to say whether he is a Great Russian, a Pole, or a Ukrainian, he would probably reply that he is a peasant; and if one insisted on knowing what language he spoke he would say that he talked the ‘local tongue’ One might perhaps get him to call himself by a proper national name and say that he is ‘russki’ [Russian], but this declaration would hardly
‘Stop your cruel oppression of the Jews’ by Emil Flohri, 1904.

This print shows an aged man labelled ‘Russian Jew’ carrying a large bundle labelled ‘Oppression’ on his back; hanging from the bundle are weights labelled ‘Autocracy’, ‘Robbery’, ‘Cruelty’, ‘Assassination’, ‘Deception’ and ‘Murder.’ In the background, on the right, a Jewish community burns, and in the upper left corner, Theodore Roosevelt speaks to the Emperor of Russia, Nicholas II, ‘Now that you have peace without, why not remove his burden and have peace within your borders?’

prejudge the question of a Ukrainian relationship; he simply does not think of nationality in terms familiar to the intelligentsia. Again, if one tried to find out to what state he desires to belong – whether he wanted to be ruled by an All-Russian or a separate Ukrainian Government – one would find that in his opinion all governments alike are a nuisance, and that it would be best if the ‘Christian peasant-folk’ were left to themselves.*

The key player in the Russification policy was Konstantin Pobedonostsev, chief minister from 1881 to 1905 and also Ober-Procurator of the Holy Synod, the highest position of supervision in the Russian Orthodox Church. A thoroughly conservative man, Pobedonostsev was a staunch advocate for autocracy and opposed any form of democratic or liberal reform. In many ways Pobedonostsev, being chief advisor to three tsars, directly prevented Imperial Russia from pursuing modernisation and reform.

Ultimately, the Russification program led to the persecution and alienation of many ethnic minorities, with many national groups, such as Poles, Lithuanians and Ukrainians, responding to the program by resorting to extreme and revolutionary actions. Russian nationalist groups also emerged during the imperial period, with the propaganda of the Union of Russian People, a monarchist organisation supporting the restoration of monarchy and the persecution of Jews, paving the way for more violent action through organisations such as the Union of Russian Men and the Black Hundred gangs. In 1905 and 1906 these groups, fuelled by rampant anti-Semitism, staged pogroms (violent killings) of non-Russians in major cities. While some theorists have argued that these vigilante-style groups acted with the tacit endorsement of the tsarist government, it is now widely believed that they acted independently.

*DID YOU KNOW? Pobedonostsev said to Tsar Alexander III, ‘The day may come when flatterers will try to persuade you that, if only Russia were to be granted a “constitution” on the Western model, all problems would vanish and the government could carry on in peace. This is a lie, and God forbid that a true Russian shall see the day when it becomes an accomplished fact.’

19 Cited in Marc Kevl, Political Ideas and Institutions in Imperial Russia (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994).
ACTIVITY 7

Summary

Write a paragraph explaining the impact of such a diverse population on the Russian Empire. Ensure you consider social, political, economic and cultural impacts. Use evidence from the map and additional written evidence to support your answer.

Marxism in Imperial Russia

Karl Marx: 'The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win. WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE!'

In the late nineteenth century many revolutionary groups began to emerge. Led by liberal nobles and a small, but growing, middle class, these groups viewed revolution as the only way forward for Russia. Two German authors, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, came to prominence in 1848 with their work entitled The Communist Manifesto. Drawing on a study of the working people of Britain to explain the sequence of human history, the work outlined a new ideology (later called Marxism) exploring the notion of history as a series of class struggles that would inevitably lead to the demise of capitalism and the rise of communism.

The Communist Manifesto advocated a scientific study of human society. The authors asserted that history was made up of a series of struggles between those with political power and those without. Depending on the situation, the type of struggle might change, but the ongoing conflict, the dialectic, continued. Marx and Engels argued that the final stage of the class struggle would be the industrial era. This emboldened revolutionaries in the late nineteenth century, who believed the proletariat (industrial working class) would come to challenge, and eventually overcome, the bourgeoisie (those who owned the means of production, i.e. the capitalists).

Those who supported the Marxist view were joined by other political groups who had emerged in opposition to tsarism. Groups such as the liberals and the Populists rose in prominence during the 1890s, along with smaller, more extreme groups (See Chapter 2). Supporters of Nihilism, such as students, revolutionaries and writers, resorted to terrorism during this period in an attempt to destroy the imperial regime. Splinter groups also emerged, such as the People's Will and the Union of Liberation, with the leaders living lives of secrecy to avoid exile to Siberia. Many of these groups and their ideas were to form the basis for the anti-tsarist political groups of the early twentieth century.
[The bourgeois is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society... The essential conditions for the existence... of the bourgeois class is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage-labour. Wage-labour rests exclusively on competition between the labourers. The advance of industry... replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition... The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie therefore produces, above all, are its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable.]

ACTIVITY 8
Research Task
Using this book and at least THREE other sources, explain the effect of The Communist Manifesto on Russia in the late nineteenth century. Structure your response in three or four separate paragraphs, with each paragraph addressing a different school of historiographical thought.

ACTIVITY 9
Summary
In 500 words, explain the concept of Marxism as you understand it.

ACTIVITY 10
Analysis
In 500 words, discuss how geography, demography and social tensions contributed to a revolutionary situation in Russia before 1904.

Modernisation and industrialisation

Sergei Witte: ‘The minister of finance recognises that the customs duties fall as a particularly heavy burden upon the impoverished landowners and peasants, particularly in a year of crop failure. These imposts are a heavy sacrifice made by the entire population, and not from surplus but out of current necessity.’

While Alexander III was generally opposed to social and political reform, believing it had the potential to undermine autocracy, he was committed to modernising Russia through industrialisation. Following his death from kidney disease in 1894 and the ascension of his son Nicholas II (1894-1917), this commitment was continued, along with the preservation of absolute autocracy. Since the 1870s industrialisation had been pursued as a distinct
government policy and this was further enhanced in the 1890s. For the tsarist government, industrialisation was the key to promoting military growth and strength; however, the impact of rapid industrialisation was to reach far more widely than the military. The period known as the 'great spurt' saw substantial industrialisation take place under the guidance of Sergei Witte (1893-1903), Minister for Finance, who was presented with the task of modernising Imperial Russia in line with Western European standards.

Witte employed foreign advisors and workers to counsel him in industrial planning and techniques. His task was not only to modernise Russia but to protect local industries. Witte believed that the only way he could balance this incredible task was to foster a system of state-run capitalism, whereby entrepreneurial principles were employed while the state retained overall control.

The 'great spurt' brought about a great deal of economic reform. Foreign capital was encouraged, to facilitate the growth of the Empire's natural resources and the development of industry. Russia relied heavily on foreign loans to develop its economy in this way. The national currency, the rouble, was placed on the gold standard in 1897 in the hope of promoting a stable currency and in turn, promoting foreign investment. Witte ensured foreign goods were limited on the Russian market and protected local industry through imposing hefty government tariffs. Despite enabling considerable industrial development, these reforms had many adverse impacts on ordinary Russians. With rapid modernisation came rising prices, taxes and interest rates – burdens difficult to bear for most people, particularly those in rural areas. Throughout the period of industrialisation the primary livelihood of the majority, agriculture, remained unprotected and undeveloped.

Investment in railways during the 'great spurt' was central to the idea of modernisation. The standout example of this progression is the Trans-Siberian railway (constructed from 1891 onwards), designed to connect the isolated regions of central and eastern Russia with the industrialised west. It was hoped this project would enable further east-west migration, bolstering the industrial workforce. The railway project remained unfinished at the outbreak of war in 1914, perhaps a stark reminder of a failed attempt to modernise a technologically unsophisticated nation.

While production and trade figures certainly indicate substantial industrial development comparable to European standards, conservative and radical opponents of Witte argued that his reforms were too dependent on foreign capital and too focussed on the development of heavy industry, ignoring the modernisation of light industry and agriculture. This was refuted by Witte, who argued that foreign capital directly enhanced Russia's production, and thus its wealth. Whatever the case, the task of rapidly industrialising an antiquated empire which was resistant to change, within the context of preserving the institution of absolute autocracy, proved to be of great difficulty for the tsarist government.

Industrialisation throughout the 1890s came at a time of world-wide industrial boom; however, this was swiftly followed by world-wide recession, taking a significant human toll on Imperial Russia. This, combined with the failure to meet rising class expectations, led to growing public discontent with the regime; discontent that would later contribute to revolutionary action in 1905. Throughout the late nineteenth century, harsh agricultural conditions coupled with the financial burden of land ownership, following the Emancipation Edict of 1861, saw many peasants flock to the industrial
centres in search of work. Many peasants had realised they could no longer bear the financial burden of life on the land, resulting in a significant rise in the urban population of Imperial Russia. This migration to the urban centres provided a ready-made industrial labour force, facilitating the desired growth of industry.

Between 1860 and 1905 the industrial labour force trebled, with this new group being employed in large-scale units in primitive factories. Very little emphasis was placed on the modernisation of machinery, thereby maximising profit for a newly-emerging commercial class through a low-cost labour force, while allowing appalling conditions for the industrial workers. With the absence of legal workplace protections and the prohibition of trade unions, rapid industrialisation through the exploitation of an oppressed industrial working class was enabled.

The unsupervised and unplanned growth of these industrial centres led to severe overcrowding. Living conditions were understandably poor, with on average sixteen people living in one apartment and six people in one room in 1904. It was in these overcrowded centres that political discontent began to stir, seeing the number of military-suppressed industrial strikes grow from nineteen in 1893 to 522 in 1902. When recession hit, widespread unemployment followed. Peasant hopes for a better life, this time in the urban centres, had again been squashed, leading to a growth in social unrest that over time would develop into a revolutionary response.

### STATISTICS

**Growth of population in Russia’s two main cities**

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

**Industrial output in the Russian Empire**
(base unit of 100 in 1900)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>1904</th>
<th>1905</th>
<th>1906</th>
<th>1909</th>
<th>1911</th>
<th>1912</th>
<th>1913</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>100</td>
<td>109.5</td>
<td>98.2</td>
<td>111.7</td>
<td>122.5</td>
<td>149.7</td>
<td>153.2</td>
<td>163.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Growth in national product 1898-1913**

- **Italy** - 82.7%
- **Austria** - 79%
- **Britain** - 40%
- **Germany** - 84.2%
- **France** - 59.6%
- **Russia** - 96.8%

Conclusion

Russia prior to 1904 was a nation characterised by traditional values and structures. A unique nation on the European continent, Russia remained the cornerstone of rule by divine right, a belief not only held by the rulers themselves but the majority of the population. The tsarist system, dominated by the Romanov dynasty for 300 years, was underpinned by bureaucracy, provincial government, the Russian Orthodox Church and the police (both overt and secret). Although there was a great deal of power exercised by tsars, there were contradictory and inconsistent aspects of their rule; in some instances central power was weak, allowing for provincial governors to wield disproportionate influence. In this sense the tsarist system can be seen as intrusive, yet poorly organised. Such a situation meant that when crises occurred, such as the famine of 1891-2, the state had little infrastructure to deal with large social problems. Not surprisingly this fuelled further public anger.

Daily conditions for rural and industrial workers came to be untenable in the late nineteenth century, particularly as the emerging educated middle class began to highlight the inequities involved. This group, which came to be seen as the ‘intelligentsia’, drew on democratic developments elsewhere in Europe (such as the French Revolution) to advocate reform and, eventually, revolution. Some of the more extreme groups took political advantage of the poor social and economic conditions, turning to terrorism and rebellion to further their cause. In response, the government attempted to preserve autocratic power and to maintain a sense of service to the Crown by censoring and repressing individuals who called for reform.

As will be shown in Chapter 2, the period following 1904 saw a dramatic shift in the social, economic and political climate of Imperial Russia, leading it into a revolutionary situation which changed Russia, and the world, forever.