In 1900, Tsar Nicholas II was the ruler of the huge Russian Empire. He was in his early thirties, happily married, and spent most of his time living in grand palaces in and around St Petersburg, the Russian capital city. He believed that God had chosen him, personally, to rule over the lives of his 128 million subjects. He used his secret police, the Okhrana, to arrest and imprison or exile anyone who opposed him.

In 1900, Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov turned thirty. He was a professional revolutionary and had spent three years living in exile in Siberia, an icy desert in eastern Russia. To escape the secret police he fled to western Europe and adopted the new name, Lenin. Lenin and his wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, a fellow revolutionary, spent their time thinking and writing about how to overthrow the Tsar. They believed that a revolution was bound to happen sooner or later and were determined to play a part in it.

By November 1917, Nicholas II was no longer Tsar. He was plain Nicholas Romanov, living under guard with his family in an ordinary house in Siberia. His royal palaces had been taken over by revolutionaries to use as offices, meeting halls and living quarters. The revolution had happened and Vladimir Ilych Lenin was at the head of a new government. Lenin believed that he and his Bolshevik party could do a much better job of governing Russia than the Tsar had done and was planning to change everything about the way Russia was organised and governed. Part One of this book describes how Nicholas governed Russia and how and why he was overthrown by revolution in 1917.
Peasants

In 1900, Russia was mostly a rural country. About 80 per cent of its population were peasants leading lives of poverty and hardship in the countryside. They lived in dusty ramshackle villages and worked long hours farming small strips of land. Peasant life had changed little over the centuries. Farming methods were primitive and inefficient and most people could not read or write.

Until 1861, peasants had not even been free. They were serfs and legally belonged to their landlords. They had hardly any more rights than the horses, cattle or pigs on the large estates. Nicholas II’s grandfather, Alexander II had made a law in 1861 giving the serfs their freedom. This law, the Edict of Emancipation, did away with some of the worst aspects of serfdom. Peasants could make some decisions about their own lives, such as whom and when to marry and whether to leave the estate. They were legally allowed to own land. However, their situation did not improve as much as they had hoped. The peasants had expected to be given land from the vast estates of their former owners. After all, they had been living on and working the land for generations. This did not happen. In spite of strong protests by peasants all over Russia, they were only given a small fraction of their land and they had to pay for it.

The government lent the peasants the money to buy land and every year for the next forty-nine years the peasants would have to make large redemption payments, like mortgage payments. Until it was paid off, the land of the village would be administered by local committees of elders known as mirov. The peasants did not have individual ownership of their small strips of land and could not buy or sell them. Taxes on their land were very high, much higher per hectare than the taxes on the landlords’ estates. Some government officials flogged peasants who failed to pay their taxes on time. Because of the combined pressures of high taxes, redemption payments and shortage of good fertile farming land, an increasing number of peasants could no longer support themselves by farming. Many began to move to the cities and towns in search of work in factories.

*St Petersburg workers in the 1890s.*
Workers

Russia was rapidly building up its industry in the 1890s and early 1900s, trying to catch up with countries such as Great Britain and Germany. Huge factories were built, many of them employing more than 1000 workers each. By 1914, nearly 10 per cent of Russians were workers living in the cities. Many of the factories were built in and around Russia’s two biggest cities, St Petersburg and Moscow, in the European part of Russia. St Petersburg (later called Petrograd and then Leningrad and now St Petersburg again) was the capital city until 1918 when the Bolsheviks moved the capital to Moscow. St Petersburg and Moscow were large, busy cities. Parts of the cities contained elegant palaces, theatres and restaurants. The workers lived and worked in the slum areas surrounding the big polluting factories.

Life was hard for the workers. Wages were so low that few people could afford to rent their own rooms and most lived in cold, unhealthy, overcrowded barracks. By 1917, nearly one-third of workers were women. They were paid even less than men. In the smaller factories, workers and their families were expected to live beside their work benches. There were hardly any rules about safety and many were badly injured at work every year. There was no workers’ compensation and trade unions were illegal. The government knew that conditions were bad but did nothing to help. Nicholas and his advisers believed that Russia’s industrial development was more important than the workers’ problems. Because the government was worried about so many discontented people living and working in such close quarters, special police were sent to guard and spy on the workers in the larger factories.

The rich and middle classes

Although most Russians were poor, a few people were very rich. About 1.5 per cent of the population owned most of Russia’s land and resources. The wealthy nobles and landlords owned huge estates in the countryside and grand mansions and palaces in the cities. They lived a glamorous life of parties and banquets. They dressed in extravagant clothes and enjoyed opera, ballet and music concerts.

There was also a middle class of doctors, lawyers, teachers, merchants and bureaucrats (people who work in government departments). By 1900, about 10 per cent of the population was middle class.

Activities

1. Study the map above:
   a. Which country shares the longest border with Russia?
   b. Which ocean is along Russia’s longest coastline?
   c. Why do you think it was useless for shipping for much of the year?

2. a. List some of the difficulties faced by peasants in Tsarist Russia.
   b. What was the Edict of Emancipation?
   c. Why were peasants disappointed by emancipation?

3. What can we learn from the photograph about living conditions for city workers?
National minorities

Since the 1500s the Russians had been invading their neighbouring countries. These included countries such as Poland, Finland, the Baltic states, Georgia and the Ukraine. In this way the kingdom of Russia had become the big and powerful Russian Empire. It also meant that the Tsar ruled over a lot of non-Russian people. There were people from more than 100 nationalities living within the borders of the Russian Empire with a huge variety of customs and languages. Although Russians were the largest ethnic group, they made up less than 50 per cent of the population.

Nicholas II didn’t really like or trust his non-Russian subjects. He believed that everyone should adopt the Russian way of life. This policy was called Russification. It meant that children could not be taught their own language in schools and non-Russians were restricted from practising their own religions. Nearly all important officials were Russians and all official business was conducted in the Russian language. Russian troops were permanently stationed in all the non-Russian territories ready to suppress riots or rebellions.
Many of the national minorities resented Russian rule but the most harshly treated were the Jewish people. They were only permitted to live in certain areas, often in overcrowded ghettos. They were not allowed to be elected to local councils and there were quotas restricting the number of Jewish students able to enter university. Peasants were encouraged to blame many of their problems on the Jews. It was common in times of trouble for groups of peasants to riot against their Jewish neighbours, stealing their possessions, burning their houses, even raping and killing them. Attacks on Jewish communities were often part of Easter celebrations. These violent riots were called pogroms and the army and police did nothing to stop them.

**How Russia was governed**

Russia’s system of government had changed little in hundreds of years. Nicholas ruled as an autocrat. In theory he had absolute power over Russia. He could do anything he liked and didn’t have to take notice of anyone’s advice. Nicholas believed he had been given his power by God and that it was his duty to be a strong and stern ruler, like an old-fashioned father.

Nicholas was firmly supported by the state church of Russia, the Russian Orthodox church. The church was run by a government department and the head of the church was appointed by the Tsar. Priests were encouraged to preach sermons supporting everything the government did. In the villages they preached that God was the Great Father and the Tsar was the Little Father of his people.

Although in theory Nicholas had total power, in practice, of course it would be impossible for one man to attend to every major decision. So the Tsar was advised and assisted by a number of individuals and government departments. The most senior officials in the government were the ministers. Although their job was to advise the Tsar, they were appointed by Nicholas and he could dismiss them whenever he wanted to. Nicholas often dismissed ministers when they told him things he didn’t want to hear.

Day-to-day decisions about running the country were made by Russia’s huge inefficient bureaucracy. Officials were very slow to make decisions and spent a lot of their time on paperwork. Many officials refused to do any work at all unless they were paid bribes by the people they were supposed to help.

Russia’s size made it difficult to govern. All of the big decisions were made from the capital, St Petersburg, which was right on the Empire’s western edge. It could be slow and difficult to move people, things or information from one part of Russia to another. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, Nicholas tried to improve communications by building a network of railways across Russia. The grandest was the Trans-Siberian railway which ran all the way from the Ural Mountains to Vladivostok on Russia’s Pacific coast. It is over 7000 kms and is still the longest railway in the world.

**Dealing with opposition**

Every year the Russian government spent a lot of money on repressing any signs of opposition or discontent among the people. Freedom of speech was very limited, especially before 1905. The police employed lots of spies and informers to keep an eye on all kinds of meetings and organisations. Newspapers and other publications were heavily censored. The police kept records of everyone’s addresses and movements and all Russians had to carry internal passports so that they could be checked by police at any time.

Soon after he came to the throne Nicholas expanded the Okhrana, or secret police. The Okhrana could arrest anyone they suspected of opposing the Tsar’s government. No one had the right to complain about or appeal against their decisions. Okhrana spies were everywhere. It was risky to criticise the government in any way.

Nicholas also used the army to control his people. The most feared soldiers were the Cossacks. Nicholas often used them to break up strikes or riots. They would ride through or over the terrified protesters, yelling and slashing them with swords as they passed.

**Activities**

1. Use the map in Chapter 1 and the information in this chapter to answer the following:
   a. List four nationalities, other than Russians, living within the borders of the Russian Empire.
   b. Find St Petersburg. What difficulties do you think the Tsar might have faced in ruling Russia from a capital city which was right on the edge of the Empire?

2. Why do you think many Jewish people joined revolutionary parties?

3. a. Nicholas ruled as an autocrat. Write a clear definition of ‘autocrat’.
   b. List the methods used by Nicholas to protect his power.
   c. How might an ordinary person, such as a peasant or a worker, express his or her grievances to the government or work to change an aspect of Russian society they did not like?