There were three main causes of discontent in Russia. One was the poverty and harsh living conditions of the peasants and workers. The second was the autocracy and the lack of opportunity to have a voice in government. The third was Russification, fiercely resented by the non-Russians. Many secret societies and political organisations were formed by people who wanted to change Russia, with a variety of views and opinions about how it could and should be done. Some wanted to overthrow the government, others just wanted to change it.

**Liberals**

Liberals wanted change in Russia without violent revolution. They believed that the government could be improved without being overthrown and that it was possible for the Tsar to be part of this reform. They wanted Russia to be more like Great Britain, with a strong parliament, elected by the people, with the power to make laws and run the government. They wanted the Tsar to work closely with the parliament. They wanted him to be a constitutional monarch, that is, to obey the rules of a constitution (a set of laws for governing a country). Liberals were mostly middle class people although some nobles also had liberal views. The most
important liberal political party by 1917 was the Kadets, so called from the initials of the party’s name, the Constitutional Democrats, or KDs, pronounced Ka Dets in Russian.

**Socialists**

The socialists believed that only a revolution could improve the situation in Russia. They wanted to overthrow the Tsar and reorganise Russia from top to bottom. The socialists believed that wealth and power should be shared equally among people, although they disagreed a lot among themselves about how and when this would happen. The three main socialist parties were the Socialist Revolutionaries, whose support was mostly among the peasants, and the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, who competed for support from the city workers.

**Socialist Revolutionaries**

The Socialist Revolutionaries (or SRs for short), were a party of peasant socialists who wanted to overthrow the Tsar. Their aim was to take land from the big estates and share it out among the peasants, however, they were vague about the details and there were many different views within the party. In 1917, they had the widest support of any opposition party, especially among the peasants, but were not well organised and were split into a lot of factions. Some SRs, such as Alexander Kerensky, believed in peaceful change but others used violence. SR terrorists were responsible for the assassination of many Tsarist officials including the Tsar’s uncle.

**Mensheviks and Bolsheviks**

**Karl Marx**

The Mensheviks and Bolsheviks were followers of the ideas of the German socialist, Karl Marx (1818–1883). Marx had a vision for a more equal world. He believed that wealth and power should be distributed equally among all people. The two countries he knew best were Great Britain and Germany. He developed his ideas during the second half of the 1800s when both countries were undergoing rapid modernisation and industrialisation. Marx observed that the owners of the new factories paid their workers very low wages while keeping the huge profits of industrialisation to themselves. He saw the appalling conditions of factory workers in cities such as Manchester in England and believed that it was impossible that people would put up with that sort of life for very long. He predicted that the workers in all the cities would rise up against the factory owners. He described this as the violent overthrow of one class, the capitalists, by another, the workers.

Marx thought that after the revolution the workers would run the factories themselves and the enormous profits being made from industrialisation would be shared equally. Instead of just a few capitalists enjoying great wealth, there would be enough for everyone to live comfortably. There would be no private property. Everything would be shared. This would be such a good and sensible way to live, argued Marx, that there would be no need for governments at all. The state would wither away and the people would all belong to one, united world instead of separate nations. This new, ‘communist’ world, would be entirely different and much fairer and better than the old society. At the conclusion of his most famous work, *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx wrote: ‘The workers have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to gain. Workers of the world unite!’ Even though Russia was still mostly rural, Russian Marxists believed that as the industrialisation of Russia progressed, a huge, unhappy working class was being created which would one day be strong enough to overthrow the government.

**The Menshevik-Bolshevik split**

In 1903, the Russian followers of Karl Marx split into two groups, the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks. The main issue they disagreed about was how best to work for a revolution. The Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, believed that they needed to have a small, tightly knit, strictly organised party, made up of full-time revolutionaries. This small group would plan the strategies to lead the workers into revolution. The Mensheviks, on the other hand, wanted to create a large party with wide membership among the workers to teach them about Marxism and to gain as many supporters as possible.

**Nationalists**

As well as the liberals and the socialists, there were also many nationalist organisations within the ethnic minority groups. Among the most hostile to Russian rule were the Poles, Jews, Ukrainians and Tartars.

**Activities**

1. Look at Lenin’s mug shot. Why was this photograph taken and what do you think it was used for?
2. Read the section about the socialists.
   a. Why did many peasants support the SRs?
   b. What ideas did the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks agree about?
   c. What ideas did the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks disagree about?
After ruling for twenty-three eventful years he was forced to abdicate (give up his throne) in 1917 and was secretly executed with his wife and children in 1918. For twenty-three years he was one of the most powerful men in the world. Yet he lacked the intelligence and imagination to meet the enormous challenges that came with his position.

When he first inherited the throne Nicholas said: ‘I am not prepared to be Tsar. I never wanted to become one. I know nothing of the business of ruling. I have no idea of even how to talk to ministers.’ In his diaries and letters he often wrote of how boring he found his work. In his diary for 1894 he commented: ‘I had a lot of papers to read which bored me to death, because I would so much like to have more time to give to my beloved little soul, Alix (Alexandra, his wife).’ Despite this, he refused over and over again to share his power.
He declared: ‘Let it be known to all that I shall devote all my strength, for the good of the whole nation, to maintaining the principle of autocracy just as firmly and unflinchingly as it was preserved by my unforgettable father.’

Nicholas’s strongest supporter was his wife, Alexandra. To the bitter end she supported her husband in his determination to cling on to power. In one of her letters to him she wrote:

I am fully convinced that great and beautiful times are coming for your reign and for Russia ... we must give a strong country to Baby [their son] and dare not be weak for his sake ... Don’t let things slip through your fingers and leave it to him to build all over again. Be firm ... How I wish I could pour my will into your veins.

Nicholas married Alexandra soon after he became Tsar. They had five children. The elder four were girls but both Nicholas and Alexandra wanted a male heir. Their son Alexei was born in 1904. A friend of Alexandra’s wrote: ‘The following summer the heir was born, amid the wildest rejoicing all over the Empire ... The Tsar ... was quite mad with joy. His happiness and the mother’s, however, was of short duration, for almost at once they learned that the poor child was afflicted by a dread disease, rather rare except in royal families ... The victims of this malady are known in medicine as haemophiliacs, or bleeders.’

This was a terrible blow. The new heir to the throne had blood that wouldn’t clot if he was cut or bruised. The doctors could do nothing and little Alexei would be lucky to live to adulthood. Nicholas and Alexandra were unable to face the fact that Alexei would most likely die before he could inherit the throne. They kept his illness a closely guarded secret.

**Bloody Sunday**

In January 1905, just after the Russian garrison at Port Arthur in Manchuria surrendered to the Japanese, there was a huge strike in St Petersburg. About 100,000 people stopped work. Because there was no freedom of speech in Russia, there was no way for ordinary people to express their views to the government so the strikers decided to try to approach the Tsar directly. They decided to march with their families to the Winter Palace to present Nicholas with a petition asking for better working conditions, the right to join unions, an end to the war with Japan and the right to vote for a parliament. Many ordinary people had great respect for the Tsar and they believed that he would help them. But he had no intention of reading the petition and left the palace the night before the march. On Sunday, 9 January, about 200,000 people marched through the streets of St Petersburg to the Winter Palace, led by a young Russian Orthodox priest called Father Gapon.

Their mood was optimistic and they sang hymns as they walked. Many carried religious pictures or portraits of the Tsar. The workers’ plan, however, went badly wrong. The soldiers guarding the Winter Palace fired on the peaceful protesters killing hundreds of people. The horrific massacre quickly became known as Bloody Sunday. Father Gapon described the scene:

The crowd first knelt and then lay flat down, hiding their heads from the rain of bullets ... At last the firing ceased. I stood up with a few others who remained uninjured and looked down at the bodies that lay around me ... I saw the scarlet stain of blood upon the snow ... Horror crept into my heart. The thought flashed through my mind: “This is the work of our Little Father, the Tsar. There is no longer any Tsar for us.”

**The Russo-Japanese War**

At the time of Alexei’s birth, Russia was fighting a difficult war against Japan. In 1904, Russia provoked a war with Japan because the Tsar wanted Manchuria (northern China) and Korea. Russia was a much bigger country than Japan and should have been able to put up a good fight. But Russia suffered defeat after defeat. At the humiliating battle of Tsushima in May 1905, the Russians lost a whole fleet of ships in less than an hour. News of each defeat made the Russian people more angry and discontented with their government. The disastrous war effort showed the Russian people just how badly their country was being run.

**Activities**

1. What can you learn about Alexandra from her letter (Document A)?

2. Why do you think Father Gapon wrote: ‘There is no longer any Tsar for us’ (Document B)?

3. List the evidence in this chapter which supports the view that Nicholas was not a good ruler.