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1 Unstable Structure, 1900–1914

Why did the Russian Imperial monarchy crumble to the ground in February 1917? Communist historians in the USSR used to maintain that it was a collapse waiting to happen and that Lenin and his Bolsheviks delivered the decisive last push [27; 28]. Most writers other than communists rejected this general line. They disliked any such kind of historical determinism; they were also sceptical that the Bolshevik contribution to the downfall of the Romanovs was of much influence. They did agree, though, that the Russian Empire had basic problems. Travellers to Russia before 1917 emphasised how unmodernised the country was and how backward and oppressive the conditions of the lower social orders were. The Imperial order had the reputation of being the ‘prison of the peoples’ and the fortress against democracy and enlightenment in Europe. Revolution was only to be expected in such circumstances.

Not everyone in the West accepted this gloomy summary. The economic and educational record of tsarism was not unimpressive, and many commentators suggested that the economy would have gone on progressing if the Russian Empire had not entered the First World War. Thus a rise towards the level of contemporary advanced capitalism has been seen as a genuine possibility [15]. There has also been a degree of support for the politics of tsarism. Nicholas II, widely despised and detested in his time, has recently been described as an intelligent, flexible leader [178]; and some Western and Russian historians have argued that the overthrow of the Romanov monarchy was the result of an unpatriotic betrayal by every political grouping – not just by Lenin’s Bolsheviks but by other socialists as well as liberals and conservatives [37]. Furthermore, it has been emphasised that the sequence of diplomatic clashes between Russia and its foreign rivals before

1914 was not predestined to end in military conflict [22]. Things could have turned out differently. Writers of this persuasion conclude that the Russian Empire was sound enough, politically and economically, to have survived if the war had been avoided. No war, no revolution.

Such accounts have not convinced most analysts. The conventional opinion has been that a revolution of some kind, if not unpreventable, was highly likely. Every aspect of the Romanov order gave signs of weakness. Nicholas II was unvisionary and unbending. The political system was underpinned by a police state and by arbitrary rule [26; 292]. Whole social classes as well as entire national and religious groups resented the status quo. Poverty was widespread and was aggravated by an industrial drive that neglected rudimentary popular needs. The Russian Empire was a powder keg waiting to explode.

Many recent historical works, however, have highlighted the unprepossessing situation which was Nicholas II's inheritance. Their argument runs as follows. The tsars ruled over the world's largest land-based empire and therefore had extremely long borders to defend. Rival powers existed to the west, the south and the east. Military imperatives constricted the revenues left over for social and economic reform. So did the need to hold the peasants back from revolt and to maintain the obedience of the non-Russians. The administrative network had gaping holes and the police were under-resourced. Transport and communications were thinly spread. The industrial lead achieved by North American and European economies was large and growing larger [72]. Meanwhile most Russians had a sense of nationhood linked to their tsar and their Orthodox Christian faith, but their primary identity was associated with their family and their village [17]. There was nothing at all near to consensus about a common national purpose and the antipathy towards the upper and middle social classes was wide and deep. Many intellectuals too were alienated from the regime. This set of circumstances, it is suggested, would have put the capacities of any conceivable Russian government to an extreme test in the early twentieth century. Thus although Nicholas II was hardly an outstanding emperor, it was the general situation and not his personality that enfeebled the regime's reaction to the assaults made upon it. The overthrow of the Romanovs grew likelier as year succeeded year.

The gathering storm, some have maintained, came from the social consequences of over-rapid industrialisation. There is much in this. Most people suffered material hardship and social injustice. But there were also positive aspects to the economic transformation. A section of the working class and peasantry benefited from the expansion of industry and commerce. Moreover, the tsarist state was nowhere as repressive towards national and ethnic minorities as Stalin's later despotism. Indeed several writers have proposed that tsarism was rendered vulnerable not so much by the ravages of industrialisation as by the continued vigour of traditional social units – the peasant communes, the religious sects, the factory work gangs – which hated and undermined the political order whenever the chance arose. And arise it did for a while in 1905–1906 and then with devastating effect in February 1917 [34].

The explanation advanced in this chapter is that the Russian Empire, before the First World War, had to deal with a double crisis: a crisis produced by hostile forces of assertive modernity and a crisis produced by the enraged forces of ancient custom. The Imperial order might – just about might – have resolved one or other crisis in isolation; but the two of them together produced an explosive situation. The Romanov monarchy and its administration could not adequately constrain and conciliate the 'modern' elements in society. Nor could it enforce its will upon the old, traditional elements. It was steadily losing in both contests. Furthermore, the empire's various weaknesses – political, economic, ethnic, social and cultural – were tightly interlinked and systemic. Of course, a sense of proportion is necessary here. The empire as it was developing by 1914 was a sensitive plant, but it was not doomed to undergo the root-and-branch revolution of 1917. What made that kind of revolution possible was the protracted, disruptive, exhausting conflict of the First World War. No First World War, no October Revolution. Lenin and his Bolsheviks were donated a revolutionary opportunity they would probably never have created for themselves.

[i] St Petersburg and the world in 1900

Let us go back to 1900. Many contemporary observers took it as axiomatic that Nicholas II's removal from power would enable

the solution of all the country's political, social and economic problems. Yet these problems were not surmountable solely by a change of regime. Looked at from St Petersburg, the world outside the Imperial borders had never seemed more threatening. Peace in Europe was brittle. Two great powers, France and Prussia, had gone to war against each other in 1870. Germany, after its unification under Prussian leadership in the same year, rose to dominance in the politics and trade of the continent's central regions; and its ally, Austria–Hungary, strove to expand its own influence in the Balkans. The quest for security encouraged Russia to sign an alliance with France in 1894 as a counterweight to German power in Europe. But Germany also posed a challenge in Persia and the Near East especially after the Germans signed commercial and military agreements with the Ottoman Empire. Diplomatic crises recurred. In the Far East, meanwhile, Japan effected rapid industrialisation and became yet another regional rival to Russia. This was the era of imperialist aggrandisement. China was the largest prey, and Russia extracted consent that northern China lay within its sphere of control. Russian imperialism had a long history. Ukrainian, Siberian, Baltic, Polish and Caucasian lands had been conquered. As recently as the 1870s, the army had been sent to subjugate areas in central Asia; and with the Ottoman Empire on the brink of dissolution, ministers in St Petersburg aspired to acquire the Straits of the Dardanelles.

This was a dangerously fluid situation. Tensions were increasing among the great powers and complacency was not in order. Any government in Russia wishing to prevent domination by foreign states or even territorial dismemberment had to stimulate the kind of economic and cultural transformation that had brought international success to Britain, France, Germany and the US. The use of steam power and, latterly, electricity in factories had transformed whole economies. The armed forces of industrialised countries acquired a massive technical advantage, and their educational facilities provided training in the mental skills newly necessary in every walk of life. Having undertaken the project of modernising the country later than its competitors, the Russian regime was under more acute pressure to accomplish it. The problem was not unique. Countries like Italy and Spain had faced it, and others in Africa, Asia and South America confront it to this day.

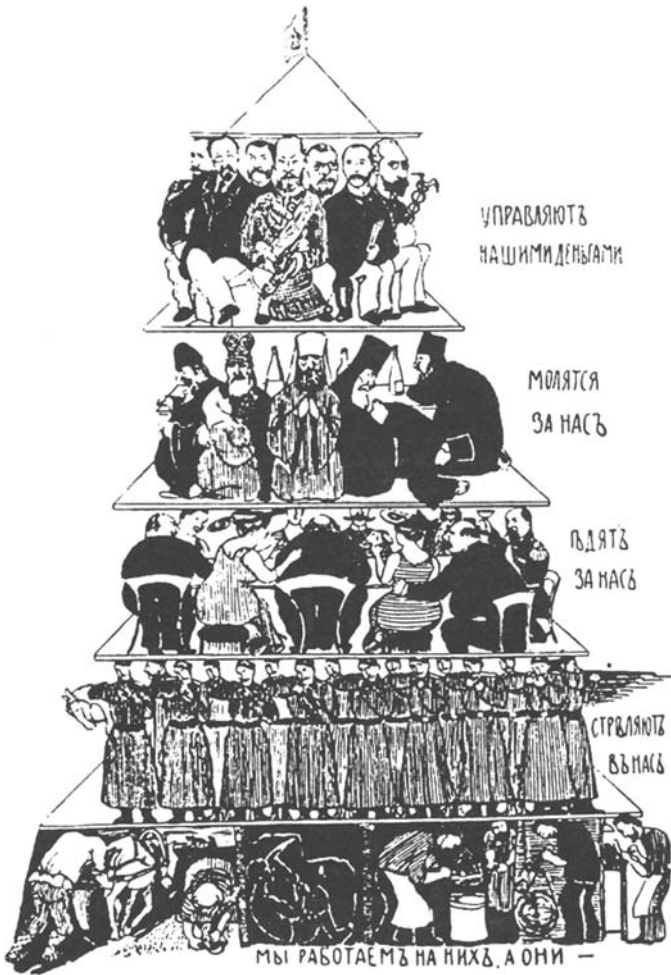
Yet Russia had other predicaments which made her unique in Europe. The climate was extremely unhelpful. Vast tracts of Siberia lie over permafrost, and huge parts of central Asia are deserts. Russia proper had more clement weather. But winter in St Petersburg and Moscow is much longer than in London, Paris and New York. Soil quality left a lot to be desired across the empire. Only limited areas, principally in the southern Ukraine and the southern steppes, approached the fertility of North America's cereal-growing belts. The empire's sheer expanse too was another burden. It is 5000 miles from eastern Poland, which was then administered directly from St Petersburg, to Vladivostok on the Pacific coast; and 2000 miles stretch between Murmansk in the frozen Russian north and the Turkish frontier. The domain of the Russian emperor dwarfed the land-mass of every other state. Canada, the US and China were small by comparison. Transport across the empire met with huge obstacles. It was a very unfortunate accident of geography that the great navigable rivers flowed away from the main economic centres. The dispersal of raw materials was an additional drawback. Gold and timber had come from Siberia and oil came from Baku by the Caspian Sea. Although St Petersburg had become the focal site for the metal-processing industries, the great deposits of coal and iron were hundreds of miles away in the Donets Basin. Ethnic diversity was a further complication. Russians constituted only two-fifths of their land-based empire's population. Poles, Latvians, Ukrainians and Azeris had regional majorities in places vital to the country's industrial health.

Russia's transformation could therefore not fail to be arduous. Economic backwardness meant that the country had to make fundamental changes very fast in order to compete with the advanced capitalist powers, and this was bound to unsettle a social order already in perilous flux. And both climate and topography pushed the financial costs higher than were encountered abroad.

[ii] The Romanov monarchy before 1905

Strong state power was needed, as elsewhere, to compel the labour force to forgo any drastic improvement of its living standards;

Unstable Structure, 1900–1914



Cartoon 1 A satirical pre-1914 cartoon about the structure of power in the Imperial monarchy. The comments, from top to bottom, are as follows:

- 'They dispose of our money.'
- 'They pray on our behalf.'
- 'They eat on our behalf.'
- 'They shoot at us.'
- 'We labour for them while they ...'

firm direction was also required to co-ordinate the economy's advance. The Imperial state was headed by an absolute monarchy. The Romanov dynasty had ruled since 1613, and no emperor in the nineteenth century permitted the election of a national representative assembly. Political parties were banned. Public meetings were strictly supervised and a pre-publication press censorship was applied. Rebellion was rare. Regicide occurred in 1762 and 1801, but these were coups that replaced one dynastic incumbent with another. Even the unsuccessful popular revolt raised in 1773 by Emelyan Pugachëv against Catherine II lacked a definite commitment to basic social reform. Not until 1825 was a truly revolutionary organisation formed. This took shape as a conspiracy of army officers and other nobles; and it was easily crushed. Nicholas I, who was crowned in 1826, retained massive authority for himself and his successor Alexander II. A personal cult of the emperor was encouraged, and it was largely effective: peasants cherished the icon of the ruler which they pinned to their hut walls. Moreover, the emperor's word was law, quite literally. Any oral instruction from him could overrule legislative enactments. Monarchical whim was pervasive. The Council of Ministers bore little resemblance to a British cabinet: it held no collective deliberations and every minister was held responsible to the monarch alone [298: 21–2]. The crown also appointed the governors who directed the organs of provincial government. Such appointees were invested with huge powers; and the police in the localities had the right to mete out punishments by administrative fiat. The Russian Empire was not just a police-state; it was also a state of extremely arbitrary rule [292: 4].

Whether this structure was fit to deal with the tasks being undertaken by the empire at the end of the nineteenth century is doubtful. But unqualified dismissal would be anachronistic. It was still in the not so distant past, in 1789, that France's absolute monarchy had been dismantled. In addition, parliamentary democracy was cramped even in the UK; the British franchise was extended to all male adults only in 1884. Repression of anti-establishment groups persisted even longer elsewhere. The German social democrats remained outlawed until 1890. In the US, some employers got away with violent persecution of socialists well after the 1920s. The Russian monarchy was an extreme case of authoritarianism in a world that had many grades of unfreedom.

Nevertheless the rulers became deeply aware of the need for economic transformation after recognising the inadequacies of the Russian military effort in the Crimean War against Britain and France in 1854–1856. Alexander III, mounting the throne in 1881, proved himself a consistent industrialiser. So did his son Nicholas II, who acceded in 1894. Neither was intellectually inspired or inspiring. But their support for industrial growth was solid. Sergei Witte, Minister of Finance from 1892 to 1903, appreciated the uses of autocracy in this connection. A Russian parliament elected through a universal adult franchise would have turned the peasantry's demographic predominance into political influence. The resultant preferences might have included a lowering of taxation and, in financial policy, a heightening of indulgences for the sector producing agricultural equipment. Even if the peasants had failed to get their demands satisfied in full, the effect might still have been damaging to investment in armaments. Perhaps the same difficulties would not have arisen if the autocracy had granted a franchise restricted to the propertied classes. This had been the pattern of German modernisation, and the Japanese employed it successfully in the 1890s. But industrialists were proportionately fewer in Russia; and the Russian landed nobility contained a larger body of opinion hostile to prioritising industrialisation: emulation of Germany would have created its own problems. Witte and others concluded that a resolute autocrat in St Petersburg could play a helpful role in stimulating and protecting industrialisation. Alexander III and Nicholas II did so and the urban middle class made progress under their shelter.

Every state has internal divisions. The Ministry of Internal Affairs, being aware of the risks of pushing the peasantry too hard, warned repeatedly against fast industrial expansion [233: 417–18]. Other institutions were less obstructive. The Russian Orthodox Church acted loyally as the government's power spiritual. But the ignorance of priests was legendary, and such efforts as were made to renovate the ecclesiastical hierarchy and its policies gave no assistance to the drive for economic and cultural modernisation [98: 340–7]. Thousands of officials in the civil bureaucracy also were apathetic or simply bemused. Venality was endemic. Nepotism and inefficiency were an Imperial shame. At the same time, though, ministerial competition for resources was intense. The standing army was a drain on the exchequer; its

duty to complete the subjugation of the Caucasus and hold down eastern Poland was costly. But the Ministry of Finance acquitted itself well in the struggle over the budget. The entire regime was in the grip of transition. The state administration was not just a form of exclusive indoor relief for hereditary nobles who had failed at farming. On the contrary, four-fifths of posts in the highest four grades of the civil service before the First World War were held by men who were not landed gentry; and non-nobles had become a majority in the army officer corps by 1912 [179: 401].

[iii] **Economic progress**

The government's handling of industry was robustly positive. State ownership and state contracts contributed vitally to capitalist economic development in Russia. The possession of weapon-producing factories had been a traditional objective of the authorities; but the railways too were recognised for their importance: two-thirds of the network in 1914 were state property. Increased revenues were obviously necessary. The myth persists that industrialisation was achieved through a universal impoverishment of the peasantry. In fact the largest portion of the government's income, 40 per cent in 1913, came from customs and excise duties – and if people had not been able to pay the tax on salt and vodka the state budget would have been in ruinous mess [93: 4]. Central direct taxes were comparatively low; even Witte, hardly the peasant's friend, treated an expansion of rural purchasing capacity as indispensable. The government in any event could not finance development solely from its own coffers. Less than a ninth of the industrial capital stock was in its hands at the outbreak of the First World War [90: 51–2]. Domestic private enterprise was nurtured. The 'monster tariff' of 1891 gave protection to Russian manufacturing; it also stimulated foreign companies to set up branches inside the empire whereas earlier they had exported to Russia. The decision of 1897 to put the rouble on the gold standard attracted further investment from abroad. It is estimated that foreigners owned 47 per cent of Russian securities, excluding mortgage bonds, by 1914 [90: 154].

There were dangers in relying so heavily upon injections of capital from western Europe in an international environment

that was anything but tranquil. Witte recognised this but astutely predicted that a massive withdrawal of funds would not occur. Russian creditworthiness was excellent: profits were solid even though they were never as great as Witte's propagandists promised since maladministration and poor transport wiped out the advantages of gaining a low-wage work force. French and Belgian finance led the way in boosting activity on the St Petersburg stock exchange. The empire's strategic interests were being well served, and the course of Russian industrial development was not deflected by foreign economic pressures. Russia was not Bulgaria. Her government was not so easily intimidated.

Yet the world trade cycle was beyond her control, and the Russian Imperial economy remained vulnerable to the periodic recessions in the rest of Europe. The slump between 1900 and 1903 was especially damaging. Yet the country also benefited from Europe's booms, so that by 1914 the empire was the fifth largest industrial power on earth. The growth rates were imposing. Industrial output expanded annually by 8 per cent in the 1890s and by 6 per cent between 1907 and the beginning of the Great War [126: 149]. Railway construction began in earnest in the 1860s. Some 30,000 miles of track were laid in the pre-war period and the Trans-Siberian line was completed in 1916. Russia became the world's fourth greatest producer of coal, pig iron and steel. Oil extraction was highly successful: only Texas rivalled the Baku fields. Naturally areas of weakness remained: the chemical, electrical and machine-tool industries gave chronic cause for concern [112: 12]. Even so, factories in Russia were starting to turn out lathes, locomotives and motor cars. Capital goods of this sort were anyway not the only sector of endeavour. Mass consumer demands increased throughout society. Textiles continued to be Russia's biggest single industry through to the First World War; and together with food-processing they supplied 50 per cent of total industrial output value whereas the figure was 14 per cent for mining and metallurgy [90: 34–5]. The balance between capital and consumer products in industrial output was not particularly unusual for a country at Russia's stage of modernisation [134: 430].

The suggestion that industrial advance was achieved at the cost of agricultural regression remains unproved. Russian agrarian indices point to a moderate advance. The harvests of wheat and rye, which were the mainstay of Imperial agriculture, increased

in the second half of the nineteenth century [206: 284]. A famine afflicted the Volga region in 1891–1892. Climate could play havoc with even the best-organised farms [291: 27–8]. Yet improvement, despite intermittent setbacks, was solid. Grain output rose by an annual average of 2 per cent between 1881 and 1913 in European Russia (or by 1.1 million tons per annum) [290: 3]. Dairy products were finding their way to markets in Germany where Russian yoghurt was much admired. The Imperial economy was definitely not all guns and no butter.

The regime's disparagers passed over this achievement in silence. They focused on the negative aspects. The Imperial population increased steeply in the second half of the nineteenth century with the result that the benefit of the agricultural expansion was less than it would have been. Even so, per capita cereal production in European Russia went on rising, possibly by as much as 35 per cent from 1890 to 1913 [149: 270]. The Empire became the largest cereal exporter in the world and ports on the Black Sea like Odessa were turned into bustling commercial entrepôts. In the half-decade before the First World War, merchants in Russia and Ukraine sold abroad an annual average of 11.5 million tons [290: 2]. Imperial agriculture was also beginning to diversify. Trade in potatoes and dairy products gained in commercial significance, especially from Poland and the Baltic. Meanwhile Ukraine, southern Russia, the Urals and western Siberia achieved their huge expansion in wheat output. Sugar beet too emerged as an important crop; the area given over to it, chiefly in Ukraine, rose by 38 per cent in the decade before the Great War [102: 225]. Nor were industrial crops ignored. Cotton growing was taken to Turkestan as the Russian elites sought to exploit their recently conquered areas. The prospect of further rural economic progress in the Russian Empire was growing ever stronger. Sales of agricultural machines and other equipment increased. Investment in such stock appears to have risen at an annual rate of 9 per cent from 1891 to 1913 [136: 274].

[iv] **The transforming of Imperial society**

Yet the modernisation of both industry and agriculture had a long, long way to go. St Petersburg was a majestic, modern city

with buildings, theatres and parks which earned the admiration of visitors from abroad; and Moscow, Odessa, Warsaw and Kiev were not far behind in global renown. Change, though, was geographically patchy. The citadels of advanced economic performance and cultural attainment were surrounded by vast tracts of habitation where little had altered in centuries. Few cities were anything like miniature versions of the Russian capital. And tens of thousands of villages, especially those which were distant from railway lines, slumbered on unacquainted with novel techniques of production.

The government's financial policies as well as its orders for railways and armaments aided industrial growth. It was less solicitous about agriculture. Peasants felt they were being left to fend for themselves. Certainly the Land Bank established for them in 1882 merely scratched the surface of their problems. And not even the government's defenders claimed that its encouragement of industry was comprehensive. Aside from sectors of recognised strategic importance, Russian enterprises were expected to operate without state assistance. Lobbying of ministers was not a highly developed art. In any case, ministerial bureaucracies were not the sole agents of economic change. Social forces supplied massive momentum. Indeed the spurt of officially fostered industrialisation in the 1880s and 1890s was preceded by decades when state policies had been inimical in some ways to industrialism as such. The entrepreneurial spirit of Moscow factory owners was famous. Jewish financial and commercial effervescence was moving across the western borderlands. Armenians were shaking up the trading patterns in the south Caucasus.

In the nineteenth century the regime placed limits on the pace of change. In particular, it preserved the peasant land commune. Rural lads had to seek permission from the village elders to leave for work in the towns. Such a stipulation reflected the government's wish to curtail the enlargement of the landless poor. It used to be thought that the desire was fulfilled. After all, there were only 3.1 million workers in factories and mines in 1913. But the working class included other groups too. The addition of railwaymen, builders, waiters, home-based workers and domestic servants yielded a total of 15 million (and 20 million if agricultural wage-labourers were taken into account) [228: 329, 333]. This was a fourfold increase over 1860.

The growing industries required a growth in the provision of basic schooling. The government wished to expand educational and social amenities in order to emulate the great powers in Europe. From 1864 it allowed the election of organs of rural self-government – each being known as a *zemstvo* – with limited responsibilities for schools, roads and hospitals; and the existing municipal councils were allowed to fulfil similar local tasks. Central government itself put a vast school-building programme in hand. Nearly two-thirds of all factory workers in European Russia, according to a survey in 1918, were literate; and, in metropolitan printing and metal-processing plants, reading and writing accomplishments were well-nigh universal [228: 601]. The Russian worker's similarity to his counterpart in Germany or Britain should not be overstated. Most members of the industrial workforce kept in touch with their native villages and many held on to their plots of land [171: 139]. Working-class life was pretty rough. Fist fights and hooliganism were endemic, especially among people who were newly arrived from the countryside and living in poverty [83; 201]. Social change obviously had a long way to go. But it was happening. Russia was acquiring an ever-larger 'hereditary working class', schooled in basic literacy and numeracy and trained to operate complex machinery.

Although the villages left behind by these workers changed less than the towns, they were not unchanging. Emperor Alexander II had issued the Emancipation Edict in 1861. Until then the peasantry, which constituted nine-tenths of the population, was either legally tied in personal bondage to the owners of the land where they were born or else consisted of state peasants under the tutelage of governmental officials. The nobility and the Imperial family were the country's greatest private landowners. Their peasants, while being emancipated as persons, received an unfavourable economic settlement. The average amount of land obtained by them across the empire, excluding Poland, was 13 per cent less than they had previously cultivated. In the more fertile regions such as in southern Russia, the nobility made the peasants forgo a third or even a half of what they had previously tilled [125: 730].

Matters did not stand still at that. The total terrain held as property by nobles proceeded to diminish. Sell-ups became a stampede after 1905. It is reckoned that the nobility had owned twice as much land in the 1860s as it managed to retain by 1912. Absentee

landlords were also on the increase and many estates were rented out. Townspeople were among those who took over the noble estates, but most of the new owners and tenants were former serfs. The peasantry's share in the agricultural economy, far from being compressed, achieved a remarkable growth. Buying and renting of land occurred on a massive scale. Close to nine-tenths of European Russia's sown area by 1916 was under cultivation by peasants [169: 182]. It is reckoned that 87 per cent of the total value of the empire's agricultural output between 1909 and 1913 was produced by them [169: 190]. The expansion of a market economy inevitably eroded age-old village customs. So did the spread of literacy as Alexander II followed up the Emancipation Edict with a series of educational and administrative reforms in the 1860s. Although progress was understandably slower than in the towns, a survey of a dozen provinces in European Russia before the Great War revealed that about two-fifths of the male rural population had learnt at least how to read and write their own names [229: 294]. Evidently life in the countryside was not yet transformed; but the achievement was not trivial and the drive towards new styles of existence appeared irreversible.

Not all nobles went bankrupt before they left the land. Many departed simply because they were offered outrageously good prices or because jobs in the civil service or even business beckoned [168: 124–6]. Owners of large landed estates in southern Ukraine and in the Baltic region, furthermore, became successful rural capitalists [203: 29]. The gentry marketed twice as large a proportion of its harvest as the peasants did of theirs [169: 188].

The incentive for such a social group in countryside or city to seek political reform was small. There were several reasons for this. Business was generally healthy in most years as the economy expanded. Moreover, the various sections of the propertied elite were distracted by rivalries. Noble landowners defended their interests against the industrial bourgeoisie and in 1898 secured a weakening of the tariff system which protected the growth of factories in Russia. Dues payable on imports of agricultural machinery were scrapped. There was also a successful campaign, guided by the Minister of Internal Affairs V. K. Pleve, to dissuade the emperor from sanctioning a proposal to confer noble status upon distinguished non-noble figures in trade and industry [168: 151–2; 261: 301–3]. Yet industrialists and bankers, whether or

not they hailed from lowly backgrounds, could count their blessings. The state, with its contracts and its help when the work force went on strike, was too valuable in defending the commanding heights of the urban capitalist economy for them to strain after its overthrow; and there was more huff and puff in the grievances of rural capitalists than genuine bite. The Ministry of Finance had arranged the railway freight rates so as to make it cheap for farmers to reach markets for their produce inside and outside the country. Imperial Russia was a playground for the rich whether they wore the boots of landowners or the town shoes of bankers and industrialists [156: 173–4].

[v] **Social discontents**

Yet with the development of the working class in the towns there came a multitude of problems. Most Russian factory workers were poor. Many were earning only enough for subsistence and were subjected to harsh, humiliating treatment at work. Safety regulations were widely ignored. Foremen could fine labourers for minor or even imaginary infringements of rules. The average working day, without overtime, was between 12 and 14 hours in the 1880s [161: 42, 47]. Housing was bad. For the majority the choice lay between gloomy company barracks and costly, unhygienic, overcrowded rented rooms. Health care was abysmal. Social insurance, where it existed at all, was extremely expensive.

These conditions do a lot to explain the rebelliousness that turned the Russian working class into a worldwide legend in 1905 and 1917. The squalor was not unique to Russia. Although sections of the industrial workforce in countries like Britain and Germany were beginning to enjoy a somewhat more comfortable life by the turn of the century, even western Europe contained areas of dreadful misery. Most workers in Milan and Turin were little better off than those in St Petersburg – and the spirit of revolt flourished equally in all three cities. In any case not all Russian labourers were political rebels. It was once thought that the trouble came mostly from the unskilled ‘raw youths’ from the countryside who swarmed into the towns and occasionally formed unruly mobs. But this failed to account for the quiescence of Irish immigrants to Birmingham. It is evident from Russian

industrial conflicts, moreover, that the leadership and inspiration came from the more skilled and more urbanised sections of the workforce [77: 210]. As elsewhere, such workers tended to have the understanding and the organisation to take up the struggle for better treatment. A slight rise in average real wages occurred between 1900 and 1913 and it was most remarkable among the skilled trades [89: 407]. But it was the slightness of the improvement and not the improvement itself that most workers noticed.

Poor conditions and rising expectations produced turbulence in Britain, France and Germany in this period. The same was true in the Russian Empire. Strikes were not spectacularly large before the turn of the century; the year 1899 was the peak year of the decade for industrial conflict, when the number of the strikers was only 97,000 [167: 225]. But the continuing ban on trade unions aggravated tension. This was recognised in all the main industrial countries, albeit only eventually and often with reservations, except Russia. The rapidity of industrialisation made it vital to open channels for the expression of grievances; and the gigantic size of many factories in Russia intensified the sense of a gulf between employers and employed. Two-fifths of workers in industrial firms belonged to workforces of over 1000 in 1914 [156: 7].

The peasants, apart from some disturbances in the early 1860s and late 1870s, did not put the police to much bother in the last century. Yet their basic unhappiness was of an acute kind. They were angry that so much of the land they cultivated had to be rented from gentry landowners, who were also hated for hanging on to crucial pastures and woods. This largely detracted from any rise in the income accruing to the peasantry. In any case, the rise was an aggregate figure that disguised the gradations of living standards. Most peasants in European Russia lived in communes. The government used this institution as a cost-free tax-gathering and self-policing facility. Communes in central and northern Russia periodically redistributed their land among resident peasant households. But inequalities persisted so that the more affluent peasants, known as kulaks, hired other peasants as labourers or became money-lenders. The village poor in Russia, as in Ireland and Germany [185: 138], lived in piteously poor conditions. This focused rural minds on the land question. Peasant land-hunger was almost universal and the belief that noble landowners should be constrained to give up their land was deeply held. Then there

were the discriminatory laws. Peasants, until 1904, were subject to corporal punishment for misdemeanours. The post of ‘land captains’, who were charged with keeping order in the villages and who often were from the gentry, was a further vexation.

[vi] **Political upheaval: 1905–1906**

The possibility that the discontent might turn into political opposition was the government’s nightmare in the late nineteenth century. Enlightened labour laws were passed. But implementation was patchy, and the army was used to break up strikes. Wage battles between employers and employees automatically acquired a political significance. Workers increasingly discerned this. So too did students. The officious university deans, the mandatory uniforms and the niggardly financial support annoyed them. Postgraduate unemployment was a further irritation [217: 45–6]. It is true that the bureaucracy gave jobs to numerous ex-students, and that state enterprises like the railways were major employers. But a ponderous insistence upon hierarchy and routine was resented by a frustrated young generation through to the end of the regime. Some entrenched themselves in the ‘free professions’ like law and medicine. Others made their mark in the *zemstvos* [110: 426–8].

Many intellectuals believed that the absolute monarchy was the primordial cause of the country’s ills. Clandestine organisations were formed from the 1860s onwards aiming to rebuild society on the foundations of egalitarian traditions in the peasant land commune. The militants by focusing upon ‘the people’ earned their description as ‘populists’ (*narodniki*). Their passionate argument was that a transition directly to a socialist order was practicable. A party, Land and Freedom, operated in the 1870s and recruited hundreds of peasants. But the vast rural majority never knew its name. Land and Freedom’s propaganda had little effect; and the assassination of Emperor Alexander II by its terrorist offshoot, People’s Freedom, caused revulsion in 1881. Yet an estimated 5000 revolutionaries resumed activity in the political ‘underground’ in the ensuing two decades [204: 42]. The populists came to recognise that capitalism was planting deep roots in the Imperial economy; they also saw that the urban working

class was more responsive than the bafflingly quiescent peasantry to political slogans. Secret trade unions were formed at the risk of arrest by the workers from 1874 onwards. Political liberty was among their demands. Populists strove to enter and direct such organisations. From the 1880s they were rivalled by groupings which adapted the doctrines of German Marxism to conditions in Russia. The Russian Marxists extolled the advantages of urbanism and large-scale social units; in their estimation, a bourgeois-led republican government had to be established before there could be a campaign for a further transition to socialism. Their strategy won more supporters than populism in the late 1890s. But linkage with the mass labour movement was attained only fitfully. The political police, known as the Okhrana, rounded up activists in hundreds. Liberals were harassed; the neo-populists, the Socialist-Revolutionaries, suffered prison and exile. The Marxists, whose 10,000 adherents made them the largest anti-monarchist party in 1904, were hunted hard [241: 25].

Repression by itself did not work well enough for the government and other preventive measures were tried. The legislation discriminating against the peasantry began to be repealed after the turn of the century. Attention was directed at the workers too. A few trade unions were legalised, but they were saddled with harsh restrictions and kept under surveillance by the Okhrana. Quickly this experiment was adjudged dangerous by the Ministry of Internal Affairs and was under threat by 1904.

The remnants of one such union in St Petersburg, led by Orthodox Church priest Father Georgi Gapon, induced upheaval in the following year. Rostov-on-Don, which had been in tumult in 1902, had had to be pacified militarily. St Petersburg three years later was less easily controlled. On 9 January 1905, guards units fired upon Gapon's peaceful procession in favour of constitutional and social reforms. 'Bloody Sunday' provoked strikes and public marches. The non-Russians went to the fore in defying the government as Poles set up barricades in cities and Georgia virtually became self-ruling. The Finns too were restless. The armed forces, moreover, had been preoccupied by a disastrous war with Japan since 1904 and hundreds of mutinies followed the defeats in the Far East [84: 86]. Workers in Russia and elsewhere created their own unofficial councils by election. The Russian word for council is soviet. These soviets, quickly evolving beyond

the functions of strike leadership, set up apparatuses of local administration. Political revolution loomed. Peasants, their harvest ruined by drought, were restive. Illegal pasturing and wood felling on gentry land occurred in the summer, and agricultural wage-labourers went on strike [108: 96]. Cases of arson increased. Occasional seizures of land occurred. Village communes, wherever they existed, helped to co-ordinate the anti-gentry revolt. A Peasants' Union was established. But the rebels in the countryside acted independently of the Union: it was in the towns that large organisations of any kind made an impact. Men, not surprisingly in view of the Russian family's traditions, took a bigger part than



Cartoon 2 M. M. Chemodanov's cartoon from 1905, depicting the rabbit attacking the bear after the lion has killed the bear. The lion is the 'proletariat', the bear is the tsarist regime and the rabbit is 'the liberal bourgeoisie'.

women [132: 81–2]. Trade unions were formed even among civil servants, waiters and the unemployed. Factory workers were not alone on the streets. Industrialists doubted the government's technical competence and joined the initial clamour for a constitution.

The monarch's fate hung by a thread as political parties emerged from the shadows. Mutiny erupted in the Black Sea fleet. The Marxist leadership of the Moscow Soviet mounted an armed uprising of workers in December 1905. Emperor, ministers, high command and police were widely reviled. Newspapers across nearly the entire spectrum of public life carried editorials predicting fundamental change in the Russian Empire.

[vii] The limits of the regime's adaptiveness

Two things saved the regime: its unsparing use of the army and its last-ditch promise of political concessions in the October Manifesto of 1905. All the revolts were quelled or deflected. A parliament, or State *Duma*, was promised. It duly met in April 1906. The Duma's powers were very restricted since it could neither appoint ministers nor pass laws autonomously. It was also liable to dissolution at the emperor's behest. And yet a chastened Nicholas II was willing to display favour towards leaders of Russian liberalism. He invited a few liberals, including Pavel Milyukov, into the Council of Ministers. This political semi-compromise was not a Russian invention; it was the kind of idea practised in Germany through to 1918. But the offer came too late for impatient, overconfident liberals in the Russian Empire – and perhaps it would even have been a difficult trick to pull off earlier. At any rate the liberals, who had formed the Constitutional-Democratic Party (or Kadets), spurned the proposal and held out for a parliament with independent legislative authority. In the First Duma they spent their time haranguing ministers. To their horror, Nicholas II issued a decree to disband the proceedings. The monarch and his premier Pëtr Stolypin were no more enamoured of the Second Duma; and in 1907, by means of something like a coup d'état, they revised the electoral rules so that the landed gentry might dominate the new chamber. This resulted in the Third State Duma. The Duma's largest party were reform-minded conservatives known

as the Octobrists, who accepted the new limits of legal political behaviour and aimed to gain an influence over the government by co-operating with it in the Duma.

Stolypin wanted to avoid relying too heavily upon the rural nobility. He therefore sought to strengthen the peasantry's rights in the local elections to the zemstvos [145: 155]. This attempt was frustrated. It ran athwart the nobility's interests, and Nicholas II acceded to requests to maintain the status quo. Noble landowners set their face against sharing their rural dominance even with neighbouring industrialists [190: 369–70]. Stolypin's ambitions anyway had inner contradictions. It was he who had arranged to prevent the peasantry's demographic strength from being duly registered in the Third Duma. He had also ordered the execution of the peasant 'ringleaders' of 1905. Field courts-martial summarily sent 2694 such men and women to their death [106: 448].

In 1911 Stolypin himself was killed by an assassin; but his political fortunes had long been in eclipse. Nicholas II was his empire's greatest landowner and remained reluctant to go against the wishes of the landowning class. The emperor had never been keen about constitutional reform, and courtiers never failed to voice their concerns about Stolypin's innovations [284: 129–34]. Steadily the will to preserve his dynasty's powers intact ruled over other desires. In 1909 he took offence at Stolypin's proposal that, in order to keep sound relations with the Octobrists, the Duma should be permitted to vet matters such as the Imperial navy's budget. Nicholas and his wife sought out advisers they found more congenial. They welcomed quacks and the 'holy man' Rasputin in their court. Ministerial office became ever more closely associated with bribery and corruption. Forthright crown servants like Witte and Stolypin gave way to toadies. Although a few courtiers made criticisms of the trends in public life, they castigated the symptoms of decadence and not the disease: they reviled Rasputin while refusing to recognise more basic political problems. Furthermore, the quasi-constitutional settlement of 1906 involved an Imperial State Council as a counterweight to the far from weighty Duma. The State Council was drawn from the higher spheres of state, Church, zemstvos, business and landed nobility, and its conservative majority regularly upset initiatives for change emanating both from the Duma and from Stolypin

[106: 491]. This suited the instincts of Nicholas II, whose nominations to the State Council reflected his rigidity.

Russian nationalism was fast becoming the regime's last standby. Shadowy associations arose on the political far right. Among them were the Black Hundreds which carried out pogroms against Jewish communities in the name of God, Holy Russia and the tsar. The central government, while disapproving of such lawlessness, lacked the will and enough police to put a stop to it [162: 24, 33–4; 173: 205, 207, 233]. Traditional chauvinism also took non-violent forms. The Orthodox Church, the ecclesiastical arm of government, displayed its creativity mainly by heightening its intolerance towards the other Christian denominations and the Moslems. Meanwhile the Ministry of Foreign Affairs asserted Russia's role as protector of the Slays in the Balkans.

[viii] Social resilience and institutional growth

Yet the monarchy's power was on the wane. It is true that the revolutionaries were spectacularly defeated and crushed after 1905. For instance, the adherents of organised Marxism – the Russian Social-Democratic Workers Party – fell numerically from 150,000 in 1907 to 10,000 in 1910 [109: 36–7]. But the power of the Imperial government was much more effective in brief, intense trials of strength than in perennial political struggle. The police state was still only half-built. Indeed the Russian Empire had seven times fewer policemen as a ratio of the total population than the UK [238: 56]. To be sure, this comparison can be a misleading one inasmuch as it takes account neither of the garrison troops deployed to keep order nor of village 'self-policing' by peasants. Nevertheless the control of civil society became more problematic after 1905 when the weakness of state authority had been exposed. It was hard enough to keep tabs on political activities. It was harder still to regulate the spread of ideas, especially after 1906 when the censorship ceased to require publishers to submit manuscripts before publication. Not that successive censors were outstandingly perceptive. Marx's *Das Kapital* had appeared legally in translation in 1872. The roll of honour of Russian literature, furthermore, includes authors from Alexander Pushkin through to Lev Tolstoi and Maxim

Gorki who evaded the ban on their works by dressing up their political criticisms in indirect language. The terminology became still less restrained before the First World War. Editors were still prosecuted and their presses closed down by the authorities, but even the revolutionary parties managed to resume publication: usually they simply renamed their newspapers and continued printing as previously.

Not all the technological innovations that facilitated the extremely repressive states headed by Stalin in the Soviet Union and Hitler in Germany had yet been disseminated. Nicholas II's government anyway did not envisage such excesses of regimentation as an objective. The executions of 1906–1909 were more the exception than the norm. Exile was the usual punishment for political dissenters, but many of them suffered badly from the climate and isolation in northern Russia and Siberia [295: 23].

Even so, the regime's efforts to mobilise popular favour behind it were diminutive. They could even be counterproductive. The coronation of Nicholas II in 1896 was planned so poorly that hundreds of onlookers on Khodynka Field were trampled to death. State occasions, such as the celebration of the Romanov dynasty's tercentenary in 1913, were subsequently better arranged; and sums were assigned for publications depicting the emperor as working selflessly for the good for the people [296: 457, 487]. But governing circles in St Petersburg lacked the imaginativeness of their counterparts in Berlin or London in developing new rituals and propaganda to elicit a renewed consent from society. The Russian monarch, moreover, ruled an empire of mutually hostile nations, and Russians constituted only 45 per cent of his subjects. It was very difficult to obtain the approval of most Poles and many Finns without allowing them to secede from the empire. The Ukrainians and Belorussians, who as Slavs were ethnically close to the Russians, were not so implacable; and, in the south Caucasus, the Georgians and Armenians knew that independence would expose them to the threat of a Turkish invasion [248: 665–70]. But the Imperial authorities did little to enhance their reputation among non-Russians. Chances to rally backing from Russians were also overlooked. Nicholas II, like his predecessors, thought more about the interests of empire than about nation building. Most

Russians were peasants and their vision of life was circumscribed by the concerns of village, agriculture and Christian festivals; they knew little about anything beyond the limits of their own little village. Once upon a time the authorities had found this very convenient. If peasants were to have acquired a deeper understanding of Russia and the world, they might have become a national force that disturbed the Imperial equilibrium.

The middle classes made scant effort to integrate the Russian lower social classes into a wider sense of society. They usually disdained to found the football clubs and choral societies that fostered civic pride and, to some extent, an inter-class culture in the West [237: 36, 39]. Probably social antagonisms were too unyielding for cultural integration to have been successful. The divisions between the propertied few and the impoverished millions were sharp and deep. Social welfare was meanly provided. Admittedly the zemstvos founded schools and hospitals, but the resultant tax burden was resented by peasants; and a small number of ‘people’s houses’ were privately established in the big cities to supply workers with reading clubs [146: 77–8]. All in all, though, endeavours of philanthropic nature were insubstantial.

So working men were insulated from the state and the middle classes. They therefore organised their own groupings. From the mid-nineteenth century they were forming Sunday schools. These were devoted to initiating or broadening the education of the adult pupils, and they attracted revolutionaries as volunteer teachers. Another point of activity was the sickness-insurance funds, even though by law they had to include employers’ representatives. Taverns were favourite gathering spots. The growth of both atheism and alcoholism caused much official anxiety; but labourers befuddled by vodka were not a threat to the regime. Other modes of social intercourse were much more disturbing. The government was worried about the groups of workers linked by common geographical origins and known as *zemlyachestva*. In these, a man could relax and talk with little fear of being overheard by the police. The October 1905 Manifesto, furthermore, led to a proliferation of still larger organisations in the form of trade unions. Admittedly about 600 unions were shut down by 1911. But some always survived, and their leaderships trained hundreds of working-class functionaries to handle their affairs. The co-operative movement flourished and thousands of agricultural

co-ops existed by 1914 [152: 14]. These also encountered bureaucratic harassment, but the effect was only to increase the alienation of their largely peasant membership from the political status quo. Independent social organisations, despite governmental interference, were a fact of life. ‘Autocratic Russia’ was no longer in a traditionally autocratic fashion.

[ix] **Economic problems before 1914**

Even before 1905 the government had seen agrarian reform as its last hope of survival. The rural turbulence in that year convinced official and landowning opinion that the peasant commune, far from acting as a prop for the existing order of things, undermined the foundations. Communal agriculture was associated with three-field crop rotation with the division of each field into several strips for each household and, in European Russia, with periodic redistribution of land among households. Russian peasant agriculture, for all its advances, remained backward by the standards of the Western great powers. Stolypin’s wish, when he became premier in 1906, was for the peasants to disband the commune, to consolidate a household’s strips of land into a contiguous holding and to hand property deeds to the heads of household. Independent, prosperous smallholders were his goal.

In fact, only about a tenth of peasant households in the empire’s European zone consolidated by 1916 [103: 572, 583]. The government had made the terms of exodus from the commune increasingly easy. Even so, the fall of individual applications to leave after 1909 was never reversed. The warmest welcome for agrarian reform occurred in the fertile south of the Russian Empire. But the average size of consolidated farms set up in three Ukrainian provinces to the west of the river Dnieper was nevertheless hardly massive: just 15 acres [103: 586]. Most peasants anyway preferred the commune’s guarantee of collective welfare, however inadequate, to the uncertainties of individual farming. In fact the Ministry of Agriculture relented its anti-communal drive before the Great War. It was finding that the ‘consolidators’ were often the most blatant exponents of soil-exhaustive methods because the pressure on them to make a quick profit was intense. By contrast, many communes were

eager for advice on the introduction of multifold crop rotations [209: 441, 445]. The problem was that action through the commune involved settling for a lengthy schedule for agricultural progress. Meanwhile, the climate was still ruining the harvest about once every seven years. The poor soil quality in northern Russia meant that the region had to import grain and potatoes to subsist; and central Russia, which had traditionally exported its surplus northwards in the previous century, failed to increase its output before the First World War as fast as the rise in its population [290: 6–7].

Imperial agriculture, then, was poised precariously between painstakingly won success and occasional disaster. The run of good harvests from 1909 to 1913 concealed the problems. Russian industry faced dilemmas. The trough of 1905 and the ensuing recession was followed by sustained recovery aided vitally by an enormous French loan; and expansion continued through to the First World War. But again the appearance of advance, with the non-state civilian economy at last breaking entirely clear of its past reliance upon state support, is deceptive.

Governmental projects remained important in Imperial industrial production. After the defeat in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–1905, when the Baltic fleet was annihilated, metallurgy received a boost from vast defence orders [123: 105–7]. The priority given to ‘rearmament’ was scarcely unique to Russia; but Germany, Britain and France were at a more advanced stage of industrialism. The deflection of investment away from civilian objectives had more adverse effects upon Russia, whose transport network needed to be denser than it was. The St Petersburg government, furthermore, nurtured a cosy relationship with a small number of huge firms. Delivery on time and at fixed prices was thought to suit the state’s interest better than *laissez-faire* competition. Scandals of excessive profits recurred [176: 138]. It was unfortunate that these same metallurgical companies could not satisfy the demand for agricultural implements. Imports of tools and machinery, particularly from the US, expanded. Many firms not blessed with governmental contracts found the going hard. Although the Russian Empire’s industrial output increased before 1914, the still higher rate of expansion in the US and Germany meant that the gap in productive capacity was widening [72: 1104, 1108].

[x] **Political instability**

Yet the economy's achievements must not be understated. The dynamism of Russian agriculture and industry was impressive, and the strictly economic difficulties, in the factories if not in the countryside, posed no immediate threat to capitalist development. But the poverty of most workers and peasants remained. Its persistence was a Damoclean sword dangling over Imperial politics.

The ultimate emergency drew nearer as factory labourers returned to the offensive. In 1912, 2032 strikes broke out. The timing of the outburst was affected by the boom which had increased opportunities for employment and allayed the fear of confronting employers; and the long-standing grievances of working people had been made more acute by the changes introduced into factories to raise labour productivity after 1905 [143: 171]. The emphasis on 'scientific management' was not merely a bosses' offensive even though this was undoubtedly part of the story. Wages were low by the standards of advanced industrial economies; but labour overhead costs, as measured in the provision of housing and training, were much higher [89: 404]. The pressure on industrialists to rationalise their operations was severe. Any lingering doubts about the government's involvement on the bourgeoisie's side vanished with the shooting of striking workers in the Lena gold fields in April 1912 – sympathy with the labour movement spread far and wide in reaction to the massacre [190: 154–7, 193]. The crescendo continued. In the first half of 1914 alone there were over 3000 strikes, and two-thirds of them were associated with political demands. Many strikers were demanding a democratic republic, an eight-hour working day and the expropriation of gentry-held land [138: 365]. These were slogans espoused by the more radical of the Marxists such as the sympathisers of Vladimir Lenin and Lev Trotsky [278: 191]. The Okhrana's penetration of revolutionary groupings remained deep and successful; and few workers were acquainted with Marxist doctrine. Yet as social unrest increased, huge demonstrations against the monarchy were organised in St Petersburg in summer 1914. These were suppressed and a revolutionary situation was pre-empted, but the fragility of the political order had been exposed yet again [188: 315–7].

Court and government appeared incompetent and distasteful to an ever-larger segment of the middle classes. Nicholas II

succumbed to autocratic recidivism. The base of his support became gravely narrow when, in 1913, Alexander Guchkov and other Octobrists made overtures for an anti-governmental pact with the Kadets. Thus did moderate conservatism announce its despair of winning the emperor's sympathy. On the other hand, the monarchy's self-professed friends outside the Duma, such as the Union of the Russian People, urged a comprehensive programme of repression and anti-constitutionalism that was manifestly outside the regime's powers to realise.

Events abroad superimposed themselves upon the political disarray in St Petersburg. On 28 June 1914 the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated in Sarajevo, and the Habsburg government in Vienna held the Serbian government responsible. Russia announced its support for the Serbs. When Austria-Hungary, encouraged by the German government, declared war on Serbia, the Russian emperor ordered his army's general mobilisation. The Germany high command gained the pretext it wanted to defeat the Russians before they became even stronger. On 1 August, as St Petersburg refused to stand down its forces, Berlin declared war on Russia. The German war plan called for an attack on France over the plains of Belgium. The UK, which had signed a guarantee of Belgian neutrality, was pulled into the diplomatic proceedings, and on 4 August the British cabinet issued an ultimatum for the Germans to evacuate Belgium. No reply was forthcoming from Berlin. The Great War had begun. Although its first battles were fought in Europe, it had ramifications throughout the world. Two great coalitions confronted each other. The Central Powers were headed by Germany and Austria-Hungary and the Allies by France, Russia and the UK.

The motives of each government were complex and controversial. In Russia, it was Nicholas II who took the crucial decision to fight. His patience with both Austria and Germany was exhausted. He was striving to preserve his country's prestige and her pretension to status as a Great Power. His upbringing and outlook inclined him to the military option in summer 1914. Also of influence on him was the course of international relations in recent years. Around the turn of the century, St Petersburg and Berlin had settled their rivalries without much difficulty. But Russia drew closer to her French ally after 1905 when loans raised in Paris saved the Imperial regime. Germany's frustrations about her own global

position grew in the same period. A Franco-German dispute over Morocco in 1905–1906 resulted in Berlin's diplomatic defeat. But then Germany successfully sustained Austria-Hungary's annexation of Bosnia in 1908 in the teeth of the remonstrations of Serbia. Russia had spoken in Serbia's favour, but the risk of war with Germany intimidated Nicholas II into climbing down. In 1914 he was unwilling to suffer another such humiliation [22].

Probably he would have been goaded into a declaration of war even if he had not declared it voluntarily. Conservative and liberal politicians in the Duma were equally alert to questions of Imperial 'honour' and material interest [181: 69]. Economic as well as geopolitical issues were at stake. German industrial penetration of Russian markets was deepening. Many magnates of Russian industry, banking and commerce looked forward to asserting themselves over a vanquished Germany and desired Russia annex the Straits of the Dardanelles.

Nicholas II and his trusted advisers also calculated that a short, victorious war would quieten the tremors of revolution at home. The stress in official pronouncements was placed on patriotic duty. War hysteria quickly gripped the country and the danger of defeat was hardly discussed. The emperor's action was widely applauded. Worker and owner, peasant and landlord, civil servant, lawyer and aristocrat: all sections of Imperial society joined in the military enthusiasm. Plans for anti-governmental strikes and demonstrations were abandoned. Governmental optimism was in the ascendant, and certainly the Russian Imperial armed forces were not so dreadfully ill-prepared as was once supposed; indeed the German high command had been fearful that Russian power would become insuperable unless a pre-emptive war were waged. But the first campaign in eastern Prussia was a massive setback for Russia. At the battle of Tannenberg, in August 1914, the German forces encircled the Russians and took hundreds of thousands of prisoners. A rapid strategic retreat took place and the Imperial Army dug trenches and prepared to resist Germany's first offensive. It became clear that the war would be a protracted one. And the strains of all-out, lengthy warfare were bound to tell harder and harder on the Russian Empire's economy and society. The point of political explosion was moving nearer.

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