

1 Introduction

POINTS TO CONSIDER

In 1881 Russia was an empire, ruled over by an all-powerful tsar. By 1924 it had become a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, ruled over by an all-powerful political party. Such a remarkable transformation involved profound political, social and economic changes. This book describes these changes and analyses why they occurred, paying particular attention to the events of 1917 – the year of the Bolshevik Revolution. In this opening chapter the key features of the period are briefly described. A cross-reference is given in brackets to the chapters where the themes are explored in detail. The chapter then provides an introduction to the rest of the book by describing the main features of imperial Russia. The concluding section looks at the question of why it was so difficult to achieve genuine reform in Russia.

1 Outline of the Period, 1881–1924

1881–95 – the years of reaction and growing resistance

In reaction to the assassination of the reforming tsar, Alexander II, by a group of revolutionaries, the government followed a policy of severe repression. Its aim was the traditional one of crushing all political opposition (Chapter 2). In spite of the regime's severity, a number of reforming and revolutionary parties had come into being by the end of the century. These represented a range of opinions, from the wish to see the tsarist system reformed to the desire to see it swept away altogether (Chapter 3).

1893–1903 – 'the great spurt'

What had helped to stimulate reformers and revolutionaries alike was a rapid period of industrial growth in the 1890s, associated with the work of Sergei Witte, the minister of finance. This 'great spurt' seemed to offer a possibility that Russia might be able to throw off its economic backwardness (Chapter 2).

1904–14 – revolution and repression

Following Russia's disastrous showing in a war against Japan 1904–05, there occurred a series of nationwide disturbances, which were serious enough to be referred to as the 1905 Revolution. This obliged the government to make some concessions. A *duma* (parliament) was introduced and became a feature of the political scene until 1917.

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However, the tsar, Nicholas II, had no intention of allowing the duma to become a genuine limitation on his autocratic powers. Between 1907 and 1914 its authority was increasingly eroded under the repressive policies of Peter Stolypin (Chapter 2).

1914–17 Imperial Russia at war

In 1914 Russia became involved in war with Germany and Austria–Hungary. This put a great strain on the nation’s military and economic systems and raised searching political questions about the ability of the tsar and his government to lead the nation in time of crisis (Chapter 4).

The 1917 Revolution

Faced by economic disruption, military reverses in the field and mounting opposition at home, Nicholas II abdicated in the ‘February Revolution’ of 1917. He was replaced by the Provisional Government, the remnant of the old duma (Chapter 4). But from the beginning the new government was beset by major problems. It had, in effect, to share its authority with the Petrograd Soviet, a self-appointed council of soldiers, workers and peasants. The continuing war, food shortages, and rampant inflation under-mined the Provisional Government’s efforts to create stability. In October, the Bolsheviks, the Marxist revolutionary party led by Lenin, who had returned to Russia on the fall of the tsar, mounted a successful coup against it (Chapter 5).

The Bolshevik Consolidation of Power, 1917–24

During the years following their seizure of power in 1917, Lenin and the Bolsheviks had to defend their revolution against the forces of reaction (generally referred to as the Whites) and to fight off attempted invasions of Soviet Russia by the western capitalist powers. They were successful in this and by the time of Lenin’s death in 1924 they had crushed all forms of political opposition within Russia. They appeared to have laid the basis for the development of the USSR as the world’s first socialist state (Chapter 6 and 7).

The significance of Russian history, 1881–1924

The character of the events that took place in Russia in these years has made the period one of unending debate. Why did Russia undergo such changes? Were they inevitable? What role did individuals play in the process? Could Russia have modernised its backward economic and social structure without undergoing revolution? Did the seizure of power in 1917 by a revolutionary Bolshevik Party mark the dawn of

a new freedom for the Russian people, or did it simply replace one form of authoritarianism with another? In terms of its significance for the rest of the world, there is an even more important question. Was the Russian Revolution a model for all peoples seeking freedom and justice, or was it a fraudulent tyranny which led necessarily to misery and oppression? Such questions have long continued to excite fierce controversy among historians and analysts. As you work through this book you will find that it is questions such as these, and the often conflicting answers offered to them, that provide the major KEY ISSUES that are sign-posted for you along the way.

2 Imperial Russia

KEY ISSUE Why had imperial Russia not modernised its governmental, political and economic systems?

a) Its Geography and People

In 1881 imperial Russia covered over eight million square miles, an area equivalent to two and a half times the size of the USA. At its widest, from west to east, it stretched for 5,000 miles; at its longest, north to south, it measured 2,000 miles. It covered a large part of two continents. European Russia extended eastward from the borders of Poland to the Urals mountain range. Asiatic Russia extended eastward from the Urals to the Pacific Ocean. The greater part of the

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

Great Russian	55.6	Lithuanian	1.2
Ukrainian	22.4	Armenian	1.2
Polish	7.9	Romanian/Moldavian	1.1
White Russian	5.8	Estonian	1.0
Jewish (defined by faith)	5.0	Mordvinian	1.0
Kirgiz/Kaisats	4.0	Georgian	0.8
Tartar	3.4	Tadzhik	0.3
Finnish	3.1	Turkmenian	0.3
German	1.8	Greek	0.2
Latvian	1.4	Bulgarian	0.2
Bashkir	1.3	Uzbekh	0.1



Imperial Russia.

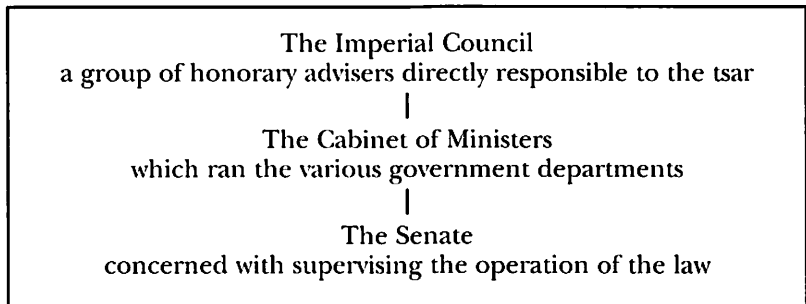
population, which between 1815 and 1914 quadrupled from 40 million to 165 million, was concentrated in European Russia. It was in that part of the empire that the major historical developments had occurred and it was there that Russia's principal cities, Moscow and St Petersburg, the capital, were situated.

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

b) The Tsarist Government

In theory, the peoples of the Russian Empire were governed by one person, the tsar (emperor). Since 1613 the Russian tsars had been members of the Romanov dynasty. By law and tradition, the tsar was the absolute ruler. Article I of the 'Fundamental Laws of the Empire', issued by Nicholas I in 1832, declared: 'The Emperor of all the Russias is an autocratic and unlimited monarch. God himself ordains that all must bow to his supreme power, not only out of fear but also out of conscience.'

There were three official bodies through which the tsar exercised his authority:



These bodies were much less powerful than their titles suggested. They were appointed, not elected, and their role was wholly advisory or administrative. In no way did they restrict the power of the tsar, whose word was the final authority in all matters of state and of law. That the tsar still claimed absolute authority was an indication of how little Russia had advanced politically. By the beginning of the twentieth century all the major western-European countries had some form of democratic or representative government. Not so Russia; although it had been frequently involved in European diplomatic and military affairs, it had remained outside the mainstream of European political

though, Progressive tsars such as Peter I (1683–1725), Catherine II (1762–96) and Alexander II (1855–81) had taken steps to modernise the country, but their reforms had not included the extension of political rights. In Russia in 1881 it was still a criminal offence to oppose the tsar or his government. There was no parliament, and political parties were not officially tolerated. State censorship was imposed on the press and on published books.

This did not prevent liberal ideas from seeping into Russia, but it did mean that they could not be openly expressed. The result was that supporters of reform or change had to go underground. In the nineteenth century there had grown up in Russia a wide variety of secret societies dedicated to political reform or revolution. These groups were frequently infiltrated by agents of the *Okhrana*, the tsar's secret police. As a result, raids, arrests, imprisonment and general harassment were regular occurrences.

Among Russia's governing classes there was a deeply ingrained prejudice against granting rights to the mass of the people. Over four-fifths of the population were peasants. They were predominantly illiterate and uneducated. Their sheer size as a social class and their uncivilised ways led to their being regarded with a mixture of fear and contempt by the governing elite, who believed that these dangerous 'dark masses' could be held in check only by severe repression. This was what Alexandra, the wife of the last tsar, Nicholas II (1894–1917), meant by saying that Russia needed always to be 'under the whip.' The denial of free speech tended to drive political activists towards extremism. The outstanding example of this was the assassination of Tsar Alexander II in 1881 by a terrorist group known as 'The People's Will' (see page 36). In a society in which state oppression vied with revolutionary terrorism, there was no moderate middle ground on which a tradition of ordered political debate could develop.

(c) The Russian Orthodox Church

The tsars were fully supported in their claims to absolute authority by one of the great pillars of the Russian system, the Orthodox Church. This was a branch of Christianity which since the fifteenth century had been entirely independent of any outside authority, such as the papacy. Its detachment from foreign influence had given it an essentially Russian character. The beauty of its liturgy and music had long been an outstanding expression of Russian culture. However, by the late nineteenth century it had become an essentially conservative body, opposed to political change and wholly committed to the preservation of the tsarist system in its reactionary form. The Church did contain some priests who strongly sympathised with the political revolutionaries, but as an institution it used its spiritual authority to teach the Russian people that it was their duty to be totally obedient to the

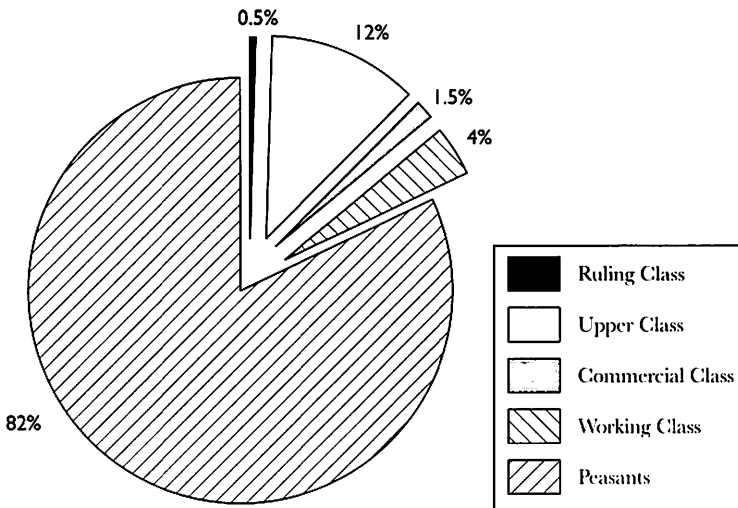
tsar as God's anointed. The catechism of the Church (the primer used for instructing the people in the essential points of the faith) included the statement that 'God commands us to love and obey from the inmost recesses of our heart every authority, and particularly the tsar'.

d) The Social and Economic Structure of Tsarist Russia

i) Social Classes

The striking features of the social structure were the comparatively small commercial, professional and working classes and the great preponderance of peasants in the population. This is illustrated in the accompanying pie-chart which shows the class distribution of the population, as measured by Russia's 1897 census.

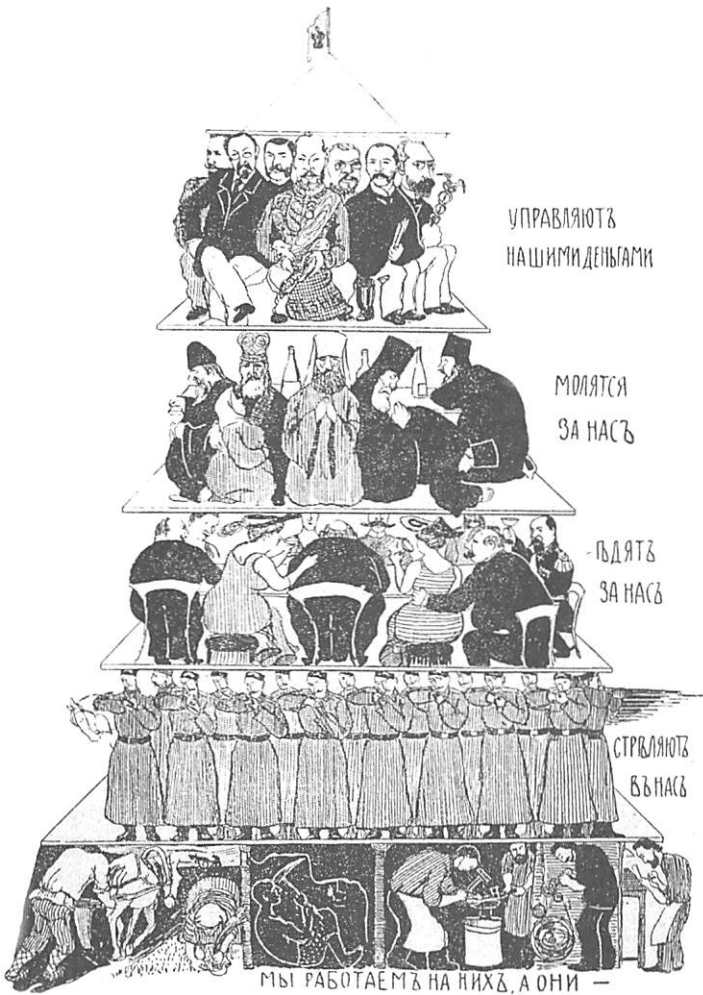
Ruling class (tsar, court, and government)	0.5%
Upper class (nobility, higher clergy, military officers)	12.0%
Commercial class (merchants, factory owners, financiers)	1.5%
Working class (factory workers and small traders)	4.0%
Peasants (land dwellers and agricultural workers)	82.0%



Class structure in tsarist Russia according to the 1897 census.

ii) Industry

The remarkable difference in size between the urban professional and working classes and the rural peasants illustrated a critical aspect of imperial Russia – its slow economic development. The low numbers of urban workers indicated that Russia had not experienced the major industrial expansion that had occurred in the nineteenth



A mocking socialist cartoon of 1900 showing the social pyramid in imperial Russia. The Russian caption for each layer reads (in ascending order):

‘We work for them while they ...’

‘... shoot at us.’

‘... eat on our behalf.’

‘... pray on our behalf.’

‘... dispose of our money.’

century in such countries as Germany, Britain and the USA. This is not to say that Russia was entirely without industry. The Urals region produced considerable amounts of iron, and the chief western cities, Moscow and St Petersburg, had extensive textile factories. Most villages had a smelting-works, and most peasant homes engaged in some form of cottage-industry, producing wooden, flaxen or woollen goods to supplement their income from farming. However, these activities were all relatively small-scale. The sheer size of Russia and its undeveloped transport system had restricted industrial growth. A further limitation had been the absence of an effective banking system. Russia did not have access to the readily-available capital for investment in industry that had stimulated developments in other countries. These factors had discouraged the rise of entrepreneurialism, the dynamic, expansionist attitude that characterised western commercial and industrial activity in this period.

!!!) *Agriculture and the Peasantry*

Russia's unenterprising industrial system was matched by its inefficient pattern of agriculture. Even though four-fifths of the population were peasants, a thriving agrarian economy had failed to develop. Indeed, the land in Russia was a source of national weakness rather than strength. The empire's vast acres were not all good farming country. Much of Russia lay too far north to enjoy a climate or a soil suitable for crop-growing or cattle-rearing. Arable farming was restricted mainly to the Black Earth region, the area of European Russia stretching from the Ukraine to Kazakhstan. In addition, the size of the peasant population created its own problems. There was simply not enough productive land to go round. The peasants were entitled to buy land under the terms of the Emancipation Decree of 1861, which had abolished serfdom (the Russian equivalent of landed slavery), but they invariably found its price excessively high. This was caused both by a scarcity of suitable farmland and by the government's taxation of property sales, imposed in order to raise the revenue needed to compensate the landowners for the loss of their serfs. The only way the peasants could raise the money to buy land was by borrowing from a special fund provided by the government. Consequently, those peasants who did manage to purchase property found themselves burdened with large mortgage repayments which would take them and their families generations to repay. The high cost of land meant that few peasant families could afford to increase their acreage. The small areas that were purchased were normally subdivided into narrow strips in an attempt to provide each household within the family with some property, no matter how little. The result was greater inefficiency. The strip system, involving the use of antiquated farming implements and techniques, had long ago been abandoned in the agriculturally advanced nations. Its continu-

ation in Russia was a major reason why the nation could not meet its food needs.

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

(v) *The Army*

One method of keeping the 'dark masses' in check was to conscript numbers of them into the Russian armed services. The lower ranks of the army and navy were largely filled by enforced enlistment. Conscription was regularly used as a form of punishment for law-breakers. The dread of conscription among ordinary Russians derived from their awareness that life in the army was invariably a brutalising experience. The Russian army was notorious in Europe for the severity of its discipline and the grimness of the conditions in which its soldiers lived. Special military camps had been set up in the remotest regions of the empire which operated as penal colonies rather than as training establishments. The rigours of service life had accounted for the deaths of over one million soldiers in peacetime during the reign of Nicholas I (1825-55).

It was a persistent belief that, as a large empire, Russia required a large army. Throughout the nineteenth century the imperial forces had a strength of around one and a half million men. The cost of maintaining the army and the navy accounted on average for forty-five per cent of the government's annual expenditure. This was by far the largest single item of state spending, and, when compared with the four per cent devoted to education, shows the order of priorities set by the government.

The higher ranks of the army were the preserve of the aristocracy. Commissions were bought and sold, and there was little room for promotion on merit. This necessarily made it less effective as a fighting force, but this fact tended to remain hidden because, with the exception of the Crimean War (1854-6), Russia was not engaged in a war with a western European power for a whole century after 1815. The army's active service was essentially a matter of putting down national risings or serious disturbances within the empire or on its frontiers. There were also frequent border wars with Turkey throughout the nineteenth century, and at various times Russian forces saw action in Poland, Armenia and Persia.

v) *The Bureaucracy*

Ironically, it was in the area where there had been the largest attempted reform that the greatest corruption had developed. Peter I had attempted to modernise Russia by establishing a full-scale civil service aimed at maintaining central government control throughout the empire. However, by the middle of the nineteenth century many critics within Russia had begun to condemn this civil service as a corrupt bureaucracy whose nepotism and incompetence were the principal reasons for Russia's backwardness. Alexander Herzen, a leading revolutionary writer, made the following charge in 1868:

- 1 One of the saddest consequences of Peter I's revolution was the development of the official class. An artificial, hungry, and uneducated class, capable of doing nothing but 'serving', knowing nothing apart from official forms, it is a kind of civilian priesthood, celebrating divine service in the law-courts and the police forces, and sucking the blood of the people with thousands of greedy, unclean mouths. There, somewhere in sooty offices which we hurry through, shabby men write page after page on grey paper, and make copies on embossed paper – and persons, families, entire villages are outraged, terrified, ruined. A father is
- 5 sent to exile, a mother to prison, a son to the army – and all this breaks over their heads like thunder, unexpected and usually undeserved.¹

This analysis provides a valuable insight. Peter I's plan to westernise Russia had been corrupted. By the middle of the nineteenth century tsarist Russia was run by a bureaucratic class which, while incompetent and unenlightened, possessed the power to control the lives of the Russian people. At local and national levels the functioning of the law, civil administration, the police and the militia was in the hands of a set of officials whose first thought was their own convenience and advantage. Against this injustice the ordinary citizen had no redress, since any challenge to the system was lost in bureaucratic procedures.

Herzen's savage attack on the system provided powerful ammunition for those in Russia who wished to ridicule and undermine the tsarist government. However, it is important to remember that Herzen was a revolutionary propagandist intent on painting the blackest picture he could of tsardom. Efforts were made in the nineteenth century to reform the administration and limit its abuses.

3 The Problem of Reform in Imperial Russia

KEY ISSUE Why was it so difficult for Russia to reform itself?

Many members of the ruling class accepted that major reforms were needed for Russia to overcome its social and economic backwardness.

However, a major block in the way of reform was a basic disagreement within the governmental elite concerning Russia's true character as a nation. Since the days of Peter the Great there had been serious differences between 'Westerners' and 'Slavophiles'. The 'Westerners' believed that if Russia wished to remain a great nation it would have to adopt the best features of the political and economic systems of the advanced countries of western Europe. The 'Slavophiles' regarded western values as corrupting and urged that the nation should preserve itself as 'holy Russia', glorying in its Slav culture and its separate historical tradition.

Another barrier to planned reform was the autocratic structure of Russia itself. Change could only come from the top. There were no representative institutions, such as a parliament, with the power to alter things. The only possible source of change was the tsar. From time to time there were progressive tsars who accepted the need for reform, but it was hardly to be expected that any tsar, no matter how enlightened, would go so far as to introduce measures that might weaken his authority. The consequence was that reform in Russia tended to be sporadic, depending on the inclinations of the individual tsar, rather than a systematic programme of modernisation. It is notable that the significant periods of reform in Russia were invariably a response to some form of national crisis or humiliation. This was certainly true of the reforms introduced in Alexander II's reign (1855-81). His accession coincided with the defeat of Russia at the hands of France and Britain in the Crimean War. The shock of this reverse prompted the new tsar into a series of major changes in Russian society.

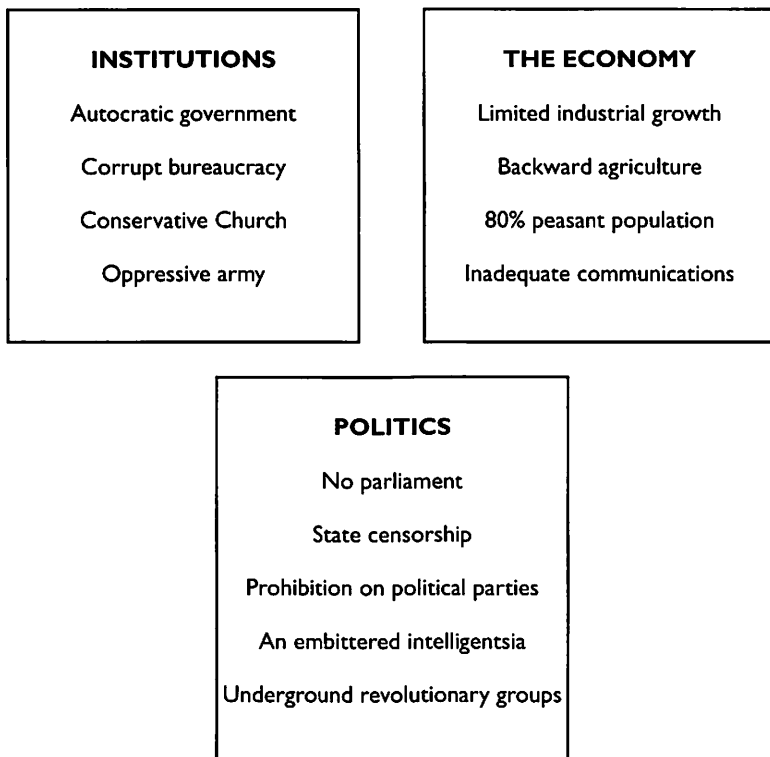
These began with the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, followed three years later by the setting up of a network of rural councils, known as the *zemstva*. These were elected bodies, but they were not genuinely democratic, since the voting regulations left them very much in the hands of the landowners and local gentry. Nonetheless, they did provide Russia with a form of representative government, no matter how limited, which offered some hope to those progressives who longed for an extension of political rights. The authorities complemented their introduction of the *zemstva* by re-emphasising the valuable role played in the countryside by the *mir*, the traditional village commune, which government officials saw as a local organisation that would provide an effective means of keeping order as well as a cheap method of collecting taxes and mortgage repayments.

In addition, a number of legal reforms were introduced with the aim of simplifying the notoriously cumbersome court procedures whose delays had led to corruption and injustice. Of even greater importance was Alexander II's relaxation of the controls over the press and the universities. Greater freedom of expression encouraged the development of an intelligentsia, which is best defined not as a

single class, but as a cross-section of the educated and more enlightened members of Russian society.

Alexander II was not a supporter of reform simply for its own sake. He saw it as a way of lessening opposition to the tsarist system. He said that his intention was to introduce reform from above in order to prevent revolution from below. His hope was that his reforms would attract the intelligentsia to side of tsardom as natural allies. The early signs were that he had succeeded. The measures of the 1860s, Emancipation and the granting of greater press and university freedoms, were greeted with enthusiasm. The intelligentsia welcomed the reforms as the basis of a genuine restructuring of Russian politics and society. However, no matter how progressive Alexander II may have appeared, he was still an autocrat. It was unthinkable that he would continue with a process that might compromise his power as tsar. Fearful that he had gone too far, he had largely abandoned his reformist policies by the 1870s. Many of the intelligentsia felt betrayed. Despairing of tsardom as a force for change, a significant number of them turned to thoughts of revolution.

Summary Diagram
Summary of Imperial Russia



Reference

- 1 Alexander Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts*, 1868

Working on Chapter 1

The purpose of this chapter was to introduce the basic features of imperial Russia. In studying this 'background' material your aim should be to gain a broad rather than a detailed grasp of the main characteristics of the tsarist system. The key question that links the material is why imperial Russia had not modernised by the late nineteenth century. If you use the summary chart you will be reminded of the key features of the tsarist structure. Write a brief definition of the points as they appear in the three boxes. This will put you in a good position to re-read the final section which introduces some of the main explanations of why it was so difficult to achieve reform in tsarist Russia. Since this is major theme throughout this book make sure you have grasped the explanations. As always, the best way to test this is to write them down in your own words. Guidance on deeper analysis will be introduced in the chapters that follow.