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Development and Reform 1881–1914

POINTS TO CONSIDER

This chapter builds on the knowledge you will have gained about the structure and character of Russia from your reading of chapter 1. Its four main sections deal with the basic problem of whether Russia could reform itself sufficiently to be able to compete with the major nations of western Europe. This is often referred to as Russia's period of crisis. Could it modernise itself? Section 1 describes 'the reaction', the period of repression under Alexander III. Section 2 examines the vitally important programme of economic reforms introduced in the 1890s by Witte in his attempt to modernise Russia. Section 3 looks at the agricultural reforms attempted by Stolypin in the first decade of the century. Your aim should be to gain a sound grasp of the basic problems that confronted Russia in this period. Section 4 introduces a new theme – foreign policy. This is a particularly important section as it deals with the events that led to Russia's momentous decision to go to war in 1914.

KEY DATES

- 1881** Alexander II assassinated by 'the People's Will'. This led to the introduction of the repressive 'temporary laws'. League of the Three Emperors formed between Russia, Germany and Austria-Hungary.
- 1881–95** Pobedonostsev presided over 'the Reaction', a period of severe political repression.
- 1885** New strict criminal code introduced.
- 1887** University Statute restricted academic freedoms.
Re-insurance Treaty signed between Russia and Germany.
- 1890** *Zemstva* Act set up a network of rural councils.
- 1891–1902** Construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway.
- 1893–1903** Under Sergei Witte's leadership Russia experienced 'the great spurt' in industrial production.
- 1894** Accession of Nicholas II, who was to be the last tsar.
- 1904–5** Russo-Japanese War saw the humiliating defeat of Russia.
- 1905** 1905 Revolution broke out.
- 1906** Witte dismissed as chief minister.
Stolypin as chief minister embarked on a combined policy of political repression and agrarian reform.
- 1907** Triple Entente between France, Russia and Britain.
- 1908** Annexation of Bosnia-Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary.
Increased tension in the Balkans.
- 1911** Assassination of Stolypin.
- 1912–13** Balkan Wars caused further Russo-Austrian tension.
- 1914** Russia went to war against Germany and Austria-Hungary.

1 'The Reaction'

KEY ISSUE
How far did the reaction under Alexander indicate the short-sightedness of the tsarist government?

The reign of Tsar Alexander III (1881-94) could hardly have begun in worse circumstances. The new tsar came to the throne prematurely after his father had been blown to pieces by a terrorist bomb. The assassination was the work of 'The People's Will', a group of disaffected members of the intelligentsia who reacted against Alexander II's apparent abandonment of his earlier liberalising policies (see page 12). The new tsar's response was predictable. Following the execution of five of the assassins, he turned his back on reform altogether and introduced a series of repressive measures that became known as 'the Reaction'.

Key measures of the Reaction

The State of State Security, 1881
 – special government-controlled courts were set up, which operated outside the existing legal system.
 – judges, magistrates and officials who were sympathetic towards liberal ideas were removed from office.
 – the powers of the *Ohranna*, the tsarist secret police, were extended, and censorship of the press was tightened.

At its introduction in 1881, this Statute was described as a temporary measure brought in to deal with an emergency, but in essentials it remained in place until 1917. Lenin described it as 'the *de facto* constitution of Russia'. Under its terms further repression was introduced.

The University Statute, 1887
 brought the universities under strict government control.

The Zemstva Act, 1890
 decreased the independence of the local councils and empowered government officials to interfere in their decision-making.

a) Russification

These restrictive measures were accompanied by a deliberate policy of 'Russification'. This was an attempt by Alexander III's government to restrict the influence of the national minorities within the Russian empire. Russian was declared to be the official first language, thereby extending the traditional policy of making it the

form in which law and government were conducted throughout the

empire. The effect of this was to give officials everywhere a vested interest in maintaining the dominance of Russian values at the expense of the other national cultures. Discrimination against non-Russians, which had previously been a hidden feature of Russian public life, became more open and vindictive in the 1890s. State interference in national forms of administration, education and religion became systematic. The nationalities that suffered most from the discrimination of these years were the Baltic Germans, the Poles, the Finns, the Armenians and the Ukrainians.

Particular victims of 'Russification' were the Jews. Over six hundred new measures were introduced, imposing severe social, political and economic restrictions on the Jewish population. The Jews, the majority of whom lived in distinct districts or 'ghettos', were convenient and easily identifiable scapegoats who could be blamed for Russia's difficulties. Anti-Semitism was deeply ingrained in tsarist Russia. Pogroms – fierce persecutions which often involved the wounding and killing of Jews and the destruction of their property – had long been a disfiguring feature of Russian history. A group of ultra-conservative Russian nationalists, known as the 'Black Hundreds', were notorious for their attacks upon Jews. During the reigns of Alexander III and Nicholas II the number of pogroms increased sharply. Until recently it was thought that this was proof of the tsars' active encouragement of the terrorising of the Jews. However, study of the Okhrana archives now shows that the pogroms were locally, not centrally, organised blood-lettings.

With hindsight, the tsarist policy of Russification can be seen as remarkably ill-judged. At a critical stage in its development, when cohesion and unity were needed, Russia chose to treat half its population as inferiors or potential enemies. The persecution of the Jews was especially crass. It alienated the great mass of the five million Jews in the Russian population, large numbers of whom fled in desperation to western Europe and North America, carrying with them a deep hatred of tsardom. Those who could not escape stayed to form a large and disaffected community within the empire. It was no coincidence that the 1890s witnessed a large influx of Jews into the various revolutionary movements in Russia. In 1897, Jews formed their own revolutionary 'Bund' or union.

b) The role of Pobedonostsev

The person most closely associated with the anti-Semitic policies of this period was Konstantin Pobedonostsev, chief minister in the Russian government from 1881 to 1905 and Procurator (lay head) of the Synod, the governing body of the Russian Orthodox Church. An arch-conservative by instinct and upbringing, he developed a deep

disaste for all forms of liberalism and democracy. He dismissed the idea of representative government as 'the great lie of our time'. To his mind autocracy was the only possible government for imperial Russia. As personal tutor to Alexander III and Nicholas II, he played a major part in shaping the reactionary attitudes of the last two tsars. Known as 'the Grand Inquisitor' because of his repressive policies, Pobedonossev personified the obstructions in the way of Russia's necessary political and social reform.

One of the ironies of this period was that 'the Reaction', associated with Alexander III and Pobedonossev, coincided with a time of remarkable economic growth. It is this fact that gives added weight to the argument that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the tsarist government threw away its last chance of survival. At a critical phase, when economic developments seemed to offer a chance for Russia to modernise herself, tsardom showed a fatal resistance to change.

2 Reform

KEY ISSUE
Why did the reforms of the period prove of only limited success in modernising Russia?

a) Witte and Economic Reform

In the 1890s, Russia experienced industrial expansion on a scale that has attracted such descriptions as the 'great spurt'. A major factor in this striking development was the rapid increase in the output of coal in the Ukraine and of oil in the Caucasus. Economic historians are agreed that, although this sudden acceleration was initiated by private enterprise, it was sustained by deliberate government policy. The tsarist government's motives were military rather than economic. It is true that the capitalists (financiers and factory owners) did well out of the spurt, but it was not the government's intention to create a new capitalist class. The tsar and his ministers viewed industrialisation as a means of improving the military strength of the Russian empire.

The outstanding individual involved in this development was Sergei Witte. As minister of finance from 1893 to 1903, he set himself the huge task of modernising the Russian economy to a level comparable with the advanced nations of the west. To help bring this about, he invited large numbers of foreign experts and workers to Russia to advise on industrial planning and techniques. Engineers and managers from France, Belgium, Britain, Germany and Sweden played a vital role in Russia's 'great spurt'. It was Witte's belief that modernisation could be achieved only through state capitalism – that

is, through the effective use of state power to direct and control the economy. He was impressed by the results of the industrial revolutions in western Europe and the USA, and argued that Russia could modernise rapidly and effectively by planning along the same lines. He admitted that, given the backwardness of Russia, this presented particular difficulties:

- 1 The economic relations of Russia to western Europe are fully comparable to the relations of colonial countries with their metropolises [mother countries]. The latter consider their colonies as advantageous markets in which they can freely sell the products of their
- 5 labour and of their industry, and from which they can draw with a powerful hand the raw materials necessary for them. Russia was, and to a certain extent still is, such a hospitable colony for all industrially developed states, generously providing them with the cheap products of her soil and buying dearly the products of their labour. But there
- 10 is a radical difference between Russia and a colony: Russia is an independent and strong power. She has the right and the strength not to want to be the handmaiden of states which are more developed economically.

In Witte's judgement, Russia's greatest need was capital for industrial investment. To raise this, he adopted a number of interlocking policies. He negotiated large loans and investments from abroad, while imposing heavy taxes and high interest rates at home. At the same time as he encouraged the inflow of foreign capital, Witte limited the import of foreign goods. Protective tariffs were set up as a means of safeguarding Russia's young domestic industries. In 1897 the Russian currency was put on the gold standard. The hope was that giving the rouble a fixed gold content would create a stable currency and so encourage international investment in Russia. The aim was largely successful but it penalised the domestic consumer since the higher-value rouble raised prices for goods already made scarce by tariff restrictions.

Much of the foreign capital that Witte was successful in raising was directly invested in railways. It was his conviction that the expansion of the railway system was the essential basis on which the modernisation of the Russian economy depended. His enthusiasm was an important factor in the extraordinary increase in lines and rolling stock that occurred between 1880 and 1914. It would not be an exaggeration to describe this as a transport revolution.

The growth of Russian railways (in miles of track)

1881	+++++++	13,270
1891	+++++	19,510
1900	+++++	33,270
1913	+++++	43,850

Witte's special prestige project was the Trans-Siberian Railway, which was constructed between 1891 and 1902. The line stretched for 3,750 miles from Moscow to Vladivostok (see the map on page 4) and was intended to connect the remoter regions of the central and eastern empire with the industrial west, thus encouraging the internal migration of workers to the areas where they were most needed. However, it promised more than it delivered. Sections of it were still incomplete in 1914 and it did not greatly improve east-west migration. The Trans-Siberian Railway proved more impressive as a symbol of Russian enterprise than as a project of real economic value.

One of Witte's main hopes was that the major improvements in transport would boost exports and foreign trade. The trade figures suggest that his hopes were largely fulfilled.

The Russian economy: annual production (in millions of tons)

	Coal	Pig iron	Oil	Grain (European Russia only)
1880	3.2	0.42	0.5	34
1890	5.9	0.89	3.9	36
1900	16.1	2.66	10.2	56
1910	26.8	2.99	9.4	74
1913	35.4	4.12	9.1	90
1916	33.8	3.72	9.7	64

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

1900	100	1909	122.5
1904	109.5	1911	149.7
1905	98.2	1912	153.2
1906	111.7	1913	163.6

These figures of increased production are less impressive when it is remembered that Russia was experiencing a massive growth in population. Production per head of population was less striking than the aggregate figures.

Population of imperial Russia 1885-1913

	1885	1897	1913
European Russia	81,725,200	93,442,900	121,780,000
Caucasus	7,284,500	9,289,400	12,717,200
Siberia	4,313,700	5,758,800	9,894,500
Steppes and Urals	1,588,500	2,465,700	3,929,500
Central Asia	3,738,600	5,281,000	7,106,000
Russia	98,650,500	116,237,800	155,427,200

Growth of population in Russia's two main cities

	St Petersburg	Moscow
1881	928,000	753,500
1890	1,033,600	1,038,600
1897	1,264,700	1,174,000
1900	1,439,600	1,345,000
1910	1,905,600	1,617,700
1914	2,217,500	1,762,700

Nevertheless, Russia was enjoying real economic expansion. Its industrial growth compared very favourably with other European countries.

Growth in national product 1898–1913

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

There is little question that Witte's policies had a major impact on the expansion of the Russian economy, but doubts have been expressed about whether the result was wholly beneficial. His critics have argued that he made Russia too dependent on foreign loans and investments, that in giving priority to heavy industry he neglected vital areas such as light engineering, and that he paid no attention to Russia's agricultural needs.

However, any criticism of Witte should be balanced by reference to the problems he faced. The demands of the military often interfered with his plans for railway construction and the siting of industry. Moreover, his freedom of action was restricted by the resistance to change which characterised the court and the government he served. The main purpose of his economic policies was to protect tsardom against the disruptive elements in Russian society, but ironically he was distrusted by the royal court. In 1906, shortly after he had successfully negotiated a substantial loan from France, the tsar obliged him to resign. Witte faced the tragic dilemma that confronted any minister who sought to modernise tsarist Russia; he was regarded with suspicion by the representatives of the very system he was trying to save.

The improvement of the Russian economy in the 1890s was not simply the result of the work of Witte. It was part of a worldwide industrial boom. However, by the turn of the century the boom had ended and a serious international trade recession had set in. The consequences for Russia were especially serious. The industrial spurt of the last two decades of the century had led to a very rapid increase of population in the towns and cities. This increase had not been organised or supervised; the resources and facilities for accommodating the

influx of workers were wholly inadequate. The result was acute overcrowding. Initially, the peasants who had left the land to take work in the urban factories accepted their grim conditions because of the considerably higher wages they were receiving. But when boom turned to recession there was widespread unemployment. The authorities in the towns and cities found themselves facing large numbers of rootless and disaffected workers who had had their expectations of a better life raised, only to be dashed by harsh economic realities. The regular presence of thousands of embittered workers on the streets of St Petersburg and Moscow played an important part in the growth of serious social unrest in Russia between 1900 and 1917.

The recession did not prove permanent. The period from 1908 to 1914 was one of overall recovery for the Russian economy, as the following figures indicate:

	1908	1914
State revenues (in roubles)	2 billion	4 billion
Number of banks	1,146	2,393
Number of factories	22,600	24,900
Number of workers	2,500,000	2,900,000

(the overall industrial growth-rate between 1908 and 1914 was 8.5%)

Against the bright picture painted by these figures has to be set the darker aspect. In general terms the workers did not gain from the industrial and financial expansion. The absence of effective trade unions and the lack of adequate legal protection left the workforce very much at the mercy of the employers. Little of the greater amount of money in circulation reached the pockets of the workers. Although the rate of inflation rose by 40 per cent between 1908 and 1914, the average industrial wage rose from 245 to only 264 roubles per month in the same period. Of course, a national average does not tell the whole story. Some workers did relatively better than others – for example, wages were a third higher in St Petersburg than in Moscow. Nonetheless, the strike statistics compiled by the Ministry of Trade showed the scale of the industrial unrest.

Number of strikes	
1905	13,995
1908	892
1910	222
1911	466
1912	2,032
1913	2,404
1914	3,574

The question of how strong the Russian economy actually was in 1914 remains a matter of lively debate among historians. There are those who suggest that until the war came Russia was in the process of developing into a modern industrial state. They cite figures showing increased industrial production, growth of the labour force, and expansion of foreign investment. Other historians, while accepting these figures, argue that, compared to developments in other countries, Russian growth was too limited to provide a genuine industrial base. They further stress that in 1914 about four-fifths of the population were still peasants, a fact which would seem to discredit any claim that there had been significant industrial development. In the end, no definitive answer can be given to the question as to how the economy would have developed had the war and the Revolution not intervened. The comment of Alex Nove, the outstanding western authority on the Russian economy, is particularly telling:

- 1 The question of whether Russia would have become a modern industrial state but for the war and the revolution is in essence a meaningless one. One may say that statistically the answer is in the affirmative. If the growth rates characteristic of the period 1890–1913 for industry
 5 and agriculture were simply projected over the succeeding 50 years, no doubt citizens would be leading a reasonable existence ... However, this assumes ... that the imperial authorities would have successfully made the adjustment necessary to govern in an orderly manner a rapidly developing and changing society. But there must surely be a limit to
 10 the game of what-might-have-been.¹

b) Stolypin and Land Reform

Peter Stolypin was appointed president of the Council of Ministers in the aftermath of the 1905 Revolution (see page 45). Like Witte before him, he was dedicated to strengthening tsardom in a time of crisis. He was a political conservative, whose attitude was clearly expressed in the coercive measures he introduced between 1906 and 1911. He declared his guiding principle to be 'suppression first and then, and only then, reform'. However, he also judged that, where possible, reform should be introduced as a way of reducing the social bitterness that produced opposition. It was in this spirit that he approached the agrarian problem in Russia. It is helpful to regard the work of Witte and Stolypin as complementary, Witte being mainly concerned with the development of industry, Stolypin with the development of agriculture. This is not to suggest that the two men co-operated in a common policy. Witte was deeply jealous of Stolypin. Nevertheless, they did share a basic objective – the preservation of the tsarist system. Indeed, it is sometimes suggested that the reforms they introduced represented the last hope that tsardom could save itself by its own efforts. Had the tsarist government and bureaucracy been willing to

support Witte and Stolypin in their efforts to modernise the Russian economy, this might have prevented the build-up of the social and political tensions which culminated in the 1917 Revolution.

Stolypin appreciated that industrial progress could not of itself solve Russia's most pressing need - how to feed the nation's rapidly growing numbers. The marked increase in population that occurred in the late nineteenth century had resulted in land shortage and bad harvests; the years 1891 and 1897 witnessed severe famines. The government's land policies following the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 had not helped. The scheme under which state mortgages were advanced to the emancipated serfs to enable them to buy their properties had not created the system of stable land tenure that the government had anticipated. The high price of land, which led to heavy mortgage repayments being undertaken, had impoverished the peasantry. Their sense of insecurity both inhibited them from being efficient food-producers and made them a dangerous social force. One of the reasons why the peasants joined the Revolution in 1905 was their fear that the government was about to repossess the land of the mortgage-holders who had defaulted on their payments. When the government came to understand this fear, it bought off the peasants by announcing that the outstanding repayments would be cancelled (see page 48).

Stolypin planned to build upon this successful 'de-revolutionising' of the peasantry. In 1906 and 1907 he introduced measures which allowed the individual peasant to opt out of the *mir*. The position of the independent householder was promoted. Peasants were encouraged to replace the antiquated strip system with separate blocks of land, based on the pattern that existed in western Europe. A special Land Bank was established to allocate funds to assist the independent peasant to buy his land. Stolypin defined his policy as 'the wager on the strong'. His aim was to create a stratum of prosperous, efficient peasants whose new wealth would turn them into natural supporters and allies of the tsarist system. This would effectively decapitate the peasantry as a revolutionary movement. He complemented his land reform policy by supporting schemes for large-scale voluntary resettlement of the peasants. The aim was to populate the empire's remoter areas, such as Siberia, and bring them into productive agricultural use.

Even in advanced economies land reforms take time to work. Stolypin was well aware that, in a country as relatively backward as Russia, reforms would take even longer to become effective. He spoke of needing twenty years for his 'wager on the strong' to show dividends. In the event, his assassination in 1911 allowed him personally only five, and the war in 1914 allowed Russia only eight. However, there is doubt whether, even without the intrusion of murder and war, his peasant policy would have succeeded. The deep conservatism

of the Russian peasants made them slow to respond. In 1914 the strip system still prevailed; only about 10 per cent of the land had been consolidated into farms. The peasants were reluctant to leave the security of the commune for the uncertainty of individual farming. Furthermore, by 1913 the Ministry of Agriculture had itself begun to show signs of losing confidence in the policy.

Number of peasant households becoming independent

(out of an estimated total of 10–12 million households)

1907	48,271	1911	145,567
1908	508,344	1912	122,314
1909	579,409	1913	134,554
1910	342,245	1914	97,877

One notable feature of Stolypin's land policy was his effective working relations with the *duma*. This elected assembly, which had been set up under the terms of the tsar's October Manifesto in 1905 (see page 48), had not been granted legislative powers. Nonetheless, it did provide for the first time in Russian history a forum for public discussion at national level. Stolypin chose to treat it with respect. The understanding which developed between him and the Octobrists, the largest party in the *duma*, allowed him to pursue his land reforms with little obstruction from the *duma* deputies. His success in this regard hinted at what might have been achieved in terms of co-operation between government and progressive opinion, had tsarist authorities been willing to trust their own ministers.

3 Russian Foreign Policy

KEY ISSUES Why was imperial Russia defensive in its dealings with the European Powers?

Did the Russo-Japanese War serve any genuine Russian interests?

a) Russian Objectives

The foreign policy of tsarist Russia was largely determined by the size of its empire. The protection of its many frontiers was a constant pre-occupation. Three particular developments had occurred in Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century which alarmed Russia: the growth of a united Germany, the formation of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the continued decline of the Turkish Empire. Russia feared that the unification of Germany in 1871 had left central Europe dominated by a young and powerful nation, ambitious to expand eastwards. The process of German unification

had involved the military and diplomatic defeat of Austria. Russia was concerned that Austria, which had been enlarged into the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1867, would build on its new strength by an expansionist policy in south-east Europe. This might be encouraged by the decay of Turkey's authority over its possessions in the Balkans, where a number of aggressive national movements were challenging Turkish rule.

Russia's attitude towards Turkey was governed by two factors. One was its traditional wish, as a predominantly Slav nation, to protect the Slav Christian peoples of the Balkans from Turkish Islamic oppression. The other was a concern for its commercial interests. Of Russia's grain exports, 75 per cent (which accounted for 40 per cent of its total foreign trade) were shipped through the Straits of the Dardanelles. It was, therefore, necessary to ensure that the Straits did not come under the control of a potentially hostile power capable of interrupting the passage of Russian ships from the Black Sea into the Mediterranean.



Russia's anxieties about the strength and intentions of the European powers led to its taking a cautious and conciliatory approach towards them. During the reigns of the last two tsars, Russia's response to the shifts and turns of European diplomacy was consistently self-protective and defensive. It was reluctant to take the diplomatic initiative, but it was willing to enter into alliances and agreements which offered a greater chance of preserving the security of its western borders and possessions. In particular, it was concerned that its traditional control over Poland should not be weakened.

Things augured well for Russia at the beginning of Alexander III's reign. In response to a proposal by Bismarck, the German Chancellor, Russia joined Austria-Hungary and Germany in the League of the Three Emperors (1881), an agreement by which each of the powers promised not to support the enemy should any of them become involved in war with a fourth country. This accord did not survive long. In the mid-1880s tension arose between Russia and Austria-Hungary over the latter's support for anti-Russian movements in Bulgaria. The Three Emperors League was not renewed. In its place, Russia and Germany signed a secret Reinsurance Treaty (1887), which recognised Russian claims in Bulgaria and promised German neutrality in the event of a Russo-Austrian war.

b) Russia and the Alliance System

Germany under Bismarck had dominated the European scene by playing upon the fears of each nation of becoming isolated in a world of alliances. However, in 1890 Bismarck was dismissed by the new German Kaiser, William II. Under its new ruler, Germany adopted a more aggressive form of diplomacy which had the effect of polarising international attitudes and led eventually to the splitting of Europe into two opposed, armed camps. William II declined to renew the Reinsurance Treaty. Instead, he showed every intention of joining with Austria in asserting German influence in the Balkans and the Near East. To avoid isolation, Russia turned first to France. These two countries had not been on good terms, but a common fear of German aggression now outweighed their traditional dislike of each other. The Franco-Russian Convention, signed in 1892, committed each partner to the military support of the other should it go to war with Germany. Their economic co-operation also brought them closer. France was the major foreign investor in Russia during the industrial take-off of the 1880s and 1890s.

The original alliance between France and Russia expanded into a Triple Entente, with the inclusion of Britain in 1907. This, too, was something of a diplomatic revolution. Anglo-Russian relations had been strained for decades. Imperial rivalries in Asia and Britain's resistance to what it regarded as Russia's attempts to dominate the eastern Mediterranean had aroused mutual animosity. Indeed,

during the 1890s Britain seemed more drawn to the Triple Alliance than to France and Russia. However, by the turn of the century Germany had embarked on an expansive naval programme which Britain interpreted as a direct threat to its own security and to its empire. Britain's response was to form an understanding with Germany's major western and eastern neighbours, France and Russia. In the Anglo-French Entente of 1904, Britain and France had already agreed to abandon their old rivalry. It made diplomatic sense for Russia and Britain to do the same. Consequently, in 1907 they agreed to settle their past differences by recognising each other's legitimate interests in Afghanistan, Persia and Tibet. No precise agreement was reached regarding the matter of military co-operation in Europe but there was a broad understanding that such co-operation would follow in the event of war.

c) The Russo-Japanese War, 1904–5

What had helped prepare the way for the Anglo-Russian *rapprochement* was the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5. This struggle arose in part from Russia's decision to pursue an expansionist policy in the Far East, both as a means of compensating for its relative decline in Europe and as a way of obtaining an ice-free port. It was also an attempt by the tsarist government to distract attention from Russia's domestic troubles by rallying the nation in a patriotic struggle. Care has to be taken over this last point. The blame for Russia's going to war against Japan has customarily been laid upon Plehve, the minister of the interior, who was reputed to have said 'We need a small, victorious war to avert a revolution'. However, recent research has shown that this verdict rests upon misinformation deliberately spread by Witte, Plehve's enemy. Richard Pipes observes:

- 1 It has since become known that Plehve did not want a war ... Witte himself bore a great deal of the blame for the conflict ... Witte's plans for economic penetration of the Far East ... called for a strong military presence, which was sooner or later to come into conflict with the
- 5 imperial ambitions of Japan.²

The Russians looked on Japan as a semi-feudal state, and no match for themselves. Pretexts for war were not hard to find. Territorial disputes between Russia and Japan over Korea and Manchuria had simmered for some time. In 1904, the Russian authorities deliberately rejected Japanese proposals for the settlement of the Korean question in the hope that this would excite a military response. The ruse worked: Japan opened hostilities by attacking the Russian fleet in Port Arthur.

That proved to be the only accurate calculation made by the Russian government in the whole affair. The rest was a tale of confusion and disaster. Japan was not the backward state the Russians had imagined. Under the Emperor Meiji (1869–1914) it had embarked

upon a series of sweeping reforms aimed at rapid modernisation along Western lines. The Japanese army and navy were far better prepared and equipped than the Russian forces and won a series of major victories. After a long siege, Port Arthur fell to Japan in January 1905. The following month, the Japanese forced home their advance by driving the Russians out of the key Manchurian town of Mukden. The final catastrophe for Russia came at sea. The Russian Baltic fleet, dispatched to the Far East in 1904, took eight months to reach its destination, only to be blown out of the water immediately on its arrival by the Japanese fleet at Tsushima in May 1905. Such defeats obliged the tsarist government to make peace. In the Treaty of Portsmouth, Russia agreed to withdraw its remaining forces from Manchuria and accepted Japanese control of Korea and Port Arthur. Russia lost the war not because its troops fought badly, but because its military commanders had not prepared effectively. They understood neither the enemy they were fighting nor the territory in which the struggle took place. Their unimaginative strategy allowed the Japanese to outmanoeuvre the Russian forces. The distance over which men and materials had to be transported from western Russia made it impossible to provide adequate reinforcements and supplies. The Trans-Siberian Railway, still incomplete in a number of sections, proved of little value. Russia's defeat at the hands of a small, supposedly inferior, Asian country was a national humiliation. Within Russia, the incompetence of the government, which the war glaringly revealed, excited the social unrest which it had been specifically designed to dampen.

(d) The Balkans

Its defeat in Asia made Russia keener still to form protective alliances with friendly European powers. The area of most immediate concern was the Balkans. The revolt of the 'Young Turks' against the sultanate in 1908 marked a further stage in the collapse of Turkish power. Despite the wrangling that went on between their various ambassadors in the Balkan states, Russia and Austria-Hungary seemed genuinely willing to co-operate at government level. In 1908, the Russian foreign minister, Izvolski, was urged by his Austrian counterpart, Aehrenthal, to accept the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina by Austria-Hungary as a means of creating greater stability in the Balkan region. Izvolski agreed to the proposal in return for Austria-Hungary's promise that it would acknowledge Russia's unfettered right to the use of the Straits, and would persuade the other European powers to do the same. Austria-Hungary duly announced the takeover of Bosnia and Herzegovina, but then failed to make any effort to encourage the international recognition of Russian rights in the Straits. From this time onwards, relations between Russia and Austria-

Hungary steadily deteriorated. A key issue dividing them was the position of Serbia. Bosnia contained many Serbs and its annexation by Austria-Hungary in 1908 aroused fierce Serbian nationalism. Russia, viewing itself as the special defender of Serbia and its predominantly Slav people, backed it in demanding compensation and the calling of an international conference to consider the annexation. Germany sided aggressively with Austria-Hungary and warned Russia not to interfere. The crisis threatened for a time to spill into war. However, in 1909 none of the countries involved felt ready to fight. Russia backed off from an open confrontation, while at the same time letting Hungary as the aggressors.

Between 1909 and 1914 Russia continued to involve itself in the complexities of Balkan nationalist politics. Its aim was to prevent Austria-Hungary from gaining a major advantage in the region. The tactic was to try to persuade the various nationalities in the region to form a coalition against Austria-Hungary. Russia had some success in this. Balkan nationalism led to a series of conflicts, known collectively as the Balkan Wars (1912-13). These were a confused mixture of anti-Turkish uprisings and squabbles between the Balkan states themselves over the division of the territories they had won from the Turks. On balance, the outcome of these wars favoured Russian rather than Austro-Hungarian interests. Serbia had been doubled in size and felt herself more closely tied to Russia as an ally and protector, while Austria-Hungary's client states, Romania and Bulgaria, had not done well in the wars. However, such gains as Russia had made were marginal. The international issues relating to Turkish decline and Balkan nationalism had not been resolved. The events of 1914 were to show how vulnerable imperial Russia's status and security actually were.

4 Conclusion

KEY ISSUE Had the period 1881-1914 been a race against time for the tsarist system?

Between 1881 and 1914 Russia took a number of significant steps towards modernisation. Serious efforts were made to reform the economy, and progressive agricultural changes were introduced. Important adjustments were made in foreign policy in an effort to end old antagonisms and provide greater national security. These were not inconsiderable achievements. Foreign observers commented favourably on the advances that had been made. However, despite some limited modifications of tsarist authority during the period, Russia in 1914 was still essentially an absolutist state. A fundamental question remained unanswered in 1914. Was

Russian capable or, indeed, willing to adopt the political and social changes necessary for it to become a modern state comparable with those of western Europe? This problem, which is often referred to as the 'the tsarist crisis' or 'the institutional crisis', had been neatly summarised in question form by Robert Service, the outstanding Lenin scholar:

- 1 It was a race against time. Would the tsarist system sustain its energy and authority for a sufficient period to modernise society and the economy? Would the revolutionaries accommodate themselves to the changing realities and avoid the excesses of violent politics? And would
- 5 the tsarist system make concessions to bring this about?³

References

- 1 Alex Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR* (Penguin, 1973) p.17
- 2 Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution 1899–1919* (Collins Harvill, 1990) p.12
- 3 Robert Service, *Lenin A Biography* (Macmillan, 2000) p.4

Working on Chapter 2

The chapter takes a broadly chronological approach in its analysis of the principal features of government repression and reform during this period. You are advised to follow the same pattern when analysing the three key areas. Use the first column of the summary to guide you as to the main points of the reaction. Against each of the headings write a brief comment to indicate that you understand its significance. Contrast these with reforms listed in the centre column. This will test your understanding of both movements and of the tension between them and of the difficulties that confronted reformers. The third area of analysis, foreign policy, is distinct from the other two but by using the third column in a similar way you should be able to highlight the principal developments.

Source-based questions on Chapter 2

To familiarise yourself with the type of question you are likely to be asked, study the following questions:

The economic reforms of Witte and Stolypin

Study Witte's analysis on page 19 and the tables of statistics on pages 19–22.

1. **Comprehension questions**, the type that tests your basic understanding of the sources. Examples are:

Summary Diagram

Reaction	Reform	Foreign Affairs
Pobedonostev 1881–1905		3 Emperors League 1881
Statute of State Security 1881	Witte 1893–1906 the great spurt	
	Population growth	The German issue
University Statute 1887	Foreign capital	
	Investment	
Zemstva Statute 1890	Railways	Austro-Hungarian- Turkish question
	Regional development	
Russification	industrial output	Franco-Russian Convention 1892
Anti-Jewish Laws		
Pogroms The Black 100s	October Manifesto 1905	Russo-Japanese War 1904–05
	Dumas 1906–14	
The Stolypin repression 1906–11	The Stolypin reforms 1906–11: Debt cancellation Land bank The wager on the strong	Triple Entente 1907
		The Balkan crises 1908–14

Why, according to Witte's analysis, had Russia's economic growth lagged behind that of the countries of western Europe? (5 marks)

What can you learn from the statistics about the improvement in Russia's industry and agriculture that resulted from the policies of Witte and Stolypin? (8 marks)

- Stimulus questions**, the type that ask you to draw on your own knowledge to explain the meaning of a key concept or the role and/or importance of a key individual or institution. A typical question might be: Using your own knowledge, explain why Witte and Stolypin were unable to achieve their complete economic objectives. (10 marks)
- Cross referencing questions**, the type that ask you to compare the content of two or more sources and reaching a conclusion based on the comparison. A typical question might be: