A note on dates

Until January 1918, Russia retained the Julian calendar, which means that the dating of events appears to be thirteen days earlier than in the Western (Gregorian) calendar in use throughout most of Europe at the time. I use the Julian calendar for all events before 1918 and the Gregorian calendar thereafter.
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In 1919, John Reed, a young American journalist fervently committed to socialism, published a stirring eye-witness account of the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks late in October 1917. Reed had traveled to Petrograd, the capital of the Russian Empire, in September that year to report on the progress of the revolution that had erupted in February and already toppled the authoritarian tsarist regime, leaving the country’s political system in a state of uncertainty. The liberals who took control of the government were incapable of coping with the enormous problems they faced: the defeats the army was suffering at the hands of German troops in what seemed to be an endless war, the widespread industrial strikes, the peasants’ unauthorized seizure of land, and the growing pressure of nationality groups to secure independence. Instead of bringing about a democratic and more just society, the dethronement of the unpopular Tsar Nicholas II had led to unprecedented economic, social, and political instability that threatened to thrust the Russian Empire into chaos.

Entranced by Vladimir I. Lenin and his followers, Reed was especially interested in reporting on their role in the dramatic events that were breaking the Russian Empire apart. If the Bolsheviks came to power, he believed, they would create an egalitarian order that would soon spread to Europe and eventually to the rest of the world. Moreover, the transformation of society in Russia would not be confined to the economic and social spheres; it would also be spiritual, in the deepest sense of the word. After attending the funeral of five hundred workers who had lost their lives in the revolutionary cause, he noted that ‘I suddenly realized
that the devout Russian people no longer needed priests to pray them into heaven. On earth they were building a kingdom more bright than any heaven had to offer, and for which it was a glory to die.’

Sensing the likely impact of the events he described on other countries, Reed titled his account, *Ten Days That Shook the World*. Lenin was so taken with the book that he ‘unreservedly’ recommended it ‘to the workers of the world, who would gain from it a clear understanding of the “Proletarian Revolution and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat.”’

Reed correctly stressed the importance of the turn of events in Russia, but he underestimated its eventual impact on world affairs. The upheaval in the Russian Empire shook the world not for ten days but for some seventy-four years. There was hardly a political development of significance in the twentieth century that was not profoundly affected by the Soviet Union, so great was the fear of Communism in many parts of the world. Had it not been for the dread of that political movement, it is highly unlikely that the Nazis would have become the largest political party in Germany and that Hitler would have been appointed Chancellor in 1933. Six years later, he plunged Europe into war and in 1941 attacked the Soviet Union, unleashing the bloodiest military conflict in human history. The Soviet Union emerged from that war as a major world power; it gained control of Eastern Europe and soon succeeded in producing nuclear weapons. Soviet leaders continued to speak of the inevitable triumph of socialism throughout the world, and they did their utmost to hasten it.

Western leaders, on the other hand, viewed that possibility as a threat to their societies and values, and spared no effort to keep Communism at bay. After World War II, when the Soviet Union emerged as a superpower, the struggle intensified and came to be known as the Cold War. That struggle between the West, led by the United States, and the Communist East dominated
international relations from roughly 1948 until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. It was a ‘war’ that in many ways shaped developments in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and parts of Latin America. Nothing sums up the impact of Communism on the Western world more graphically than the quip by an American professor: ‘If you tell me what a person’s view of 1917 is, I can most probably divine his political views on all major contemporary issues.’ Even a political analyst as perspicacious as Reed could not have foreseen that the seizure of power by a small group of radicals led by Lenin would so powerfully influence the course of history.
The dream of an ideal society in Russia began to take shape in the 1880s, when a small group of Russian intellectuals founded a Marxist movement that claimed to represent the interests of the working class. Their leader, G.V. Plekhanov, contended that Russia’s development would be similar to that of Central and Western Europe. The country would be industrialized and would then undergo a bourgeois revolution that would replace the autocratic system of rule with a constitutional order dominated by the middle class, which favored capitalism. Eventually, when industrialization reached maturity and the proletariat (the industrial working class) had become a powerful force, it would stage a second, socialist revolution, which had not yet taken place in Central and Western Europe. In 1898, the Russian Marxists formed the Russian Social Democratic Workers’ Party, which five years later split into the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions.

**Bolshevism**

‘Bolshevism’ is the name of the Russian Marxist movement that emerged at the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Party held in August 1903 in Brussels and London. The party split over what appeared to be a minor difference on how to define a
The Russian Revolution: A Beginner's Guide

The Party of Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs), which were less doctrinaire than the Marxists but equally militant, claimed to speak for the peasants, who formed the vast majority of the population. The heirs of the populists of the 1870s, in 1901 the SRs formally created a political party committed to the idea that, since most people had been exposed to the egalitarian principles of the commune, the dominant institution in many regions of the country, the Russian Empire could attain socialism without passing through the stage of full-blown capitalism. The village party member. Vladimir Lenin, in his pamphlet *What Is to Be Done?*, written in 1902, had expressed his commitment to the creation of a highly centralized, elitist, and hierarchically structured political party. At the Congress, he defined a party member as anyone who ‘recognized the party's program and supports it by material means and by personal participation in one of the party's organizations.’ Lenin was aiming at the formation of a cadre of professional revolutionaries. Iulii Martov, however, wished to define a party member as anyone who supported the party ‘by regular personal association under the direction of one of the party's organizations.’ Martov and his followers, in other words, favored broad working-class participation in the movement's affairs and in the coming revolution. It also became evident that, although both factions subscribed to a revolutionary course, the Mensheviks tended to adopt more moderate tactics than the Bolsheviks.

Lenin's definition was adopted by a vote of twenty-eight to twenty-three; hence his faction adopted the name ‘Bolsheviks’, which means ‘Majoritarians,’ and Martov's supporters were stuck with the name ‘Mensheviks,’ which means ‘Minoritarians.’ This sobriquet put Martov's supporters at a disadvantage, even though on other issues they had sided with the majority.

Both groups continued to favor a revolutionary course to transform Russia into a socialist state, and the split did not become final until 1912. Even then, their basic aims continued to be identical, but in the ensuing struggle against the tsarist autocracy the Mensheviks tended to adopt more moderate positions than the Bolsheviks on whether or when to seize power and the economic and political policies to be imposed on Russia after the collapse of the Provisional Government in October 1917.
The road to revolution

The commune, consisting of the elders of peasant households, handled the affairs of the local peasants; it tried peasants charged with minor crimes, it collected taxes, it decided on which youngsters would be recruited into the armed services, and, most importantly, it saw to the periodic distribution of land among its members to prevent wide differences in the holdings of individual families.

The SR Party advocated the transfer of all privately owned land to peasant communes or local associations, which in turn would assign it on an egalitarian basis to all who wished to earn their living by farming. Industry would be similarly socialized. Although the SRs insisted that the final goal, socialism, must be achieved by means of persuasion, they tolerated the ‘Combat Organization,’ an independent organ of the party that carried out dozens of political murders. Political terror, many SRs believed, was necessary to bring about the dismantling of the autocratic regime.

Liberalism emerged as an organized force in the late nineteenth century, when people associated with the zemstvos, institutions that exercised some powers of self-government on the local level, advocated extensive loosening of the autocratic system of government. They were joined in the late 1890s by a variety of middle-class citizens, such as lawyers, doctors, writers, and professors. These articulate intellectuals soon exerted an influence on the national scene far out of proportion to their numbers. Industrialists and businessmen in general were slower to take up the liberal cause; their economic dependence on the state made them politically cautious.

In 1864, three years after the abolition of serfdom, the tsarist government established zemstvos, institutions of local government at the county (uyezd) and provincial levels in most regions of European Russia. The members of the new institutions were elected,
Like the Marxists, the liberals favored a fundamental reordering of society, but the two movements differed in their ultimate goals. The liberals advocated the rule of law, the granting of civil liberties to all citizens, a sharp curtailment of the powers of the monarch, the creation of a legislature elected by the people, and the maintenance of a capitalist economy. The journal they founded in 1902, Osvobozhdenie (Liberation) and their underground organization, the Union of Liberation, formed in 1904, helped mobilize public opinion against the old order and thus set the stage for the first Russian revolution.

Russia’s backwardness

Given the economic, social and political backwardness of Russia, the proliferation of political parties, some favoring utopian goals
and extremist tactics, is hardly surprising. At a time when much of Europe had turned to some form of popular participation in the political process, Russia continued to be an autocracy in which the Tsar claimed to rule by divine right. This claim was advanced with particular vigor by Nicholas II, who occupied the throne for twenty-three years (from 1894 until 1917), but proved to be singularly unfit to govern the country, as many people in high positions realized. On 19 October 1894, when it was clear that Tsar Alexander III was fatally ill, N. M. Chichaev, the Minister of War, trenchantly assessed the twenty-six-year-old Nicholas:

The heir is a mere child, without experience, training, or even an inclination to study great problems of state. His interests are still those of a child, and it is impossible to predict what changes may be effected. At present, military service is the only subject that interests him. The helm of state is about to fall from the hands of an experienced mariner, and I fear that no hand like his is to grasp it for many years to come. What will be the course of the ship of state under these conditions the Lord only knows.

Nicholas’s private letters and diary indicate that while he exuded personal charm, held strong religious convictions, and harbored deep affection for his wife and other members of his family, he showed no serious interest in politics. He took pains to describe evenings with his family and his various sporting activities, going so far as to note the number of birds he had bagged on his hunts. He could be deeply moved by events such as the loss of his favorite dog, Iman. ‘I must confess,’ he wrote on 20 October 1902, ‘the whole day after it happened I never stopped crying—I still miss him dreadfully when I go for walks. He was such an intelligent, kind, and loyal dog!’ Yet he devoted scant attention to the great events of his rule: the wars with Japan in 1904 and the Central Powers in 1914, the demands of liberals for a constitution, the
industrial strikes, the Revolution of 1905, and the breakdown of public order that year.

Although moderately intelligent, Nicholas lacked the personal drive and vision to take charge of the government, to familiarize himself with the workings of the administration, and to instill a sense of purpose and direction in the ministers and bureaucrats. He was also narrow-minded and prejudiced, incapable of tolerating those who did not fit his conception of the true Russian. He especially disliked Jews and attributed his refusal to abolish restrictions on them to an ‘inner voice’ that told him it would be wrong to do so. Nor could he abide the intelligentsia. Once at a banquet when someone uttered the word ‘intelligentsia,’ he exploded: ‘How repulsive I find that word.’ He added, wistfully, that the Academy of Sciences ought to expunge the word from the Russian dictionary. Moreover, Nicholas firmly believed that all the people, except for the intelligentsia, the Jews, and the national minorities, were completely devoted to him.

In fact, a growing number of the population (of well over a hundred million) was becoming increasingly disgruntled. In the countryside, the peasants, who composed over 80 percent of Nicholas’s subjects, chafed at the continued deterioration in economic conditions since their emancipation from serfdom in 1861. In the first place, the rapid growth in population between 1887 and 1905 resulted in a decline in the average landholding of peasant households of over 20 percent, from 13.2 to 10.4 desiatinas (one desiatina equals 2.7 acres). Productivity remained abysmally low, in large measure because the system of communal landownership, which governed about four-fifths of the peasants’ holdings, was not conducive either to long-range planning or to the application of modern methods of farming. Many statistics could be cited to demonstrate the wretched conditions in the countryside, but none is more telling than the following: the Russian death rate was almost double that in England.
The government’s fiscal policies also placed inordinate burdens on the peasantry. The expenses of the state treasury grew eightfold between 1861 and 1905, from 414,000 to 3.205 million rubles, necessitating new taxes, many of which were levied on consumer goods. Peasants had to pay these taxes in addition to the redemption dues that had been imposed on them at the time of emancipation. Unable to meet the tax bills, many poorer peasants were forced to sell their harvest in the fall, when plentiful supplies drove down prices. In the winter and spring, they would have to buy back some of the grain at exorbitant prices or take loans from landlords or kulaks (well-to-do peasants), which they would repay with labor if they lacked cash. For short-term loans, interest rates of 9.7 percent a month or 116.4 percent a year were not uncommon. If the peasant failed to make his payments, he might be subjected to whipping with a birch rod, or his property might be confiscated and sold. These measures did not have the desired effect. In the years from 1871 to 1875, the total peasant arrears in payments of various dues and taxes amounted to 29 million rubles. Twenty years later they totaled 119 million rubles.

The peasants were also forced to endure the heavy hand of bureaucracy. The emancipation of 1861 had freed them from serfdom and in 1864 they were given the right to participate in the election of zemstvos, although they chose far fewer representatives than the nobility. However, the peasants still could not move freely from one place to another and in numerous ways remained at the mercy of local landlords. During the reign of Alexander III (1881–94), the government enacted a series of counter-reforms that vastly increased the arbitrary power of local officials over the peasants. Most notably, provincial governors were charged with appointing land captains, who could overrule decisions of all local institutions, appoint personnel to important governmental positions, and, on their own authority, order the imprisonment of peasants for five days or impose five-ruble fines on them. Only
in 1903 did the government prohibit corporal punishment of convicted criminals.

In view of these conditions in the countryside, the peasants’ aloofness from revolutionary movements during the 1880s and 1890s may seem odd. However, organized political action could hardly have been expected from a social class that was geographically dispersed, cut off from urban centers of intellectual life, and still largely (over 80 percent) illiterate. On the other hand, in times of crisis the rural masses constituted yet another social group that sided with the forces opposing the prevailing order. Very often they erupted in elemental outbursts of anger at the authorities when unrest simmered in the towns.

Peasant unrest was not the only sign of social stress in the countryside. The dvorianstvo (nobility or gentry) was losing its grip economically and declining as a social and political force. Still, the nobles were unquestionably the main prop of the autocracy, even though they constituted a small and highly diverse group. According to the census of 1897, 1.5 percent of the population were either hereditary or lifetime nobles, among whom one could find, as the historian Hans Rogger put it:

Rich … and poor ones, rustics and urbanites, reactionaries and liberals, capitalist operators of large estates, employers of hired or tenant labor (the majority of the landed gentry), rentiers, civil servants, officers, and professionals (one-fifth or more) who, at best, kept a tenuous foothold or summer home in the countryside. Half the nobility was non-Russian, and 28.6 percent who were Poles and discriminated against by the state hardly contributed to the solidarity of the class.

Even the ethnically Russian nobles were so diversified in their interests that they did not form a common political front. Although the majority ardently supported the autocracy, quite a
few became active in the liberal movement, to the dismay of the Tsar and officials at court.

Although peasant unrest early in the twentieth century was a major factor in destabilizing the tsarist system of rule, the decisive social force behind the revolutionary turmoil turned out to be the industrial workers, a tiny portion of the total population that grew in size after the authorities decided, in the 1890s, that if Russia were to remain a significant player in the international arena it would have to embark on a program of rapid industrialization. However, they did not understand the implications of their decision. They deluded themselves into believing that they could modernize the country economically without altering the traditional social and political order.

**The drive to industrialize**

No one fostered this illusion more fervently than S. Iu. Witte, the brilliant architect of Russian industrialization who also played a central role in shaping government policies during the first fifteen months of the Revolution of 1905, the first major upheaval in the Russian Empire in the twentieth century. Witte quickly grasped the essentials of any problem he tackling and devised ingenious, if not always effective, solutions. He was masterly in judging the abilities of subordinates and in inducing them to do his bidding, but he was also fiercely ambitious, arrogant, cunning, and given to backstage intrigues. If he encountered obstacles he could not overcome, he lapsed into depression. Yet he always bounced back and pressed hard to implement his policies.

Witte advocated industrialization not because he believed that modernization was desirable in itself or because he wished to raise the standard of living of the Russian masses. He wanted to transform the economy primarily to bolster the political power and greatness of the state. It was this argument that appealed to
Tsar Alexander III, who appointed him Minister of Finance in 1892, and to Nicholas II, who retained him in that office until 1903. During those eleven years, Witte’s achievements were, by virtually every standard, remarkable.

**Count Witte**

Count S. Iu. Witte was one of the two most eminent and gifted statesmen in late Imperial Russia (the other was Pyotr Stolypin) and his personality and career were probably the most colorful. Born in 1849 in Tiflis (now Tbilisi, Georgia), into a noble family, Witte aspired to a profession considered unsuitable for an aristocrat; he wanted to be professor of theoretical mathematics at the University of Novorossiisk, where he was an outstanding student. He was prevailed upon to abandon that goal and instead began training as an administrator in the railroads, a burgeoning field in Russia. In 1875, a wreck on the Odessa Railway, in which many lives were lost, endangered his career. He was held responsible for the disaster and sentenced to four months in prison. However, that very same Odessa railway was so successful in transporting soldiers and material during the Russo-Turkish war of 1877–8 that Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich reduced his sentence to two weeks and allowed him to return to work.

His career then moved from one success to another. He was appointed Director of Railway Affairs in the Ministry of Finance, a post he occupied for eleven years, during which he initiated the first burst of industrialization. In 1903, Tsar Nicholas II appointed him Chairman of the Committee of Ministers, where he added two major accomplishments to his list of achievements: negotiating the peace treaty that concluded the conflict with Japan, from which Russia, the losing power, emerged relatively unscathed; and persuading Tsar Nicholas II to make extensive concessions to the opposition, which brought the general strike of October 1905 to an end.

Witte was not a liberal; on the contrary, he believed in the principle of autocracy, but he was also pragmatic enough to realize that some concessions had to be made to save as much as possible of the old order (government by an autocrat). His devotion to that order was so strong that he was willing to suffer personally from its rigidities. When his wife died in 1890, he married a divorcée who had converted to Orthodoxy from Judaism, each one of which
Although some industries had been established by the 1880s, the real spurt occurred in the following decade, as a few statistics will indicate. In 1880, Russia had 22,865 kilometers of railway track. By 1890, almost 8,000 kilometers had been added, giving a total of 30,596; and by 1904 had virtually doubled, to 59,616 kilometers. Coal output in southern Russia jumped from 183 million poods in 1890 to 671 million poods in 1900 (1 pood equals 35.11 pounds). In the same region, the production of iron and steel rose from 8.6 million poods in 1890 to 75.8 million in 1900. Also in that decade, the production of cotton thread almost doubled and that of cloth increased by about two-thirds. By 1914, the Russian Empire was the fifth-largest industrial power in the world. However, in some important respects, economic progress was not as impressive as these figures suggest. Labor productivity and per capita income rose much more slowly than in Western Europe. In 1910, it amounted to only a third of the West European average, whereas in 1860 it had been slightly more than half.

Reliable statistics on the size of the industrial proletariat at the turn of the twentieth century are hard to find. The estimate of about three million in the late 1890s, made by M. I. Tugan-Baranovski, a respected Marxist scholar, appears to be reasonably accurate, which means that the proletariat constituted no more than 2.4 percent of the total population. No student of Russian history can fail to wonder how such a small proportion of the people came to exert so significant an influence on the political evolution of the empire.

To a large extent, the answer can be found in the peculiarities of Russia’s industrialization. The country was a latecomer
to the process, and the state played an inordinately large role in stimulating industrial development. Determined to press forward quickly, Witte launched an array of interrelated programs, the main purpose of which was to amass capital investment. Among other things, he promoted foreign loans and investment, established confidence in Russia’s financial system by adopting the gold standard, placed extremely high tariffs on foreign industrial commodities, and substantially raised the rates of taxation. A large share of the financial burdens of these programs fell on low-income groups, especially the peasants, who had to pay high prices for manufactured goods and absorb the stiff indirect taxes on such items as tobacco, sugar, matches, and petroleum.

The state not only adopted policies to encourage industrial development but also participated directly in the nation’s economy to an extent unequaled in any Western country. For example, in 1899, the state bought almost two-thirds of all metallurgical production. By the early twentieth century, it controlled some 70 percent of the railways. It also owned vast tracts of land, numerous mines and oilfields, and extensive forests. The national budgets from 1903 to 1913 indicate that the government received over 25 percent of its income from its various holdings. Thus, the economic well-being of private entrepreneurs depended in large measure on decisions of the authorities in St. Petersburg—a major reason for the political timidity of a substantial sector of the Russian middle class.

On the other hand, the concentration of industry, a result of the adoption of the forms of production and factory organization of more advanced countries, facilitated the emergence of a mili
tant labor movement early in the process of industrialization. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Russia’s manufacturing economy was more heavily concentrated than those of Germany and the United States, usually singled out as the pathfinders in this regard. For example, in 1866, 43 percent of the workers in the Russian cotton industry were employed at plants with more than
one hundred employees; in 1877, 51 percent; in 1894, 72 percent. The existence of large factories was a boon to labor organizers and political activists, who could easily reach sizable numbers of workers resentful of the harsh conditions at the workplace.

The insensitive way senior government officials and industrialists handled the ‘labor question’ further fueled working-class militancy. Until 1905, they frequently asserted that there was no labor problem at all, that employers and their workers enjoyed a patriarchal relationship, comparable to the mutually beneficial relations between landlords and peasants. Consequently, they argued, the Russian worker, who was in any event less well educated than his counterpart in Western Europe and still tied to the land, would not succumb to the enticements of outside agitators, the alleged fomenters of labor unrest. Many officials knew that these assertions were baseless, but a frank acknowledgment by imperial authorities that the patriarchal relationship did not apply to the urban setting would have constituted, in the words of the historian Gaston V. Rimlinger, ‘denial of the validity of the social order on which the tsarist regime was based.’

The disciplinary paternalism in industry, initially introduced by nobles who owned factories, grew harsher in the course of the nineteenth century, in part because the non-nobles who increasingly entered the entrepreneurial class lacked the tradition of noblesse oblige. The laws governing the contractual obligations of the worker were precise and stern, clearly designed to buttress the social and economic powers of the employer. Thus, amendments to the Penal Code in 1842 branded collective resistance to the employer as tantamount to an uprising against the state, punishable by fifteen to twenty years of hard labor. A strike for higher wages could result in prison sentences of three weeks to three months for instigators and seven days to three weeks for participants. In 1874, the Penal Code was further amended to make membership in an illegal organization that fomented strikes and unrest punishable by eight months’ imprisonment in a fortress.
and exile to Siberia. During the next decade, the government issued several decrees that increased these penalties.

Conditions for factory workers were grim. After 1897, they normally worked eleven and a half hours a day for five days a week; somewhat less on Saturdays. They were paid poorly, and since many (the exact numbers are in dispute) returned for part of the year to their villages to work in the fields, they were housed in large, unsanitary barracks during their service at the factory. Industrialists, the historian Gaston V. Rimlinger noted, often acted like ‘Tsars in their realm’ and looked upon their workers ‘as servants and slaves.’ The employers and their managers were condescending to the laborers, addressing them by the familiar ‘thou,’ searching them for stolen goods at the end of the workday, and imposing fines on them for infractions of the intricate ‘rules of internal order.’ Any act of insubordination was punishable by a fine.

The wide cultural gulf between workers on the one hand and factory supervisors and government officials on the other exacerbated relations between them. In 1897, about 50 percent of the proletariat was illiterate, and many who were classed as literate could only barely read and write. That workers were not only economically exploited but also profoundly humiliated goes a long way to explaining why they frequently gave vent to rage during periods of revolutionary turbulence.

In the meantime, it had become apparent that Russian workers would not permanently accept their status of inferiority and remain docile. Between 1862 and 1869, six strikes and twenty-nine ‘disturbances’ took place; from 1870 to 1885 the average number of annual strikes rose to twenty and the number of disturbances from three to seventy-three. Some of the strikes, such as those in the St. Petersburg cotton mills in 1870, Kreenholm in Narva, Estonia in 1872, and Orekhovo-Zuevo near Moscow in 1885, were so massive as to suggest a significant change in the proletariat’s mood. Even some government officials began to acknowledge publicly that labor strife, far from simply being perpetrated
by outside agitators, was actually rooted in working conditions. By 1884, the police in St. Petersburg and Moscow, who kept an eye on all potential sources of disorder, had issued several reports on the erosion of the paternalistic relationship between manufacturer and employee. The police contended that masters paid their workers too little, showed no concern for their well-being, and had lost their respect. The social ideals propagated by the tsarist regime were manifestly not being implemented in the industrial sector of the economy.

On the initiative of an enlightened Minister of Finance, N. Kh. Bunge, a child labor law was adopted in 1882, which prohibited the employment of children under twelve, limited the workday of youngsters aged twelve to fifteen to eight hours, and placed restrictions on the use of children for night work. Inspectors employed by the government to enforce the legislation performed half-heartedly and were seen by many workers as often caring more about the employers’ profits than the employees’ well-being.

In 1899, the government adopted new measures to prevent strikes. The Third Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs established an elaborate network of police surveillance in industrial enterprises, ostensibly for the purpose of studying such matters as the economic life of the factories and workers’ conditions. Instead, the police devoted much of their time to ferreting out the instigators of strikes and arresting them before strikes could occur. Discovering the leaders of a potential strike, however, was not easy. Indeed, labor unrest continued to rise rapidly, as official figures indicate: between 1886 and 1894, the annual average was thirty-three; between 1895 and 1904, 176. During the massive strikes of 1896 and 1897 in the textile mills of St. Petersburg, workers revealed an unprecedented degree of sophistication, unity, and discipline. There could no longer be any doubt about the Russian workers’ ability to act forcefully to advance their interests. The strike movement reached its highest
level in the period before the Revolution of 1905 in 1903, when 138,877 workers staged 550 stoppages. The one policy that might have defused labor unrest, the legalization of independent unions and strikes, was never tried, because the government feared that it would undermine the entire structure of autocratic rule.

Early in the twentieth century, then, three principal issues motivated the opposition to the old order in Russia. The first was the constitutional question: How could the anachronistic political structure of the empire be altered to introduce civil liberties and assure a redistribution of power? The second was the labor question: How could the demands of the industrial proletariat for improvement in its social and economic conditions be met? The third was the agrarian question: How could the land hunger of millions of peasants be satisfied? The liberals, workers, and peasants constituted fairly distinct social groups, each of which emphasized one of the three issues, but by the spring of 1905 their agitation overlapped, which set off an unprecedented social and political crisis. The government could restore political stability only if it addressed the aspirations of these three protest movements, a state of affairs the authorities found disagreeable, both because they were reluctant to make any concessions at all and because they faced conflicting demands from various sectors of the opposition.

To complicate matters further, the national aspirations of minorities also provoked discontent, though most were not sufficiently aroused by this issue to pose a serious problem for the authorities until 1917, but even during the first revolution in 1905 those sentiments served to exacerbate tensions in various parts of the country.

**Russification**

The Russian Empire, the accretion of centuries of colonization, military conquest, and annexation of weak principalities by
Muscovite rulers, comprised over a hundred ethnic groups with a range of cultures, languages, and religions. The Great Russians, who made up less than half the country’s population—somewhat over 44 percent according to the census of 1897—claimed to be the dominant group and exerted a paramount influence in politics, occupying most of the important positions in the bureaucracy and military services. By the late nineteenth century, the authorities in St. Petersburg made plain their determination to preserve the hegemony of the Great Russians and even to increase their influence by reducing to a minimum the cultural and political autonomy of the minorities. The last two rulers, Tsars Alexander III and Nicholas II, embarked on a policy of ruthless Russification, partly for reasons of security. Concentrated in the borderlands, the minorities were looked upon as a potential danger in times of war. In addition, the tsars feared that the special rights and privileges, cultural as well as political, enjoyed by some of the nationalities (notably the Finns and, to a much lesser degree, the Poles) would serve as a model for other minorities, among whom national consciousness was beginning to take root. If autonomy were widely extended, the empire would cease to be a ‘unitary state,’ to use the parlance of the time, and the autocrat’s power would be sharply curtailed.

The authorities in St. Petersburg were also motivated by sheer prejudice. They considered the minorities to be culturally inferior, and were especially antagonistic toward the Jews, who numbered about five million. The government imposed economic, legal, and social restrictions on the Jews that were more extensive and demeaning than the measures against any other group. Forced, with few exceptions, to live in one region in the western and southwestern provinces, known as the Pale of Settlement, Jews also had to pay special taxes, could not attain the rank of officer in the army, and were almost completely excluded from employment in the bureaucracy. Moreover, their attendance at secondary schools and institutions of higher learning was
constrained by quotas. At bottom, the hostility toward the Jews derived from the belief that they were marked by ‘inner vices’ that made their full assimilation into Russian society impossible. The prominence of Jews in all the radical movements and, to a lesser extent, in the liberal movement was in large measure the fruit of the government’s discriminatory policies.

Although the entire opposition condemned the government’s policies of Russification and oppression of minorities, it did not adopt a uniform stand on the national question, which further complicated the struggle between the advocates of change and the champions of the status quo. The radicals favored either full autonomy or self-determination for the minorities, whereas many liberals opposed the decentralization of political authority, a stand that antagonized some minority groups, especially the Polish nationalists. The liberals generally believed that a constitutional government in St. Petersburg that respected cultural differences would retain the loyalty of all the empire’s subjects regardless of their national identity. In light of the growing force of nationalism, liberals seem to have been deluding themselves.

**War with Japan**

Domestic discontents in Imperial Russia were numerous and deep, but by themselves did not generate mass uprisings threatening the foundations of the state. In 1905, as in 1917, popular upheavals erupted at a time when political leaders had blundered into military conflicts that were badly managed and had led to catastrophic defeats. Only when the Tsar and his advisers proved to be incompetent as well as heartless did the people challenge the authorities en masse. In neither instance did the military conflict make revolution inevitable, but it created the preconditions for rebellion.
Although it has never been proved that the Russian government deliberately provoked Japan to divert attention from domestic tensions, there is little doubt that some senior officials mindlessly pursued a foreign policy in the Far East that was bound to be viewed with alarm by Japan. Russia began to abandon its generally cautious policy in the Pacific region in the 1890s, in response to Japan’s emergence as a strong, aggressive power, and China’s weakness. Eager to promote the country’s economic development, the authorities in St. Petersburg adopted various measures to extend Russia’s influence over two regions also coveted by Japan: Manchuria, which was part of China, and Korea, an autonomous kingdom under the suzerainty of the Chinese Emperor. At the same time, the Russian government decided to construct the Trans-Siberian Railroad. Finance Minister Witte was interested primarily in the economic exploitation of the area, which was rich in resources and markets, and he made it clear that he favored a cautious foreign policy that would avoid needless provocation of other powers. Russian diplomats, however, adopted an assertive, imprudent stance toward Japan and on several occasions during the 1890s forced Japan to abandon positions on the mainland. According to the historian John A. White, these humiliations evoked a ‘paroxysm of public indignation’ among the Japanese, who embarked on a program of rapid expansion of their armed forces.

Early in the twentieth century, tensions between the two powers reached a climax. Japan had vastly increased its economic and political influence over Korea, whereas Russia had extended its influence over neighboring Manchuria. When a Russian speculator, A. M. Bezobrazov, received a concession from the Korean government to cut timber on the Yalu and Tumen rivers, the Japanese government became alarmed. To calm the waters, it proposed an arrangement whereby Russia would be granted predominance in Manchuria in return for Japan’s predominance in Korea. The Russian government dawdled, and in January 1904
the Japanese pressed St. Petersburg for a speedy reply. When none was forthcoming, they decided on a course of action they had believed for some time to be inevitable. On 26 January, they launched a surprise attack on Russian ships at Port Arthur and Chemulpo, a foretaste of what happened thirty-seven years later, when the Japanese attacked the United States naval base at Pearl Harbor, in Hawaii, also without warning, bringing America into World War II.

Although surprised and indignant at Japan’s treachery, the Tsar, his advisers and the public at large were not particularly apprehensive. Everyone at the tsarist court thought that Russia faced a minor inconvenience and that the Japanese ‘adventure’ would be quickly ‘terminated.’ The liberal press, most notably Russkie vedomosti and Vestnik Evropy, referred to Russia’s ‘historical destiny’ to advance in the Far East and to the necessity of protecting the country against an aggressive and unscrupulous enemy. It was widely believed that Russia’s resources were so much greater than Japan’s that victory was assured. Among the revolutionary Left, the war attracted surprisingly little attention, although the leaders did denounce the government’s adventurism.

The optimism did not last long. Soon after hostilities began, it became clear that Japan enjoyed enormous advantages. Its troops and naval forces were better trained, its intelligence services were more effective, and, unlike Russia, it did not face the formidable task of having to transport reinforcements almost 4,400 miles over a still-primitive railway system. Russia suffered one humiliating defeat after another, at sea and on land, and public enthusiasm for the war quickly evaporated.

The Russians’ most dramatic setback came in May 1905, when a large fleet commanded by Admiral Z. P. Rozhdestvensky arrived in the Far East with orders to engage the Japanese navy. As soon as the fleet of eight battleships, twelve cruisers, and various auxiliary ships reached the Straits of Tsushima, it encountered
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the Japanese fleet, commanded by Admiral Togo Heihachiro. In size, the two fleets were about evenly matched, but Togo’s intelligence included detailed information about the location and movements of the Russian ships, and his forces were well rested. Battle was joined early in the afternoon of 14 May 1905, and within forty-five minutes the Russian navy suffered a devastating defeat. All told, the Japanese destroyed twenty-one Russian ships and captured four battleships and two hospital ships. Six Russian ships escaped to neutral ports, where they were disarmed, and only four reached Vladivostok. With this triumph, Japan gained undisputed mastery over the Pacific.

On land, the Russians fared no better, sustaining one humiliating defeat after another. A key factor was the poor showing of the officers, many of whom tended to be confused once their troops faced the enemy; they often took flight rather than encourage their troops. Even before the spring of 1905, when the worst military disasters befell Russia, the mood of Russian society had begun to sour. As early as the spring of 1904, newspapers had abandoned their optimism. Initially, they simply expressed shock at Russia’s inability to defeat Japan quickly, but soon their comments became much sharper. The moderate Prince S. N. Trubetskoï, who in January had strongly supported the war, now argued that ‘Russia could survive only if her government agreed to reforms.’

More than military humiliation generated opposition to the war. The war debilitated the economy, which was in the early stages of recovery after a prolonged slump. Usually, wars tend to stimulate economic activity, but the decision to transport only military goods on the Trans-Siberian Railway adversely affected some important sectors of the national economy. The production of silk goods, for example, declined by over 25 percent in 1904, that of woolen goods by about 15 percent, and that of cotton goods, chemicals, and some other industrial products by a smaller, but nevertheless significant, percentage. In addition, the call to
arms of about 1.2 million reservists, often the most productive workers, reduced output in the handicraft industries. Unemployment rose sharply and the local organs of government that were charged with providing charity to indigent families found it increasingly difficult to fulfill this obligation. Many such families received much less help than they needed.

The change in the public mood became most noticeable in the summer of 1904 when a terrorist assassinated V. K. Plehve, the reactionary Minister of Internal Affairs. The response of people in various strata of society to the elimination of the most dynamic and most intransigent figure in the government exposed the depth of despair over the state of affairs. The new mood was captured by Count Aloys Lexa von Aehrenthal, the Austro-Hungarian Ambassador to St. Petersburg. In a report to Vienna, he noted that although one could not expect much sympathy for so ‘authoritarian’ a person as Plehve, one could have expected: ‘… a certain degree of human compassion, or at least concern and anxiety with respect to the immediate future … [of the country]. Up to now I have found only totally indifferent people or people so cynical that they say that no other outcome was to be expected.’