

Why was Russia so difficult to govern?

AT THE BEGINNING of the twentieth century, Russia was a vast empire spanning two continents – Europe and Asia. From west to east it stretched over 4,000 miles, from north to south some 2,000 miles. The USA could fit into Russia two and a



SOURCE 1 A man and his son on a street in a provincial Russian town

half times over and Britain nearly 100 times. When it was night on one side of the empire, it was day on the other.

Communications were difficult. There were few paved roads. Outside the main cities, most of the roads were hard-packed earth, which would turn to mud in heavy rain. In the villages and small towns in spring and autumn, people had to walk on platforms or boards to avoid sinking in the mud, which could suck off their boots. In the winter, the frozen ruts would bounce people along as they travelled in their horse-drawn sleds. Travel by road was slow at the best of times and roads often became impassable.

For longer journeys, people used the rivers or the railways. Many of the major cities were sited along the rivers. Passenger steamboats plied regularly up and down the main routes, such as the River Volga. In the winter, the rivers iced over and sleds could be used.

Railways were the most comfortable form of travel. There had been an enormous growth in railways in the 1890s, but by 1900 Russia had only as many miles of track as Britain. Most of these were in European Russia. The only line of communication across the vast eastern expanse was the Trans-Siberian railway, which was opened in 1904. It took more than a week on the Trans-Siberian Express to travel from Moscow in the west to Vladivostok on the Pacific coast.

The Russian Empire covered about one-sixth of the world's total land, with a vast range of landscapes. The northern part of Russia, the tundra, is frozen for most of the year. South of the tundra is the taiga, which consists of miles and miles of impenetrable forests, and then the Russian Steppes, a vast area of grassland. In the far south lies the desert, where nomads used camels for their journeys to far-flung settlements.

Much of this land was very beautiful and dramatic, but little of it could be used for farming. The main agricultural areas were in European Russia, where most of the people lived. The Black Earth region was the most fertile. Beyond the Ural Mountains, Russia was a wild place, with frontier settlements very like the old Wild West of America.



SOURCE 2 A map of the Russian Empire in 1900, showing the different climatic regions and types of vegetation

SOURCE 3 Peasant women pulling boats on the Volga River



1. How do you think that each of the following helps explain why Russia was difficult to govern:

- size
- climate
- communications?

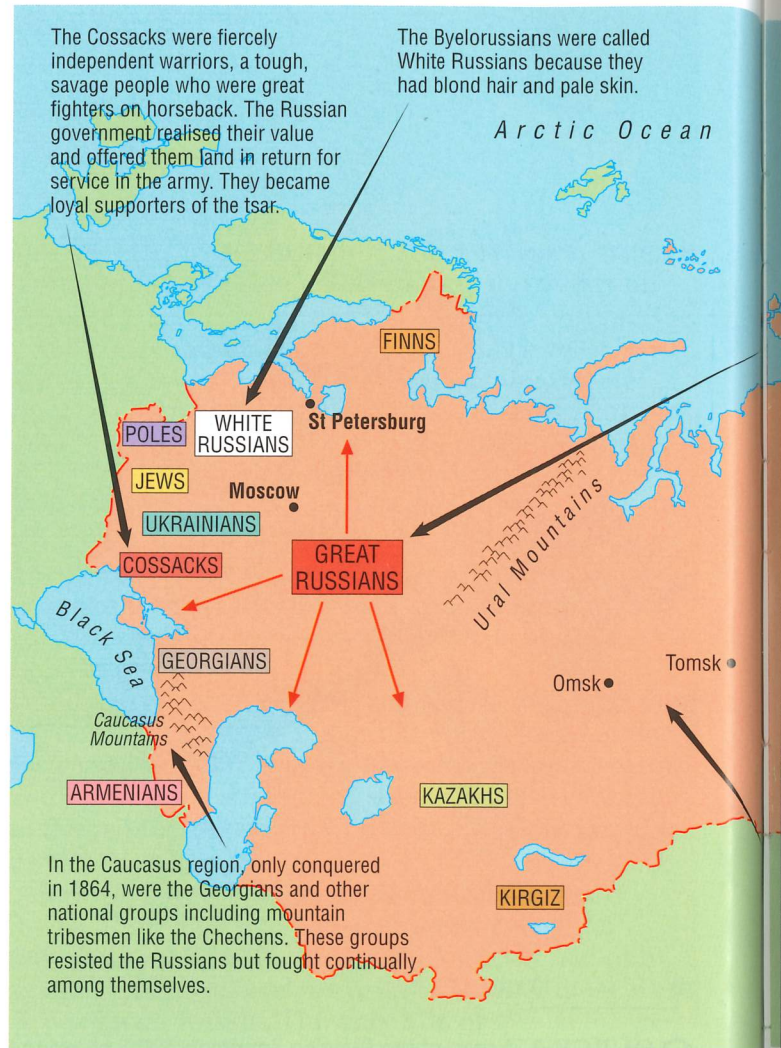
Who were the Russians?

The Empire contained around 130 million people, the vast majority of whom lived in European Russia, west of the Ural Mountains. But less than half of the population were Russians. The rest belonged to peoples who had been conquered by the Russians. Many of them did not speak Russian and most were illiterate.

1. Why did so many people live in the European part of Russia?

Nationality	Millions
Russian	55.6
Ukrainian	22.4
White Russian	5.8
Polish	7.9
Jewish	5.0
Kirghiz	4.0
Tartar	3.4
German	1.8
Latvian	1.4
Bashkir	1.3
Lithuanian	1.2
Armenian	1.2
Romanian/Moldavian	1.1
Estonian	1.0
Georgian	0.8
Turkmenian	0.3

SOURCE 4 The major nationalities in Russia by mother tongue in 1897



SOURCE 5 Map showing areas inhabited by some of the different nationalities



SOURCE 6 Gurians from the Caucasus



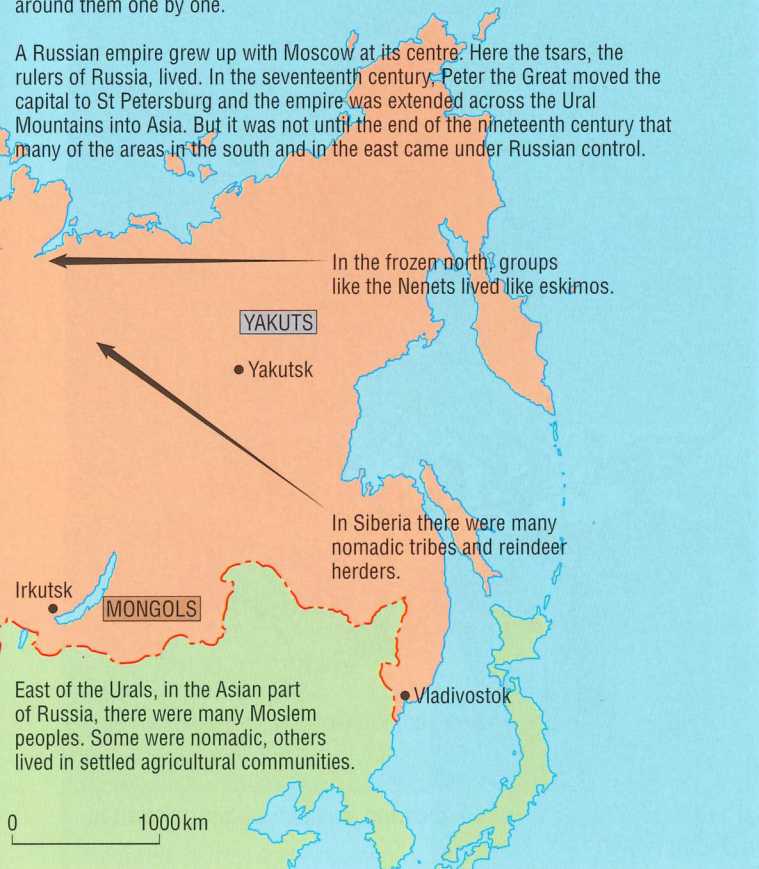
SOURCE 7 Evenki people from Siberia



SOURCE 8 Muscovites waiting at a tram stop

The Great Russians, a mixture of Slavs and Vikings, were characterised as a melancholy, gloomy people, given to outbursts of emotion. This was put down to the hard climate, long dark nights and long periods of inactivity. The Russians were convinced that they were special. They thought that the Russian customs and religion were superior to those of their neighbours. From the fifteenth century onwards, they began to conquer the peoples around them one by one.

A Russian empire grew up with Moscow at its centre. Here the tsars, the rulers of Russia, lived. In the seventeenth century, Peter the Great moved the capital to St Petersburg and the empire was extended across the Ural Mountains into Asia. But it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that many of the areas in the south and in the east came under Russian control.



Russification

Some of the national groups were deeply resentful of Russian control. They particularly resented the policy of 'Russification' – making non-Russians speak Russian, wear Russian clothes and follow Russian customs – which they saw as an attack on their way of life.

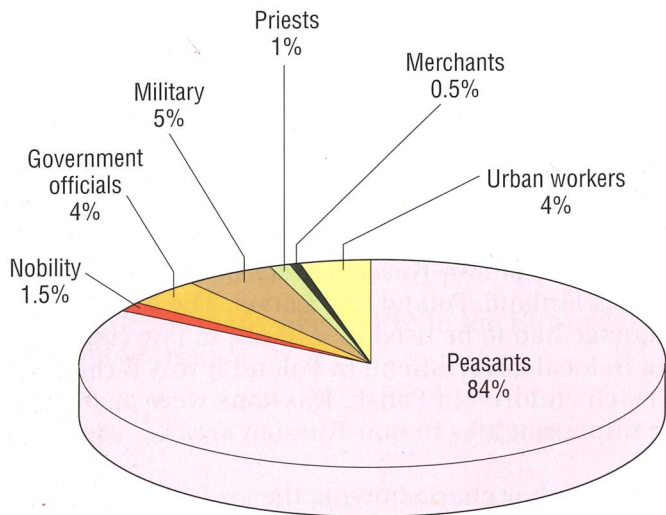
Russian officials were brought in to run the government of non-Russian areas of the Empire, such as Finland, Poland and Latvia. The Russian language had to be used in schools, in law courts and in local government. In Poland it was forbidden to teach children in Polish. Russians were also given the important jobs in non-Russian areas.

2. Draw a bar chart showing the size of the seven largest groups in Russia.
3. What do Sources 1, 3 and 5–9 suggest about differences in the lives of the people in different parts of Russia? Choose three photographs to illustrate your points.
4. Do you think the existence of the different national groups would make it easier or harder to govern Russia? Think about:
 - different languages and ways of life
 - attitudes towards the Russians and Russification
 - divisions between national groups who disliked each other.



SOURCE 9 Jews from Bokhara in central Asia

What was life like in Russia in 1900?



SOURCE 1 A breakdown of Russian society by class in 1900

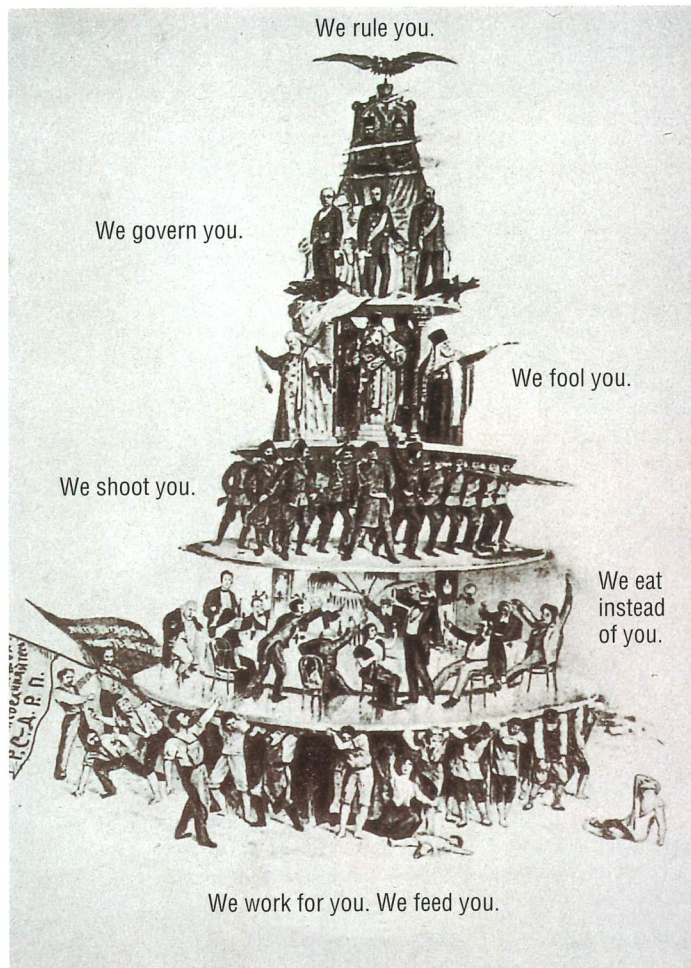
1. What do Sources 1 and 2 tell you about Russian society?
2. Do you think the cartoonist who drew Source 2 approved of the way Russian society was organised? Explain your answer.

The peasants

AT THE BEGINNING of the twentieth century, four out of every five people in Russia were peasants. For most of them, life was hard. Their main food was grain made into rye bread or porridge, and cabbage soup. Fish was common but meat was rare. On religious days and at festivals delicacies such as pies and pancakes were eaten. Tea, beer and vodka were the most popular drinks.

When the harvests were good there was food to go around. But when the harvests were bad there was starvation and disease: 400,000 people died in 1891 when crop failure coupled with cholera hit the countryside. The average life expectancy was less than 40 years. There were regular epidemics of typhus and diphtheria, and syphilis was widespread. It was a life of poverty, squalor and, often, drunkenness.

The peasants used the backward strip method of farming – each family had 20 to 30 or more narrow strips scattered around the village. They used wooden ploughs and had few animals or tools, so the work was backbreaking physical labour. Most families only produced enough food for themselves. Some peasants earned extra money by making clothes, furniture or articles to sell in the towns.



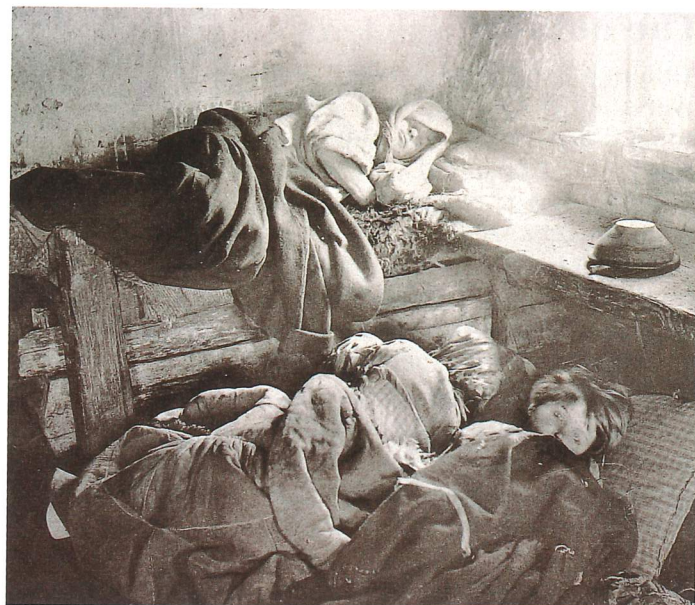
SOURCE 2 A cartoon showing Russian society, drawn in about 1900

But the main problem was land. There was simply not enough to go round. Until 1861, the majority of peasants had been *SERFS*, owned by their masters. In 1861, they had been freed and were allocated a share of land which they could buy with money loaned by the government. But they had to pay off the loans over many years. Moreover, the amount of land they got was often barely enough to survive on, let alone pay off loans. As a result, many peasants got into crushing debt.

The peasants were angry that the landowners, the nobles, had kept so much of the land after 1861 and still had large estates. Many had to work on the nobles' estates to earn extra money. Most peasants simply wanted enough of their own land to farm. The situation was getting worse by 1900. The population had increased by 50 per cent between 1860 and 1897 and was still growing fast. More and more peasants were competing for the land available.



SOURCE 3 Peasants in a village near Nizhny-Novogorod, 1891-92



SOURCE 4 A peasant mother and her children sleeping in a hut

Typically, Russian peasants wore coarse woollen shirts and trousers and peaked caps. Their loose trousers were tucked into leather boots if they were well off. The poorest wore sandals made of tree bark. Women wore cotton blouses, often coloured, skirts, and scarves on their heads. Men and women wore kaftan coats tied at the waist.



SOURCE 5 Peasants at a village meal (see Source 3)

SOURCE 6 A description of peasants' homes by an English visitor

“The village consists of one street, containing about 35 cottages, and lined with birch trees. The cottages are built of wood and are unpainted . . . You mount a wooden staircase or ladder, push open a door, and find yourself in the upper or main floor of the cottage, the ground floor being mainly used for storage purposes. A big brick stove is in the main room, and on this stove the older people and children sleep in winter. There is a rough table and a few chairs, a bed and in the middle of the room a child's cot suspended from the ceiling.”

3. What can you see in Sources 3, 4 and 5 to suggest that the peasants were poor?
4. In what ways does Source 6 agree with the evidence of the photographs?
5. Give two reasons why the peasants were so poor.
6. Why was the issue of land so important to the peasants?
7. What would your main complaints be if you were a peasant? Make a list under the following headings: food, health, work, money, land.

The nobility

Although the nobles made up just over one per cent of the population, they owned almost a quarter of all the land.

Some were extremely rich, with large country estates, which they employed people to run. They would often also have another home in St Petersburg or Moscow, or both, and would spend a good part of the year enjoying the ballet, the theatre and a round of social events in 'society'.



SOURCE 7 The ball of the coloured wigs at Countess Yelisaveta Shuvalova's palace in St Petersburg

The middle classes

Around 1900, with the development of industry, a new class of people was growing in Russia: bankers, merchants and rich capitalists who owned the industrial works. St Petersburg and Moscow were the main centres of commerce and of the textile industry. The link between rich businessmen and the government in Russia was very strong; the government gave them big contracts and loans.

Life for the rich middle classes was very good. In Moscow there were restaurants, cocktail bars and smart hotels. Here they could eat good Russian food – caviar, sturgeon, cold salmon and borsch (beetroot and meat soup served with cream) – and drink champagne. They could go to the much-loved ballet, to concerts or the theatre. They had large houses which were lavishly decorated, with beautiful furniture.

ACTIVITY

Compare the lives of the rich and poor in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century. Divide a page into two columns headed rich and poor.

- Use the evidence – the photographs and the written sources – to compare their clothes, food, work, housing, entertainment, and other aspects of their lives.
- Write several sentences to answer this question: 'How large was the gap between rich and poor in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century?'



SOURCE 8 A painting of a middle-class family being entertained by a street musician



SOURCE 9 A soup kitchen for the unemployed before 1914

SOURCE 10 From *The Story of My Life*, by Father Gapon, written in 1905. Gapon was a priest who organised a trade union to help workers

“They receive miserable wages, and generally live in an overcrowded state, very commonly in special lodging houses. A woman takes several rooms in her own name, subletting each one; and it is common to see ten or more persons living in one room and four sleeping in a bed.

The normal working day is eleven and a half hours of work, exclusive of meal times. But . . . manufacturers have received permission to work overtime, so that the average day is longer than that nominally allowed by law – fifteen or sixteen hours. I often watched the crowds of poorly clad and emaciated figures of men and girls returning from the mills . . . Why do they agree to work overtime? They have to do so because they are paid by the piece and the rate is very low. ”

SOURCE 11 A report from the journal of the Moscow municipal corporation in 1902 on tenement buildings in the city

“The apartment has a terrible appearance, the plaster is crumbling, there are holes in the walls, stopped up with rags. It is dirty. The stove has collapsed. Legions of cockroaches and bugs. No double window frames and so it is piercingly cold. The lavatory is so dilapidated that it is dangerous to enter and children are not allowed in. All apartments in the house are similar. ”

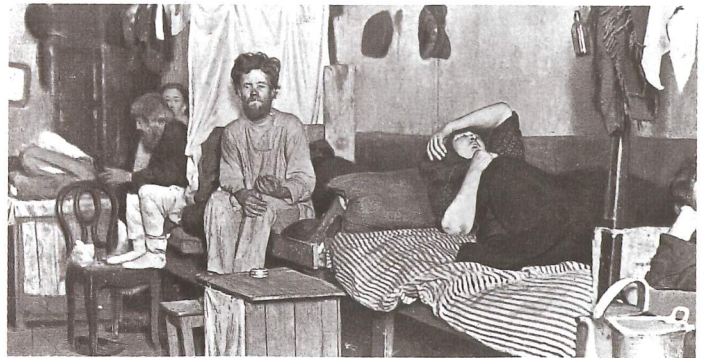
The workers

Life in the back streets of St Petersburg, Moscow and other Russian cities was very different for the men and women who worked in the new industries. They lived in cheap wooden lodging houses or large tenement buildings, ate cheap black bread, cabbage soup and buckwheat porridge – and drank vodka.

In industrial centres away from the cities, workers often lived in barracks next to the factory. Inside, dark corridors led to dormitories for up to 30 workers, or minute rooms sleeping several families. Spaces between them were divided off by flimsy partitions or sheets, giving almost no privacy. Illness, smells, arguments, sex – nothing could be hidden. Many factories kept going 24 hours a day, and the same beds were occupied by two workers in turn, one on the day shift and one on the night shift.

Many of the workers were young male peasants who had been forced off the land. A large number of women workers were employed in the textile factories in Moscow and St Petersburg.

1. Which sources are most useful to historians – the photographs, Sources 9 and 12, or the written sources (10 and 11)?
2. What would your main grievances be if you were a worker?



SOURCE 12 A photograph showing the inside of a lodging house