

# How was Russia governed in 1900?



**SOURCE 1** Tsar Nicholas II and Tsarina Alexandra in full regalia

**SOURCE 2** An extract from an open letter from Leo Tolstoy, the famous novelist, to the Tsar in 1902

*“A third of the whole of Russia lives under reinforced surveillance . . . The army of the police, regular and secret, is continually growing in numbers. The prisons and penal colonies are overcrowded with thousands of convicts and political prisoners, among whom industrial workers are now included . . .*

*The censorship has reached a level not known since the 1840s . . .*

*In all cities and industrial centres, soldiers are employed and equipped with live ammunition to be sent out against the people.*

*. . . and the peasants, all 100,000,000 of them, are getting poorer every year . . . Famine has become a normal phenomenon. Normal likewise is the discontent of all classes of society with the government. ”*

NICHOLAS II, of the Romanov dynasty, came to the throne in 1894. He was an **AUTOCRAT**. This means that he had complete and absolute power. He was not elected. He believed that he had a divine right to rule – that is, that he had been chosen by God. He could do what he liked without consulting anyone. He had the power of life and death over his subjects.

To help him rule, he had a council of ministers who ran the various government departments. But they all reported to the Tsar, who made the important decisions.

Because Russia was such a large country to run, there were thousands of civil servants, from top officials down to tax collectors and customs officers. Getting things done was a painfully slow business. The civil servants carried out the orders passed down to them. However, since the wages of the people at the bottom were very low, there was a good deal of bribery and corruption.

There was no parliament to represent the views of the people, and there was no way for people to get their views heard. Newspapers and books were **CENSORED**: they had to be sent to the government for approval before they could be printed. Opposition was not tolerated, and the Okhrana, or secret police, dealt with anyone who criticised the government. The secret police had spies and agents everywhere. **DISSIDENTS** soon found themselves in jail or exiled to Siberia.

If there were strikes, protests or riots, which often took place in times of famine, then soldiers, particularly the much-feared Cossacks, would be used to restore order. They stopped any demonstrations with great brutality.

1. Explain in your own words the meaning of the word ‘autocrat’.
2. What impression of the Tsar and his wife was Source 1 designed to put across?



**SOURCE 3** Political prisoners, including the revolutionary Marie Spirodonova (left; see page 15)

**SOURCE 4** From *Russia as it Really Is*, written in 1904 by Carl Joubert, a French doctor. Here he describes some of the prisoners he examined who were going to Siberia

“■ *A young man, aged twenty, a student from Kazan, stated that he had committed no crime: but he was found reading a certain book in which the censor's name did not figure on the title page, was arrested by the secret police, and sent for five years hard labour . . . I examined him and found him in the second stage of consumption. His troubles would soon be over.*

■ *A girl, aged nineteen, from Taganrog, stated that she was found in the house of a revolutionary. The revolutionary got away before arrest, but she was taken, though absolutely innocent, as a substitute. No trial. Twenty years' [sentence] . . . Examined her and found that she was suffering from cancer of the breast. Nothing had been done for her.*

■ *A woman, aged 27, from the city of Moscow, wife of a lawyer. Her husband, in the same prison, was sentenced to ten years for being in possession of certain books. Health: advanced pregnancy.*

*Such were a few of the cases that came to my notice . . . It is not therefore surprising that a large number of them never reach their destinations. ”*

## The Orthodox Church

The Orthodox Church – a branch of Christianity – was very important in Russia. In most houses there were holy pictures or icons on the walls. The Orthodox Church was surrounded by mysticism and superstition. Holy men, or *STARTSY* (one *STARETS*) were held in special regard. However, there was a great gap between the poor parish priests on one side and the rich bishops and higher clergy on the other.

The Orthodox Church was closely linked to the Tsar and supported his way of ruling. It taught that the Tsar was the head of the country and the head of the Church – in other words, that he was God's chosen representative on earth. This was why many peasants and workers thought of the Tsar as the 'little father', their special protector. But this image was to be shattered in the early part of the new century.

- Do Sources 2–4 suggest that the system of governing Russia was working well? Explain your answer.
- What do each of the cases in Source 4 tell us about the Tsar's method of keeping control?
- How do you think the Orthodox Church helped to keep the Tsar in power?
- What aspects of the way that Russia was governed do you think made people most angry?

## ACTIVITY

You are a Russian noble who believes that there is a lot wrong with Russia in the year 1903. You have spent some time in Moscow and St Petersburg and have toured around many villages. Write a letter to the Tsar telling him what is wrong and why changes need to be made. Mention:

- the poverty of the peasants and the land problem
- the living and working conditions of the industrial workers
- corruption in government
- censorship of the press
- the violence used to deal with protesters
- the lack of opportunity for people to have their views heard.

You could begin like this:

5 June 1903

Sire,

Your most loyal and obedient servant wishes to draw to your attention the grievous situation and serious problems existing in some parts of Russia today. I know that, were you fully aware of these, you would take steps to improve matters. I have recently completed a tour of . . .

# Was the Tsar fit to rule Russia?

THE SYSTEM OF government in Russia meant that a lot depended on the man at the centre – the Tsar. He had to be a strong person, capable of making hard decisions and controlling his ministers. Was Nicholas II up to the job?

## Tsar Nicholas II

There is no doubt that Nicholas was a kind, well-meaning person, with a deep affection for his family. He was devoted to his wife, Alexandra, his son, Alexis, and his four daughters, Tatiana, Olga, Maria and Anastasia. Family photographs were in every room of the palace, including the lavatory. Nicholas would sooner spend time with his family than deal with governmental matters.

Although kind to those around him and deeply religious, Nicholas could also be cruel and merciless. He would not stand for opposition. His answer was always the same – violence. He praised regiments who put down disorder and hanged the people involved. He was particularly anti-Jewish and encouraged POGROMS (attacks) against Jewish settlements.

Nicholas believed wholeheartedly in autocracy. He thought that democracy with elections and parliaments would lead to the collapse of Russia.

It does seem that he genuinely wanted to bring happiness and prosperity to his people. Unfortunately, Nicholas knew very little about the people. He did not visit factories or villages, or go on tours. His information about what was going on came from a small number of people, who were quite happy to protect him from the realities of life in Russia.

## His wife: Alexandra

The Tsarina Alexandra, Nicholas's wife, had a very different type of personality. Although shy, she was strong willed and obstinate.

She was also very religious. She believed that the



**SOURCE 1** A photograph of the Tsar with his wife Alexandra and their children

Tsar had been appointed by God and that it was her duty to support him.

Alexandra was clearly very much in love with Nicholas. In the evenings, she demanded that he spend time with the family. She encouraged the Tsar to withdraw from public events to a private family world.

The Tsarina had a great influence on the Tsar. She was determined that Nicholas should not share power with the people. She felt Nicholas should keep all his autocratic powers, given to him by God, to pass on to their son.

1. How might Alexandra have had a harmful influence on her husband in his role as leader?

## What did his contemporaries say?

**SOURCE 2** Written by Kerensky, the leader of the government which took over from the Tsar in 1917, in his memoirs, *Crucifixion of Liberty*, in 1934

*“The daily work of a monarch he found intolerably boring. He could not stand listening long or seriously to ministers’ reports, or reading them.”*

**SOURCE 3** Said by an unknown cabinet minister

*“Nicholas II was not fit to run a village post office.”*

**SOURCE 4** Written by Leon Trotsky, one of the leaders of the revolutionaries who opposed the Tsar, in 1932

*“His ancestors did not pass on to him one quality which would have made him capable of governing an empire.”*



**SOURCE 5** From the diary of the Tsar’s sister, the Grand Duchess Olga

*“He kept saying . . . that he was wholly unfit to reign . . . And yet Nicky’s unfitness was by no means his fault. He had intelligence, he had faith and courage and he was wholly ignorant about governmental matters. Nicky had been trained as a soldier. He should have been taught statesmanship, and he was not.”*

**SOURCE 6** By Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich

*“He never had an opinion of his own . . . always agreeing with the judgement of the last person he spoke to.”*

**SOURCE 7** By Sergei Witte, chief minister under Nicholas, in his memoirs. Even though he disliked the Tsar, he said this of Nicholas

*“He has a quick mind and learns easily. In this respect he is far superior to his father.”*

2. What did Nicholas’s contemporaries (people who lived at the same time) think of him as a ruler (Sources 2–7)?
3. a) Are there any reasons why some of these people might want to run Nicholas down and make him out to be worse than he was?
- b) Which of these sources would you trust most? Why?
- c) Which would you trust least? Why?

## What do historians say?

**SOURCE 8** From *Nicholas II, Emperor of All the Russias*, by Dominic Lieven, 1994

*“Nicholas II was not a stupid man . . . His problem was that he could understand many points of view and wavered between them. The problems Russia faced were very great . . . Nicholas II loved his country and served it loyally and to the best of his ability. He had not sought power and his personality meant that he was not very good at exercising it. He was very kind, sensitive, generous . . . [The situation] would probably have destroyed any man who sat on the throne. ”*

**SOURCE 9** From *Russia in the Age of Modernisation and Revolution* by H. Rogger, 1983

*“Even more poorly prepared than his father for the burdens of kingship, Nicholas had no knowledge of the world of men, of politics or government to help him make the weighty decisions that in the Russian system the Tsar alone must make. ”*

1. Read the opinions of the historians in Sources 8 and 9.
  - a) Which historian’s opinion is supported by most contemporary views?
  - b) Find one contemporary view to support each of the historians.

## ■ ACTIVITY

Work in pairs or groups.

1. Choose three qualities which you think a strong leader for Tsarist Russia should have.
2. How does Nicholas measure up against each of these?
3. Read through all the sources on pages 12–14 and decide which of these statements sums up Nicholas best:

a) *He was useless as a Tsar. He was stupid, incompetent and totally unfit for the role of a powerful leader.*

b) *He was not as bad as some people made him out to be, but he was not the right man for the job. He was unsuited for it.*

c) *He was an intelligent man, but he had not been prepared for the job of Tsar and really was not up to it.*

d) *It was an impossible job with all the problems in Russia at this time. Any person would have had great difficulty being Tsar in this period.*

4. Use these statements, or a combination of them, to help you write your own opinion about Nicholas. Use the sources to support your views.

## Who opposed the Tsar?

THERE WERE MANY people in Russia who did not like the way the Tsar governed the Empire. They believed there were better ways of running the country and improving the living conditions of the people. By the early 1900s, a number of groups had emerged who opposed the Tsar.

### Socialist Revolutionaries

Formed in 1901, the SOCIALIST REVOLUTIONARIES believed in a general revolutionary movement which would unite all the people who were suffering under the Tsar. They thought the peasants would bring about revolution in Russia.

#### SOCIALIST REVOLUTIONARIES

##### Aims

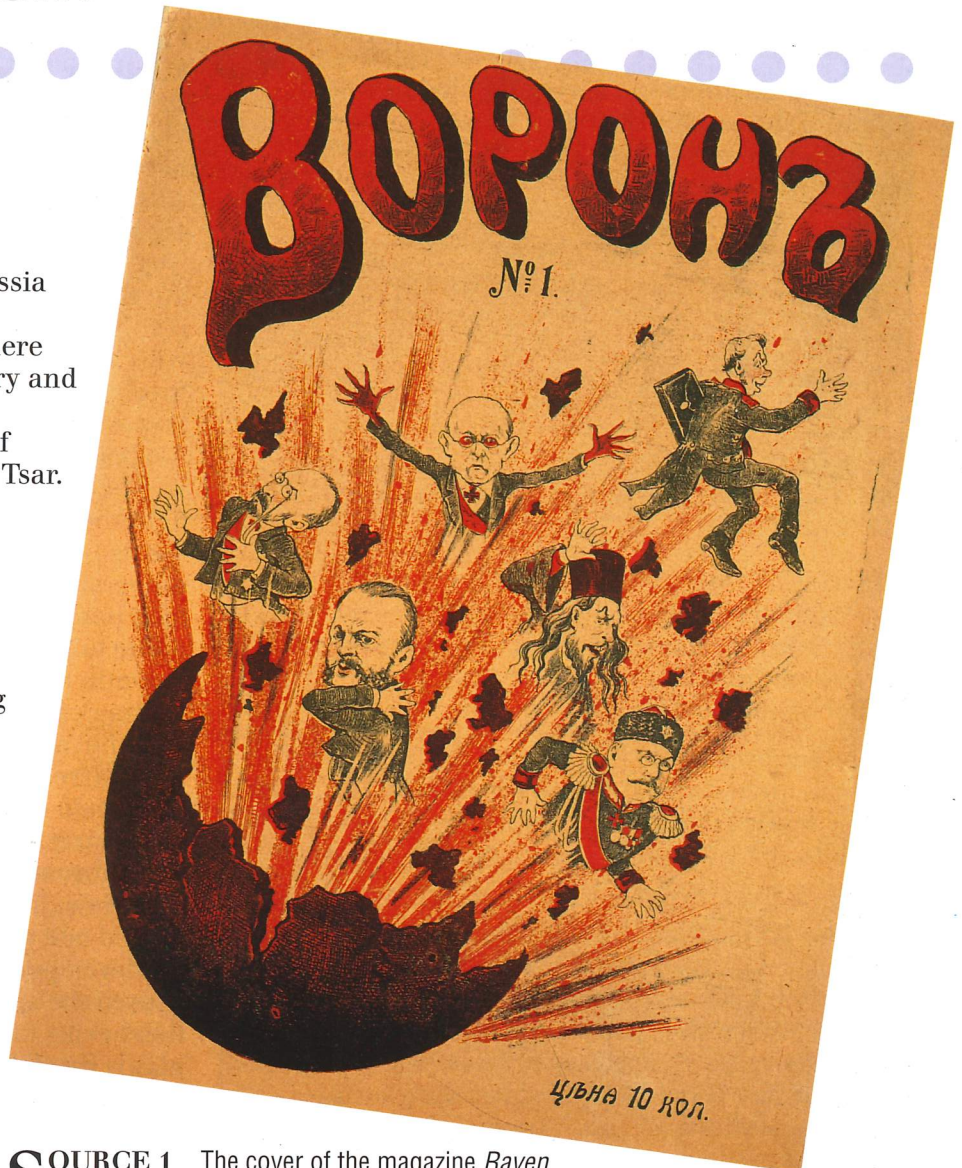
- To get rid of the Tsar and his government.
- To give all the land to the peasants to farm collectively in communes – so forming thousands of small peasant communities.

##### Support

- Mainly appealed to the peasants, who supported the party which wanted to give them the land. Sometimes called the 'Peasants' Party'.

##### Tactics

- Propaganda to encourage revolution.
- Violent acts (terrorism) to bring about the collapse of the government. Responsible for the deaths of several important government officials.



**SOURCE 1** The cover of the magazine *Raven* (1906) showing tsarist ministers being blown up



#### Marie Spirodonova

Marie Spirodonova came from a well-to-do family. In 1906 she was a 19-year-old student in Tambov and was deeply affected by the suffering of the peasants around her. She became a Socialist Revolutionary and decided to kill the cruel governor of Tambov. He tortured peasants who could not pay their taxes and used his Cossacks to mistreat them. She

walked up to him at a railway station and shot him in the heart.

The Cossacks beat her and threw her naked into a cold cell. When she would not give them the names of accomplices, they pulled out her hair and burnt her all over with cigarettes. For two nights she was passed around the Cossacks. She was sentenced to death but this was changed to life imprisonment in Siberia. She was freed by the 1917 revolution.

## Social Democrats

The Social Democratic Party, founded in 1895, followed the teachings of Karl Marx. They believed a revolution would be started by the workers concentrated in large cities.

### SOCIAL DEMOCRATS

#### Aims

- To overthrow the Tsar.
- To create a SOCIALIST state.

#### Support

- Workers in cities and large towns.
- Students.

#### Tactics

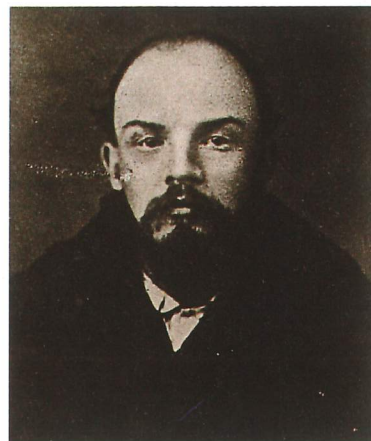
In 1903, the Social Democrats split over the tactics they thought would bring about revolution. One group became known as the MENSHEVIKS and the other as the BOLSHEVIKS.

**Mensheviks** believed the party should be a mass organisation which all workers could join. This mass party would grow until it eventually took power. It would work with other groups like trade unions to improve wages and working conditions.

**Bolsheviks** believed in a small, secret, tightly disciplined party of professional revolutionaries who would seize power when the time was right. They thought that a large party could always be infiltrated by police spies. They planned revolutionary cells of three or four people who would get into factories to organise strikes and demonstrations.

## Lenin – real name Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov

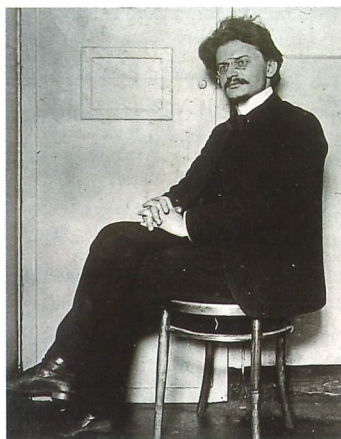
Vladimir Ulyanov was born in Simbirsk in 1870, the son of a school inspector. He was deeply affected by the execution of his revolutionary brother, who had been involved in the assassination of Alexander II. He vowed that he would fight the injustice of Tsarism. He went to university to study law, but was expelled because he took part in demonstrations. Later he changed his name to Lenin.



**SOURCE 2** A photograph of Lenin taken in around 1900

Lenin became more involved with Marxism, writing pamphlets and supporting strikes, and in 1894 formed a MARXIST group. His activities soon led to his arrest and exile to Siberia. Here he married Nadezhda Krupskaya, a fellow revolutionary.

On their release in 1900, Lenin and Nadezhda went abroad to work with the new Social Democratic Party in exile. They came to London, where Lenin helped edit the Party newspaper, *Iskra* ('The Spark'). He developed his ideas about revolution, which caused the split of the Social Democratic Party. The Bolsheviks followed his idea for a small, secret, highly disciplined party, which would seize power in the name of the workers. Lenin remained outside Russia, organising the Bolshevik Party, until the revolution broke out in 1917.



**SOURCE 3** Photograph of Trotsky in a prison cell after his arrest in 1905

## Trotsky – real name Lev Bronstein

Lev Bronstein was born in 1879 in the Ukraine, the son of a rich Jewish peasant. Angry at the mistreatment of the Jews, he joined a Marxist discussion group at the age of 16 and fell in love with Alexandra Sokolovska, who was the leader of the group. They were arrested for writing revolutionary pamphlets and leading strikes. Married in a Moscow prison, they were exiled to Siberia.

In 1902, his wife helped him escape abroad, using a false passport, which he signed in the name of Trotsky (it was the name of a prison warder). In Paris, he met a young Russian art student called Natalia Sedova. He lived with her for the rest of his life, and they had two sons, although he always kept on good terms with his first wife and family. He went to London to work with Lenin and his wife Krupskaya. They called him 'the Pen' because he was such a good writer. But at the Social Democratic conference in 1903, he sided with the Mensheviks.

In February 1905, he returned from exile to join in the revolution, becoming Menshevik chairman of the St Petersburg SOVIET in October. When the revolution collapsed, Trotsky was arrested and sent back to Siberia. But he escaped on the way and went to America.

## Liberals

The liberal middle classes thought it was time the people had an opportunity to run the country through a parliament. In 1905, the liberals formed the Constitutional Democratic Party, the Cadets.

### LIBERALS

#### Aims

- Free elections and a parliament to run the country.
- The Tsar to be a constitutional monarch like the one in England.
- Civil rights – freedom of speech, worship and conscience.

#### Support

- The middle and educated classes – teachers, doctors, lawyers, some industrialists.
- Some members of the gentry.

#### Tactics

- Meetings, speeches, discussions, publishing articles and books calling for change.

## ■ TASK

Look at the statements below. Match each one to the person you think would have said it, and say which opposition group you think they might have supported.

- Railwayman
- Peasant farmer
- Student
- Doctor
- Jewish teacher
- Factory worker

*It is time the people had a say in the running of the country. There should be a parliament which is freely elected by all men.*

*The only way to bring down this evil government is to use terrorism against the Tsar and his officials.*

*The workers have suffered for too long. We must overthrow the Tsar and build a state where people work co-operatively and share the fruits of their labour.*

*The capitalists squeeze as much work out of the working people as they can for the least amount of wages while they live well with lovely houses, clothes and food.*

*The land should be taken from the rich landlords and given to the people who work on it.*

*People should have equal civil rights, including the freedom to speak and write without censorship. They should have an equal chance to get jobs and set up businesses.*

### Discussion point

Do you think terrorism is ever justified in trying to change the way a country is governed?



# Why did Russia explode in revolution in 1905?

**I**N 1905 RUSSIA reached boiling point and revolution broke out. For a year, the Tsar was unable to control large areas of Russia. How did this come about? People had been dissatisfied with the government for a long time but it needed other factors to push Russia into open revolution.

## Economic problems

We have already seen that the living and working conditions for peasants and workers were very bad. But the government made matters worse by its own policies.

Russia needed to develop its industries in order to change from a backward agricultural country into a modern industrialised one, and remain an important military power. So the government invested an enormous amount of money in improving Russia's industries. Although money was borrowed from other countries, the main source was the Russian people.

The peasants had to pay heavy taxes on grain. The taxes on everyday items such as alcohol and salt were increased. The workers' wages were kept low. The government's idea was to squeeze the people hard and put all the money into industrial development. It was hoped that, once industry got going, everybody would become better off.

At first, things seemed to go well. Industry grew rapidly, especially iron and steel, and the railways. But then in 1902 there was an industrial slump and thousands of the new workers lost their jobs. Strikes and demonstrations broke out in many cities.

Disaster also struck in the countryside. There were poor harvests in 1900 and 1902. The peasants had already been squeezed to a point where they could barely survive. Now they were starving. There were outbreaks of violence and landlords' houses were burned.

The government's only solution to these problems was to use troops to crush any disturbances. But the demonstrations and violence continued throughout 1902 and 1903.

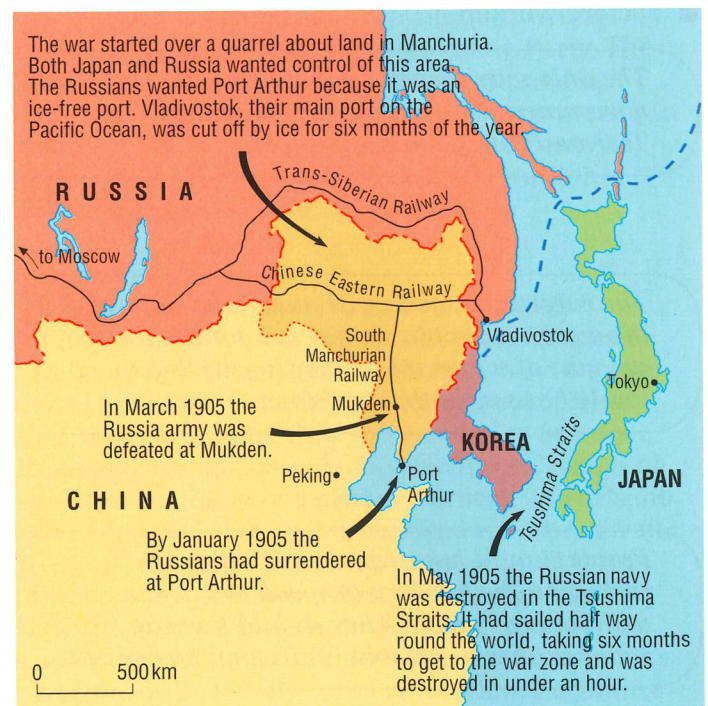
1. Why did Russia need to develop its industries?
2. a) How did the government plan to develop industries?  
b) Why did this plan run into difficulties?  
c) What were the effects of these difficulties?

## The Russo-Japanese War

On top of all this, Russia got itself involved in a war with Japan in 1904. At first, Tsar Nicholas thought the war was a good idea. Victory in a short war would stop people criticising his government. But it was not long before the war made conditions worse than they had been before. Prices rose in the cities, as the war caused shortages of food and other goods. Lack of industrial materials caused factories to close, and more workers found themselves unemployed and hungry.

Even worse for the Tsar was that the Japanese inflicted defeat after defeat on the Russians. This was very humiliating, since Japan was such a small country in comparison with Russia. As the war progressed during 1904, Russia was pushed deeper and deeper into crisis. The year 1905 started very badly, when Port Arthur fell to the Japanese, bringing renewed protest about the incompetence of the Tsar and his government.

3. Why did a war break out with Japan (see Source 1)?
4. What attitude towards the war and the Japanese is shown in Source 2?
5. Why would this attitude make defeats in the war more shocking for the Russians?
6. What other effects did the war have?



**SOURCE 1** A map of the Russo-Japanese War, showing key events



**SOURCE 2** A cartoon drawn during the Russo-Japanese War. The caption read 'Oh you funny Japs, always making mistakes. Thank you for the badly aimed shells which help me light my pipe!'

## The spark: Bloody Sunday

At the beginning of 1905 conditions were bad in St Petersburg and tension was high. To ease the tension, a priest, Father Gapon, organised a march to deliver a petition to the Tsar, asking for his help.

**SOURCE 3** Extracts from the workers' petition, organised by Father Gapon in 1905

*“Sire – We, working men and inhabitants of St Petersburg, our wives and our children and our helpless old parents, come to You, Sire, to seek for truth, justice and protection. We have been made beggars, we are oppressed; we are near to death . . . The moment has come for us when death would be better than the prolongation of our intolerable sufferings . . . We ask but little: to reduce the working day to eight hours, to provide a minimum wage of a rouble a day . . .*

*Officials have brought the country to complete ruin and involved it in a shameful war. We working men have no voice in the way the enormous amounts raised from us in taxes are spent . . .*

*We are seeking here our last salvation. Do not refuse to help Your people. Destroy the wall between Yourself and Your people. ”*

On a cold, crisp morning, Sunday 22 January, some 200,000 people marched towards the Winter Palace to deliver the petition to the Tsar. As the marchers approached the palace, they were met by troops.

7. a) What were the workers asking the Tsar for in the petition (Source 3)?
- b) What does the petition tell you about the attitudes of the people towards the Tsar at this time?

**SOURCE 4** From Leon Trotsky's book *1905*, written 1908–9. Trotsky was not in St Petersburg at the time

*“As agreed, the march to the palace was a peaceful one, without songs, banners or speeches. People wore their Sunday clothes. In some parts of the city they carried icons and church banners. Everywhere the petitioners encountered troops. They begged to be allowed to pass. They wept, they tried to go around the barrier, they tried to break through it. ”*

**What would happen next?**

**SOURCE 5** From *The Story of My Life*, 1905, by Father Gapon, the leader of the march

*“Suddenly the company of Cossacks galloped rapidly towards us with drawn swords. So, then, it was to be a massacre after all! . . .*

*A cry of alarm arose as the Cossacks came down upon us. Our front ranks broke before them, opening to the right and left, and down this lane the soldiers drove their horses, striking on both sides. I saw swords lifted and falling, the men, women and children dropping to the earth like logs of wood, while moans, curses and shouts filled the air . . .*

*Again we started forward, with solemn resolution and rising rage in our hearts. The Cossacks turned their horses and began to cut their way through the crowd from the rear. They passed through the whole column and galloped back towards the Narva Gate, where – the infantry having opened their ranks and let them through – they again formed line. We were still advancing . . .*

*We were not more than 30 yards from the soldiers, being separated from them only by the Tarakanovsky Canal, when suddenly, without warning and without a moment's delay, was heard the crack of many rifle shots. ”*

1. Does Gapon's account of Bloody Sunday in Source 5 agree or disagree with the other sources? Give examples.
2. Look at how the people are represented in Source 7. What do you think were the aims of the artist who painted this picture?
3. Which are more useful to historians – the painting and photograph or the written sources? Explain your answer.
4. Source 6 is used in many history books to show troops firing on the crowds on Bloody Sunday. In fact it comes from a film about this event made in 1925. What questions do you need to ask about photographs in books?
5. Use Sources 3–8 to tell the story of Bloody Sunday.



**SOURCE 6** (above) A photograph of soldiers firing on the crowd

**SOURCE 7** (left) A painting of soldiers firing on the crowd by Makovsky (1846–1920)



**SOURCE 8** Trotsky (see Source 4)

*“The soldiers fired all day long. The dead were counted in the hundreds, the wounded in the thousands. An exact count was impossible, since the police carted away and secretly buried the bodies at night. ”*

## The consequences of Bloody Sunday

The estimated number of casualties on Bloody Sunday has varied from thousands to less than 100 (according to official government figures at the time). News of the massacre spread rapidly to other cities.

**SOURCE 9** Written by the American consul in Odessa, 1905

*“The present ruler has lost absolutely the affection of the Russian people, and whatever the future may have in store for the dynasty, the present Tsar will never again be safe in the midst of his people.”*

**SOURCE 10** By the French Consul in Kharkov, 1905

*“Work stopped everywhere: on the railways, in all factories, workshops, in shops of all types, in the University, and all schools, in all administrative offices, even the telegraph offices . . . The whole population was on the streets, either as sightseers or as demonstrators . . . People began to ransack arms stores and to smash the windows of the large stores and conservative journals.*

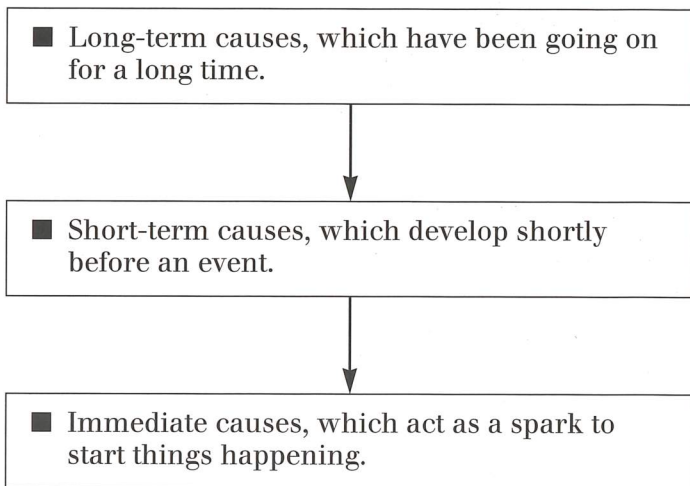
*Students, directed by lawyers, doctors and teachers, and helped by workmen and Jews . . . set up barricades.”*

6. How did Bloody Sunday change the way the people viewed the Tsar?
7. What were the other consequences of Bloody Sunday?

### TASK

Bloody Sunday was the last straw. Within a week, a full-scale revolution was under way.

When we talk about the causes of an event, we often think about different types of causes:



### ACTIVITY

Write a short essay explaining the causes of the 1905 Revolution. Use the statements on the right as the basis for paragraphs in your essay and use the flow chart to give your essay a structure.

The statements below refer to causes of the 1905 Revolution. Put each one into one of the three categories of causes.

*1. Bloody Sunday started the 1905 Revolution.*

*2. The peasants were very dissatisfied with their living conditions and how the land was divided up.*

*3. The workers had many grievances about their terrible working conditions. They wanted higher wages and shorter hours.*

*4. The people blamed the Tsar for losing the war with Japan. The war made already bad conditions in the cities even worse and brought the workers to breaking point.*

*5. The government's policies to develop industry had had disastrous effects on the people. This was made worse by poor harvests and an industrial slump.*

*6. Many middle-class people were angry that the Tsar would not share some of his power with the people.*