

CHAPTER 1

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# Late Imperial Russia 1894–1905

The Russian Empire of which Nicholas II became tsar in 1894 was beset by many long-standing difficulties that had prevented its achieving modernity. This chapter describes the basic features of the Russian Empire at the beginning of Nicholas II's reign, and examines the opposition groups that had developed by 1905, the year which saw the greatest challenge tsardom had yet faced: the 1905 Revolution. The analysis falls under the following headings:

- ★ The land, the people and tsardom
- ★ The problem of reform in Imperial Russia
- ★ Economic reform under Witte 1893–1903
- ★ The opponents of tsardom
- ★ The Russo-Japanese War 1904–5
- ★ The 1905 Revolution

## Key dates

|                  |                                                              |               |                                                      |
|------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|---------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>1894</b>      | Start of Nicholas II's reign                                 | <b>1904–5</b> | Russo-Japanese war                                   |
| <b>1894–1906</b> | Sergei Witte's economic reforms                              | <b>1905</b>   | Revolution                                           |
| <b>1897</b>      | Jewish Bund formed                                           |               | All-Russian Union of Peasants set up                 |
| <b>1898</b>      | Social Democratic Party formed                               |               | October Manifesto created a <i>duma</i> (parliament) |
| <b>1901</b>      | Formation of the Social Revolutionary Party                  |               | Formation of the Kadet and Octobrist parties         |
| <b>1903</b>      | Social Democratic Party split into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks |               |                                                      |

## 1 The land, the people and tsardom

► *Why had Imperial Russia not modernised its governmental, political and economic systems?*

The following sections describe the main characteristics of Imperial Russia.

### Russia's geography and peoples

In 1894 Imperial Russia covered over 8 million square miles (22 million square kilometres), an area equivalent to two and a half times the size of the



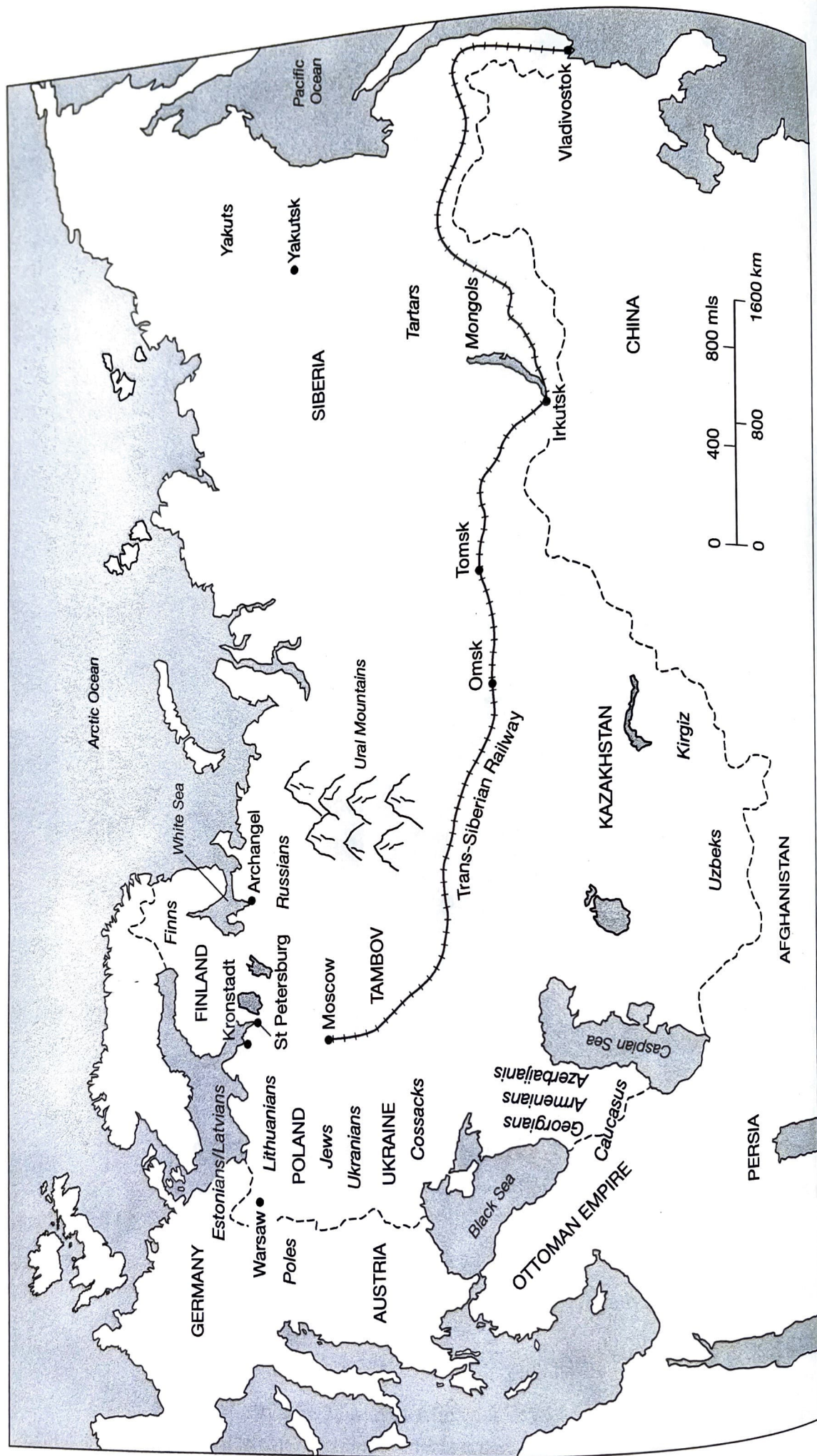


Figure 1.1 Imperial Russia.



USA today. At its widest, from west to east, it stretched for 5000 miles; at its longest, north to south, it measured 2000 miles. It covered a large part of two continents. European Russia extended eastward from the borders of Poland to the Urals mountain range. Asiatic Russia extended eastward from the Urals to the Pacific Ocean. The greater part of the population, which between 1815 and 1914 quadrupled from 40 million to 160 million, was concentrated in European Russia. It was in that part of the empire that the major historical developments had occurred and it was there that Russia's principal cities, Moscow and St Petersburg, the capital, were situated.

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

**Table 1.1** The major nationalities of the Russian Empire according to the census of 1897 (in millions, defined according to mother tongue)

|                  |      |                    |     |            |     |
|------------------|------|--------------------|-----|------------|-----|
| Great Russian    | 55.6 | German             | 1.8 | Mordvinian | 1.0 |
| Ukrainian        | 22.4 | Azerbaijani        | 1.7 | Georgian   | 0.8 |
| Turkic/Tatar     | 13.4 | Latvian            | 1.4 | Tadzhik    | 0.3 |
| Polish           | 7.9  | Bashkir            | 1.3 | Turkmenian | 0.3 |
| White Russian    | 5.8  | Lithuanian         | 1.2 | Greek      | 0.2 |
| Yiddish (Jewish) | 5.0  | Armenian           | 1.2 | Bulgarian  | 0.2 |
| Kirgiz/Kaisats   | 4.0  | Romanian/Moldavian | 1.1 |            |     |
| Finnic           | 3.1  | Estonian           | 1.0 |            |     |

## The tsar (emperor)

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

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

- the Imperial Council, a group of honorary advisers directly responsible to the tsar
- the Cabinet of Ministers, which ran the various government departments
- the Senate, which supervised the operation of the law.

These bodies were much less powerful than their titles suggested. They were appointed, not elected, and they did not govern; their role was merely to give advice. They had no authority over the tsar, whose word was final in all governmental and legal matters.

### KEY TERM

#### **Romanov dynasty**

The royal house that ruled Russia between 1613 and 1917.



## Russia's political backwardness

What the tsar's power showed was how little Russia had advanced politically when compared with other European nations. By the beginning of the twentieth century all the major Western European countries had some form of democratic or representative government. Not so Russia; although it had been frequently involved in European diplomatic and military affairs, it had remained outside the mainstream of European political thought.

There had been reforming tsars, such as Peter I (1682–1725), Catherine II (1762–96) and Alexander II (1855–81), who had taken steps to modernise the country, one example being the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 (see page 7). But their achievements had not included the extension of political rights. In Russia in 1894, it was still a criminal offence to oppose the tsar or his government. There was no parliament, and although political parties had been formed they had no legal right to exist. There had never been a free press in Imperial Russia. Government censorship was imposed on published books and journals.

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

### Extremism

The denial of free speech tended to drive **political activists** towards extremism. The outstanding example of this occurred in 1881 when Tsar Alexander II was blown to bits by a bomb thrown by a terrorist group known as 'The People's Will' (see page 19). In a society in which state oppression was met with revolutionary terrorism, there was no moderate middle ground on which a tradition of ordered political debate could develop.

## The Russian Orthodox Church

The tsars were fully supported in their claims to absolute authority by one of the great pillars of the Russian system, the Orthodox Church. This was a branch of Christianity which, since the fifteenth century, had been entirely independent of any outside authority, such as the papacy. Its detachment from foreign influence had given it an essentially Russian character. The great beauty of its liturgy and music had long been an outstanding expression of Russian culture. However, by the late nineteenth century it had become a deeply conservative body, opposed to political change and determined to preserve the tsarist system in its **reactionary** form. How detached the Orthodox Church was from Russia's growing urban population was illustrated by the statistic that in 1900 a Moscow suburb with 40,000 people had only one church and one priest.



### KEY TERMS

**Liberal ideas** Notions that called for limitations on the power of rulers and greater freedom for the people.

**Okhrana** The tsarist secret police, whose special task was to hunt down subversives who challenged the tsarist regime.

**Political activists** Those who believed that necessary change could be achieved only through direct action.

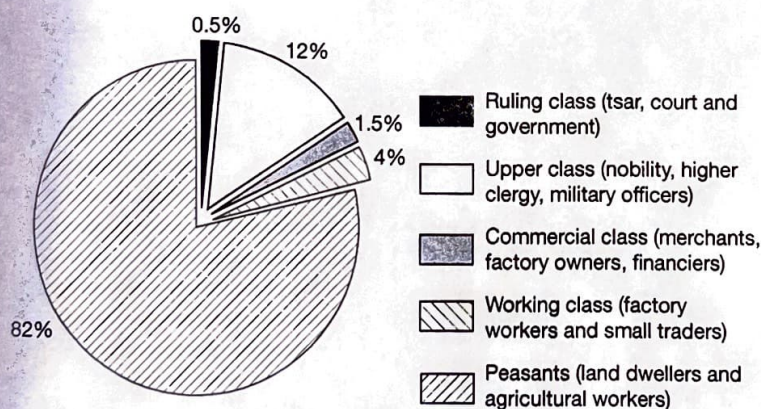
**Reactionary** Resistant to any form of progressive change.



The Church did contain some priests who strongly sympathised with the political revolutionaries, but as an institution it used its spiritual authority to teach the Russian people that it was their duty to be totally obedient to the tsar as **God's anointed**. The **catechism** of the Church included the statement that 'God commands us to love and obey from the inmost recesses of our heart every authority, and particularly the tsar'.

### The social structure of tsarist Russia

The striking features of the social structure were the comparatively small commercial, professional and working classes and the great preponderance of peasants in the population. This is illustrated in Figure 1.2, which shows the class distribution of the population, as measured by Russia's 1897 census.



**Figure 1.2** The class distribution of the Russian population in 1897.

### The Russian economy

The remarkable difference in size between the urban professional and working classes and the rural peasants revealed a critical feature of Imperial Russia: its slow economic development. The low number of urban workers was a sign that Russia had not achieved the major industrial growth that had taken place in the nineteenth century in such countries as Germany, Britain and the USA.

This is not to say that Russia was entirely without industry. The Urals region produced considerable amounts of iron, and the chief western cities, Moscow and St Petersburg, had extensive textile factories. Most villages had a workshop for making iron tools, and most peasant homes engaged in some form of cottage industry, producing wooden, flaxen or woollen goods to supplement their income from farming. However, these activities were all relatively small scale. The sheer size of Russia and its undeveloped transport system had limited the chances for industrial expansion. A further restriction had been the absence of an effective banking system. Russia found it hard to raise **capital** on a large scale. It had not yet mastered the art of successful borrowing and investment, techniques which help to explain why expansion had been so rapid

### KEY TERMS

**God's anointed** At their coronation tsars were anointed with holy oil to symbolise that they governed by divine will.

**Catechism** The manual used for instructing the people in the essential points of the faith.

**Capital** The essential financial resource which provides the means for investment and expansion.



## KEY TERMS

### Entrepreneurialism

The dynamic, expansionist attitude associated with Western commercial and industrial activity in this period.

### Agrarian economy

A system in which food is produced on the land by arable and dairy farming and then traded.

in Western countries. Russia's financial sluggishness had discouraged the rise of **entrepreneurialism**.

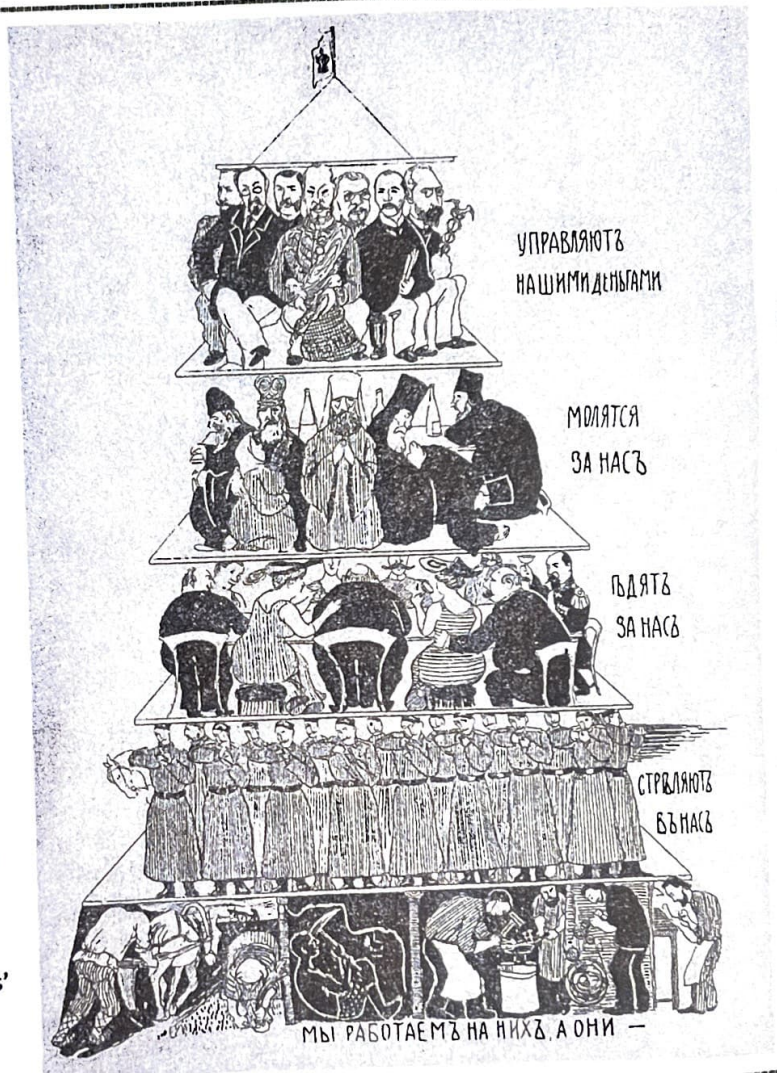
## Agriculture

Russia's unenterprising industrial system was matched by its inefficient pattern of agriculture. Even though four-fifths of the population were peasants, a thriving **agrarian economy** had failed to develop. Indeed, the land in Russia was a source of national weakness rather than strength. The empire's vast acres were not all good farming country. Much of Russia lay too far north to enjoy a climate or a soil suitable for crop-growing or cattle-rearing. Arable farming was restricted mainly to the Black Earth region, the area of European Russia stretching from Ukraine to Kazakhstan.

## SOURCE A

? Study Source A. How effectively does it portray the relationship between the various social classes in tsarist Russia?

A mocking socialist cartoon of 1900 showing the social pyramid in Imperial Russia. The Russian caption for each layer reads (in ascending order): 'We work for them while they ...' '... shoot at us' '... eat on our behalf' '... pray on our behalf' '... dispose of our money.'





The great number of peasants in the population added to the problem. There was simply not enough fertile land to go round. Under the terms of the **Emancipation Decree of 1861**, the ex-serfs were entitled to buy land, but they invariably found the price too high. This was caused both by a shortage of suitable farming territory and by the government's taxation of land sales, imposed in order to raise the revenue needed to compensate the landowners for the losses caused by emancipation. The only way the peasants could raise the money to buy land was by borrowing from a special fund provided by the government. Consequently, those peasants who did manage to purchase property found themselves burdened with large mortgage repayments which would take them and their families generations to repay.

### The peasant problem

Among Russia's governing class, which was drawn from less than one per cent of the population, there was a deeply ingrained prejudice against granting rights to the mass of the people. Over 80 per cent of the population were peasants. They were predominantly illiterate and uneducated. Their sheer size as a social class and their coarse ways led to their being regarded with a mixture of fear and contempt by the governing elite, who believed that these dangerous '**dark masses**' could be held in check only by severe repression. This was what Nicholas II's wife, the Empress Alexandra, meant when she said that Russia needed always to be 'under the whip'.

The existence in the second half of the nineteenth century of an uneducated peasantry suspicious of change, and living with large debts and in great poverty, pointed to the social, political and economic backwardness of Imperial Russia. Various attempts to educate the peasants had been made in the past, but such efforts had been undermined by the fear among the ruling class that any improvement in the conditions of the 'dark masses' might threaten its own privileges. It was commonplace for officials in Russia to speak of the 'safe ignorance' of the population, implying that any attempt to raise the educational standards of the masses would prove highly dangerous, socially and politically.

### The Russian Army

One common method of keeping the peasants in check was to recruit them into the Russian armed services. The lower ranks of the army and navy were largely filled by enforced enlistment. **Conscription** was regularly used as a form of punishment for law-breakers. Ordinary Russians dreaded this sentence; they knew that life in the armed forces was a brutalising experience for the common soldier. The Russian Army was notorious in Europe for the severity of its discipline and the grimness of the conditions in which its soldiers lived. Special military camps had been set up in the remoter regions of the empire which operated as penal colonies rather than as training establishments. The rigours of service life had accounted for the deaths of over a million soldiers in peacetime during the reign of Nicholas I (1825–55).



#### KEY TERMS

##### **Emancipation Decree of 1861**

This reform had abolished serfdom – a Russian form of slavery in which the landowner had total control over the peasants who lived or worked on his land.

##### **'Dark masses'**

Used contemptuously in the imperial court and government circles to describe the peasants, who made up four-fifths of the population.

**Conscription** The forcing of large numbers of peasants into the army or navy.



It was a persistent belief in Russia that, as a large empire, it needed a large army. Throughout the nineteenth century the Imperial forces were kept at a strength of around one and a half million men. The cost of maintaining the army and the navy accounted on average for 45 per cent of the government's annual expenditure. This was by far the largest single item of state spending, and, when compared with the four per cent devoted to education, showed how unbalanced government priorities were.

### KEY TERMS

**Commissions** The holding of officer rank.

**Nepotism** A system in which positions are gained through family connections rather than on merit.

**Militia** Local citizens called together and granted arms to deal with a crisis requiring force.

The higher ranks of the army were the preserve of the aristocracy.

**Commissions** were bought and sold, and there was little room for promotion on merit. This weakened it as a fighting force, but the truth of this tended to remain hidden because, with the exception of the Crimean War (1854–6), Russia was not engaged in a major conflict with a Western European power for a whole century after 1815. The army's active service was essentially a matter of putting down national risings or serious disturbances within the empire or on its frontiers. There were frequent border clashes with Turkey throughout the nineteenth century, and at various times Russian forces saw action in Poland, Armenia and Persia.

### The bureaucracy (civil service)

Ironically, it was in the area where there had been the largest attempted reform that the greatest corruption had developed. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Peter I had attempted to modernise Russia by establishing a full-scale civil service with the aim of maintaining central government control throughout the empire. However, by the middle of the nineteenth century, many Russian critics had begun to condemn this civil service as a corrupt bureaucracy whose **nepotism** and incompetence were the principal reasons for Russia's backwardness. Writing in 1868, **Alexander Herzen** claimed that the bureaucracy had become 'a kind of civilian priesthood', a money-grasping elite, which used its power to tax people and direct their behaviour for its own ends. Herzen accused the bureaucrats who ran Russia of 'sucking the blood of the people with thousands of greedy, unclean mouths'.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Herzen asserted, 'tsarist Russia was run by a bureaucratic class which, for all its incompetence, still possessed the power to control the lives of the Russian masses. At local and national levels, the law, the government, the police and the **militia** were in the hands of a set of men whose first thought was their own convenience and advantage. Against this injustice the ordinary citizen had no redress, since any challenge to the system was lost in bureaucratic procedures.

Herzen's savage attack provided powerful ammunition for those in Russia who wished to ridicule and undermine the tsarist system itself. However, it is important to remember that Herzen was a revolutionary propagandist intent on painting the blackest picture he could of tsardom.

### KEY FIGURE

#### Alexander Herzen (1812–70)

A leading revolutionary thinker and critic of the Russian government.



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Efforts were made in the nineteenth century to reform the administration and limit its abuses. Nevertheless, the fact remained that the corruption and inefficiency which Herzen described was still operating when Nicholas came to the throne in 1894.

Summary diagram: The land, the people and tsardom

|                                                                    |                                                                                                                         |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>The land</b><br>Russia's geography<br>Its great size            | <b>The people</b><br>The social structure<br>Tiny dominant elite<br>The 'dark masses'<br>80 per cent peasant population |
| <b>The economy</b><br>Undeveloped industry<br>Backward agriculture | <b>The tsarist system</b><br>Autocratic government<br>Reactionary Church<br>Corrupt bureaucracy<br>Oppressive army      |

## 2 The problem of reform in Imperial Russia

► Why did Imperial Russia find it difficult to modernise?

Many members of the ruling class accepted that major reforms were needed if Russia was to modernise its social and economic structure. However, there were barriers in the way.

### Obstacles to reform

One major barrier to reform was a basic disagreement within the government elite over Russia's true character as a nation. Since the days of Peter the Great there had been serious differences between '**Westerners**' and '**Slavophiles**'. Their dispute made it difficult to achieve reform in an ordered and acceptable way.

Another barrier to planned reform was the **autocratic** structure of Russia itself. Change could only come from the top. There were no representative institutions, such as a parliament, with the power to alter things. The only possible source of change was the tsar. From time to time, there were **progressive** tsars who accepted the need for reform. Yet it was hardly to be expected that any tsar, no matter how enlightened, would go so far as to introduce measures that might weaken his authority.

### KEY TERMS

**'Westerners'** Those who believed that to remain a great nation Russia would have to adopt the best features of the advanced countries of Western Europe.

**'Slavophiles'** Those who regarded Western values as corrupting and urged that the nation should preserve itself as 'holy Russia', glorying in its Slav culture and traditions.

**Autocratic** The absolute rule of one person – in Russia this meant the tsar.

**Progressive** Promoting necessary change.