

Czar Nicolas II's Government: Overview

As a child, Nicholas II received his education through a string of private tutors. While Nicholas II excelled in history and foreign languages, ironically, the future leader struggled to comprehend the subtleties of politics and economics. To make matters worse, his father failed to provide him with much training in affairs of state. Nicholas succeeded to the throne following his father's death from liver disease on 20th October, 1894. Reeling from the loss, and poorly trained in affairs of state, Nicholas II hardly felt up to the task of assuming his father's role. In fact, he confessed to a close friend, "I am not prepared to be a czar. I never wanted to become one. I know nothing of the business of ruling."

Later that month he married the German princess, Alexandra of Hesse-Darmstadt. Alexandra, the grand-daughter of Queen Victoria, was a strong believer in the autocratic power of the czar and urged him to resist demands for political reform.



Russo-Japanese War

Czar made plans to expand into Manchuria and Korea. In 1891, construction on the Trans-Siberian railroad had begun, connecting Russia with the Pacific Coast. As a result, Japan felt increasingly threatened.

In 1904 Japan attacked Russia. On 8th February, 1904, the Japanese Navy launched a surprise attack on the Russian fleet at Port Arthur. In December of that year, Nicholas II's army was forced to surrender Port Arthur. Although the Russian Army was able to hold back Japanese armies along the Yalu River and in Manchuria, the Russian Navy fared badly.

The war was unpopular with the Russian people and demonstrations took place in border areas such as Finland, Poland and the Caucasus. Failure to defeat the Japanese in the Russo-Japanese War also reduced the prestige of the Czar and his government. By spring of 1905, his fleet was destroyed.

Unrest in Russia

Nicholas II also faced mounting domestic problems. The Russian industrial employee worked on average an 11-hour day. Conditions in the factories were extremely harsh and little concern was shown for the workers' health and safety. Attempts by workers to form trade unions were resisted by the factory owners, and in 1903, a priest, Father Georgi Gapon, formed the Assembly of Russian Workers. Within a year it had over 9,000 members.

1904 was a particularly bad year for Russian workers. Prices of essential goods rose so quickly that real wages declined by 20 percent. When four members of the Assembly of Russian Workers were dismissed at the Putilov Iron Works, Gapon called for industrial action. Over the next few days over 110,000 workers in St. Petersburg went out on strike.

The Revolution of 1905

In an attempt to settle the dispute, Georgi Gapon decided to make a personal appeal to Nicholas II. He drew up a petition outlining the workers' sufferings and demands. This included calling for a reduction in the working day to eight hours, an increase in wages, an improvement in working conditions and an end to the Russo-Japanese War. When the procession of workers reached the Winter Palace, it was attacked by the police and palace guards. Over 100 workers were killed and some 300 wounded. The incident, known as Bloody Sunday, started what became known as the Revolution of 1905. Strikes took place all over the country and the universities closed down when the whole student body complained about the lack of civil liberties by staging a walkout. Lawyers, doctor, engineers, and other middle-class workers established the Union of Unions and demanded a constituent assembly. Ultimately the Revolution of 1905 ended with the establishment of a limited constitutional monarchy, yet the czar soon disregarded these limits.

Profile: Workers

Russia's lower class workers had faced a dire economic situation. Workers also had good reasons for discontent: overcrowded housing with often deplorable sanitary conditions, long hours at work (on the eve of the war a 10-hour workday six days a week was the average and many were working 11 ½ hours a day by 1916), constant risk of injury and death from very poor safety and sanitary conditions, harsh discipline (not only rules and fines, but foremen's fists), and inadequate wages. The rapid industrialization of Russia also resulted in urban overcrowding and poor conditions for urban industrial workers. In one 1904 survey, it was found that an average of sixteen people shared each apartment in Saint Petersburg, with six people per room. There was also no running water and piles of human waste were a threat to the health of the workers. The poor conditions only aggravated the situation, with the number of strikes and incidents of public disorder rapidly increasing in the years shortly before World War I.

But the workers had other grievances. Trade unions were still strictly controlled. Strikes were regarded as illegal. Few factory laws were passed to improve the poor working conditions of the workers. As a result, some workers held secret meetings to discuss revolutionary ideas.



Profile: Peasants

Roughly 85% of the Russian people were peasants under harsh oppression from the upper classes and the Czarist regime. A small class of noble landowners controlled a vast number of indentured peasants. In 1861, Czar **Alexander II of Russia emancipated these peasants** not for moral reasons, but because it was preventing Russia from advancing socially. This newfound freedom was of limited use, however, since they now had no land to work. As a result, the government drafted new terms that gave the peasants set amounts of land to cultivate. However, the amount of land they were given was insufficient, thus mass riots broke out.

Food had become a considerable problem in Russia, but the cause of this did not lie in any failure of the harvests. The indirect reason was that the government, in order to finance their efforts in WWI, had been printing off millions of rouble notes (money), and by 1917 inflation had sent prices up to four times what they had been in 1914. The peasantry were consequently faced with the higher cost of purchases, but made no corresponding gain in the sale of their own produce. As a result they tended to hoard their grain.



Profile: Soldiers

When the Czar himself acted as the commander-in-chief in the field in 1915 [during WWI], more battles were lost. The Czar was in fact ignorant of military affairs and gave wrong advice in military strategy. Terrible human losses were recorded. By late 1915, casualties reached 3,800,000 (in 1917 Russian casualties were 9,750,000). As a result of heavy defeats and losses of lives, Russia's position was already hopeless by 1916.

Defeatism grew rapidly among the army and there was mass desertion from the army. Mutinies began to occur, and in 1916 reports of fraternizing with the enemy started to circulate. Soldiers went hungry and lacked shoes, munitions, and even weapons. Rampant discontent lowered morale, only to be further undermined by a series of military defeats. Nicholas was blamed, and what little support he had left began to crumble.

The huge losses on the battlefields were not limited to men. The army quickly ran short of rifles and ammunition and, by mid-1915, men were being sent to the front bearing no arms. It was hoped that they could equip themselves with the arms that they recovered from fallen soldiers, of both sides, on the battlefields. With patently good reason, the soldiers did not feel that they were being treated as human beings, or even as valuable soldiers, but rather as raw materials to be squandered for the purposes of the rich and powerful.

