

In 1861 Tsar Alexander II freed Russia's serfs. Serfs were peasants who were owned by their landlord, effectively they were slaves. For generations before the reign of Alexander II around 80% of Russia's population had been serfs.



Alexander II was assassinated in 1881 by a group called the 'People's Will'. They did not want Russia to be ruled by an autocratic Tsar and felt that change was happening too slowly.



From 1881 Alexander III introduced a sustained period of political repression. Any opposition was brutally dealt with. A policy of 'Russification' was also introduced which forced the ethnic and religious minorities within Russia to speak Russian and follow the practices of the Orthodox Church.



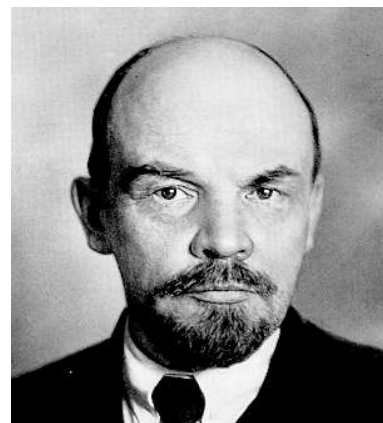
During the 1890s Alexander III's finance minister Sergei Witte introduced a programme to modernise Russia's economy. Russia was the most backwards country in Europe yet it had vast reserves of natural resources and manpower. He used loans from abroad to build up new industries and a huge rail system to link east and west Russia, the Trans-Siberian Railway.



In 1898 the Social Democrat Party was created. This was just one of a number of political groups that wanted to see changes to the Russian political system. Some parties wanted to see the introduction of a 'constitutional monarchy' in which the Tsar would rule with a parliament (similar to Britain). More radical parties wanted to see a full scale revolution. The Social Democrats aimed to bring about a Communist revolution in Russia.



In 1903 the Social Democratic party split into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. The Bolsheviks were led by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known as Lenin.



In 1894 Alexander III died and was succeeded by his son Nicholas II. Nicholas was intelligent but lacked many of the personal traits necessary to be a successful Tsar.



In 1904 Russia went to war with Japan. Russia expected a quick and easy victory. In fact, they had seriously misjudged the Japanese and Russia suffered a humiliating defeat.



In 1905 people across Russia rose up in protest against the Tsar following the shooting of demonstrators outside the Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg. Strikes, mutinies and armed uprisings occurred throughout Russia.



By the end of 1905 Tsar Nicholas II had managed to regain control of Russia. Despite the huge opposition Nicholas had managed to hold onto power by promising changes, maintaining the support of the army and exploiting the divisions amongst his opponents.



Between 1905 and 1914 Nicholas II introduced some limited reforms. He took steps to allow more peasants to buy land and he introduced Russia's first elected parliament, called the Duma. The Duma's powers were however very limited and it was closed down each time it disagreed with Nicholas.



The First World War put a huge strain on Russia's economy and people. The war began well but quickly the situation gradually worsened. In 1915 Nicholas II took sole control of the army. By 1917 the economy was in crisis, food was rationed to a bare minimum and around 7 million Russian soldiers had died in the fighting.



In February 1917 a revolution broke out in St. Petersburg and Tsar Nicholas II abdicated. He was replaced by a 'provisional government' drawn from members of the Duma.

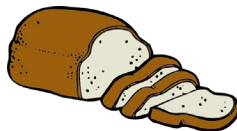
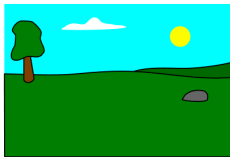


Between March and October 1917 the Provisional government decided to keep Russia in the First World War. Russia continued to suffer defeat after defeat whilst the economic problems deepened even further.



In October 1917 the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional government and introduced the world's first ever communist government. Although the Bolsheviks were a small party they had slowly been gaining support due to the failings of the provisional government and Lenin's promise of 'peace, land and bread'.

In March 1918 the Bolsheviks pulled Russia out of WWI. However Russia immediately descended into Civil war between supporters of the Bolsheviks and those who opposed their rule.



Between 1918 and 1921 the Bolsheviks used the Civil War to punish and humiliate the upper classes of Russian society. Property was seized and former landlords were given demeaning jobs. The Tsar and his family were shot, doused in acid and the bodies hidden. Private trade was banned during the Civil War and peasants were forced to give their produce to the Bolsheviks. These policies were known as 'war communism'.

By early 1921 the opponents of the Bolsheviks had been defeated. Around 3 million Russians had died in the civil war. Lenin died in 1924.



