

# 3 Opposition to Tsardom 1881–1914

## POINTS TO CONSIDER

This chapter takes as its main theme the growth of resistance to the tsarist regime. It looks at the range of movements, from those which advocated moderate reform through to those which believed in destroying tsardom altogether. There is an understandable tendency among historians to concentrate on those forces which were eventually to take power in the revolution of 1917. But it is important to remember that the victory of the Bolsheviks in 1917 was not inevitable. To gain a balanced view of the period covered by this chapter you need to be familiar with the other groups and parties that offered alternative solutions to the problem of how Russia could modernise itself.

## KEY DATES

- 1870** Birth of Vladimir Ulyanov (Lenin).
- 1870s** Populist (Narodnik) peasant revolutionary movement developed.
- 1871** Populist terrorist group, 'The People's Will', was founded.
- 1881** Alexander II assassinated by 'The People's Will'.
- 1887** Lenin's elder brother executed for his involvement in a plot to murder Alexander III.
- 1897** Revolutionary Jewish Bund formed.
- 1898** All Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (the SDs) of Marxist revolutionaries formed.
- 1901** Social Revolutionary Party (SRs), a development of Populism, formed under Victor Chernov.
- 1902** Lenin published his pamphlet, *What Is To Be Done*, setting out his revolutionary programme.
- 1903** SDs split into Mensheviks (under Plekhanov) and Bolsheviks (under Lenin).
- 1905** Constitutional Democratic Party (Kadets) formed under Paul Milyukov.  
Moderate reforming party, the Octobrists, led by Alexander Guchkov formed after the issuing of tsar's October Manifesto.  
Soviets formed in St. Petersburg and Moscow.
- 1906** First Duma sat between April and June.
- 1907** Second Duma sat between February and June.  
Third Duma began in November.
- 1911** Stolypin assassinated.
- 1912** Serious disturbances occurred in the Lena goldfields, Siberia.  
Third Duma dissolved in June.  
Fourth Duma began in November.

- 1912** First edition of the Bolshevik newspaper, *Pravda*, published.
- 1914** Fourth Duma suspended on the outbreak of war in August.

## 1 Introductory Survey

'The Reaction' that began under Alexander III and continued in the reign of Nicholas II (1894–1917) oppressed, but did not destroy, opposition to the tsarist regime. Indeed, despite greater police surveillance, opposition became more organised. A number of political parties, ranging from moderate reformers to violent revolutionaries, came into being. The government's policies of reaction and Russification combined to produce a situation in which many political and national groups were becoming increasingly frustrated by the mixture of coercion and incompetence that characterised the tsarist system. The rapid industrial growth in the 1890s had created a special problem. It had brought to the cities large numbers of peasants, who were attracted by the prospect of relatively well-paid factory work. When a depression followed in the first decade of the twentieth century it left many of these new industrial workers unemployed and angry. Their bitterness made them a serious threat to public order.

The government attempted to meet the problem by diverting attention away from domestic issues with a war against Japan in the Far East (see page 28). The aim was to unite the nation, but the reverse happened. Russia's humiliating military defeat in 1905 was blamed directly on the government's inept handling of the war. It was no coincidence that workers, peasants and middle-class liberals joined together in the year of Russia's defeat in a series of anti-government protests, which were serious enough to merit the description 'the 1905 Revolution'.

The disturbances obliged Nicholas II to make a number of political concessions. In his October Manifesto, he reluctantly gave in to the demand for the formation of a duma. But this did not mark a liberalising of the regime, as was soon illustrated by the ferocity of the political repression that followed once the disorder had been ended. The government, led by Stolypin as chief minister from 1906 to 1911, was ruthless in crushing opposition. But the strikes and disturbances continued despite the repression. By 1914, many reformists had become so disillusioned with the failure of the 1905 Revolution to lead to real advance that they had begun to consider violence as the only means by which to change the oppressive yet incapable tsarist regime.

Until the issuing of the October Manifesto in 1905, political parties were illegal in Russia. This had not actually prevented their formation but it had stifled their development as genuinely democratic bodies. Denied legal recognition, they often resorted to extreme methods in

order to spread their ideas. As a result, during the brief period of their permitted existence from 1905 to 1921, the Russian political parties proved generally to be highly suspicious and intolerant of each other. This made co-operation and collective action difficult to organise and sustain. Four main groups opposed to tsardom can be identified: the Populists, the Social Revolutionaries, the Social Democrats, and the liberals.

## 2 The Populists (*Narodniks*)

**KEY ISSUE** How did populism help to stimulate a revolutionary atmosphere in late imperial Russia?

Populism as a revolutionary movement dated from the 1870s. It regarded the future of Russia as being in the hands of the peasants who made up the overwhelming mass of the population. The Populists or *Narodniks* (from the Russian word for 'the people') looked to the peasants to take the lead in the transforming of Russia, beginning with the overthrow of the tsarist system itself. As with all the significant political movements that came into being in this period, the Populist leaders were drawn, not from the peasants, but from the middle and upper classes. The Populists regarded it as their duty to educate the uninformed peasantry into an awareness of its revolutionary potential. This involved 'going to the people', a policy by which the educated Populists went from the universities into the countryside to live for a period with the peasants in an attempt to incite them to revolution.

The scheme met with little success. The peasants were largely unmoved by the revolutionary socialist message preached to them. In desperation, some Populists turned to terrorism, which they defined euphemistically as 'the propaganda of the deed', as the only way of achieving their aims. In 1879, a group calling itself 'The People's Will' was founded with the declared intention of murdering members of the ruling class. This group, which was reckoned to be no more than 400 strong, gained notoriety two years later with its assassination of Alexander II. However, this act weakened rather than strengthened the Populist movement. The murder of a tsar who had initiated many reforms seemed to discredit the idea of reform itself and so justified the repression imposed in the aftermath of the assassination.

The importance of Populism lay in its methods rather than in its ideas. Its concept of a peasant-based revolution appeared unrealistic, given the political inertia of the Russian peasantry. What was lasting about Populism was the part it played in establishing a revolutionary tradition. All the revolutionaries in Russia after 1870 were influ-

enced, if not inspired, by the example of the Populist challenge to tsardom.

## 3 The Social Revolutionaries (SRs)

**KEY ISSUE** What range of opinion in Russia did the SRs represent?

The Social Revolutionary Party grew directly out of the Populist movement. The quickening of interest in political and social issues which accompanied the economic spurt of the 1890s was viewed by Populists as an opportunity to gain recruits for their revolutionary cause. They attempted to broaden their basis of appeal in order to attract the rapidly growing urban workforce to their revolutionary programme. The intention was to widen the concept of the 'people', so that it encompassed all those who wanted the destruction of the tsarist system. An important figure in this reshaping of Populist strategy was Victor Chernov, who played a major part in the formation of the Social Revolutionary Party in 1901 and became its leader. He was a member of the intelligentsia, and sought to provide a firmer theoretical base for Populism than its previous passionate but vague ideas had produced. However, as with all the revolutionary groups in tsarist Russia, the SRs were weakened by disagreements among themselves. Lev Trotsky described them in these terms:

- 1 [They were] formed at the beginning of the century from a fusion of several tendencies of the *Narodniks*. Representing the wavering interests of the small peasant proprietor, the party soon split into a group of Left Social Revolutionaries, anarchist in their leanings, and the 5 Right Social Revolutionaries.<sup>1</sup>

In distinguishing between the left and the right elements, Trotsky was referring to the division of the SR Party into anarchists and revolutionaries. The former were the faction who wanted to continue the policy of terrorism inherited from 'The People's Will'. The latter were the more moderate element, who, while believing in revolution as their ultimate goal, were prepared to co-operate with other parties in working for an immediate improvement in the conditions of the workers and peasants. Between 1901 and 1905, it was the terrorist faction that dominated. During those years the SRs were responsible for over 2,000 political assassinations, including Plehve, the interior minister, and the tsar's uncle, the Grand Duke Sergei. These were spectacular successes but they did little to forge the desired link with the urban workers.

The 1905 Revolution brought more gains to the liberals than to the revolutionaries (see page 49). One effect of this on the SRs was that the more moderate element gained greater influence over party policy. This began to show dividends. From 1906, the SRs experi-

enced a growing support from the professional classes, from the trade unions (which had been legalised under the October Manifesto), and from the All-Russian Union of Peasants, which had been set up in 1905. At its first congress in 1906, the SR Party committed itself to 'revolutionary socialism' and gave a special pledge to the peasants that it would end 'the bourgeois principle of private ownership by returning the land to those who worked it'. It was their land policy which largely explains why the SRs remained the most popular party with the peasants. However, at the time, the congress decisions brought disruption rather than unity. The left wing broke away on the grounds that the party's programme ignored the industrial proletariat, while the right wing complained that congress policy was unworkable in current Russian conditions. Chernov tried to hold the factions together, but from 1906 onwards the SRs constituted a collection of radical groups rather than a genuinely co-ordinated party. Nevertheless, until they were outlawed by the Bolsheviks (see page 109) the SRs remained the party with largest popular following in Russia.

#### 4 The Social Democrats (the SDs)

**KEY ISSUE** Why did Lenin develop a separate Bolshevik party within the SD?

The All-Russian Social Democratic Labour Party was formed in 1898 as a Marxist party.

##### Marxism

Karl Marx (1818–83), the German revolutionary, had advanced the idea that human society operated according to in-built mechanisms which could be scientifically studied and then applied. He asserted that history was a continuous series of class struggles between those who possessed economic and political power and those who did not. The form of the conflict changed according to the historical period, but the essential struggle between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' was constant. He referred to this process of continuous class struggle as the dialectic. For revolutionaries in the nineteenth century, the most exciting aspect of Marx's analysis was his conviction that the contemporary industrial era marked the final stage of the dialectical class struggle. Human history was about to reach its culmination in the revolutionary victory of the proletariat (the industrial working class) over the bourgeoisie (the exploiting, capitalist, class).

The attraction of Marx for Russian revolutionaries is easy to understand. His ideas had been known in Russia for some time, but what gave them particular relevance was the 'great spurt' of the 1890s. This promised to create the industrial conditions in Russia which would make a successful revolution possible. The previously unfocused hopes for revolution could now be directed on the industrial working class. The first Marxist revolutionary of note in Russia was George Plekhanov. He had translated Marx's writings into Russian, and in 1883 had helped to found the first Marxist organisation in the country, the 'Group for the Emancipation of Labour'. His efforts to promote the idea of proletarian revolution had earned him the title 'the father of Russian Marxism'. Despite this, a number of the revolutionaries who had formed the SD Party in 1898 soon became impatient with Plekhanov's leadership. They found him too theoretical in his approach, and urged the adoption of more active revolutionary policies. The outstanding spokesman for this viewpoint was Vladimir Ulyanov, better known by his revolutionary pseudonym as Lenin.

#### -Profile-

##### V.I. LENIN

- 1870 Lenin born as Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov to a minor aristocratic family of Jewish ancestry
- 1887 his brother's execution intensified Lenin's revolutionary attitude
- 1897 exiled to Siberia, took the name Lenin (the most famous of the 160 aliases he used as a revolutionary)
- 1900 joined SD party
- 1902 wrote *What is to be Done?*
- 1903 led the Bolshevik breakaway movement in the SD
- 1905 returned to Russia in December but played no part in the Revolution
- 1906–17 in exile abroad for much of this period
- 1917 returned to Petrograd following the February Revolution and led the Bolsheviks in a successful coup in October
- 1917–20 led the Bolsheviks in consolidating their hold on Russia
- 1918 injured in an SR attempt on his life
- 1921 introduced NEP to save Russia from starvation



1922–23 suffered a number of severe strokes which left him speechless

1924 died

Lenin had been on the tsarist authorities' list of 'dangerous persons' since he was 17. The execution of his elder brother in 1887 for his part in an attempted assassination of Alexander III had made Lenin himself politically suspect. He lived up to his reputation. By the age of 20, his voracious reading of Marx's writings had turned him into a committed Marxist for whom revolution was a way of life. By the age of 30, his dedication to the cause of revolution in Russia had led to his arrest, imprisonment, and internal exile. Indeed, he was in exile in Siberia when the SD Party was formed in 1898. When he returned to western Russia two years later he set about turning the SD into a genuinely revolutionary party. With an SD colleague, Julius Martov, he founded a party newspaper, *Iskra* (the Spark), which he used as the chief means of putting his case to the party members. Lenin was concerned that Plekhanov was more interested in reform than in revolution. He was worried that the SDs were attempting to improve the conditions of the workers (a policy referred to as 'economism'), instead of pursuing their true goal, the transformation of the workers into a revolutionary force for the overthrow of capitalism. Lenin wanted conditions to get worse, not better. In that way the bitterness of the industrial proletariat would increase, and so bring revolution nearer.

Although Lenin despised the moderate, reformist intelligentsia, he argued, nonetheless, that it was only from that intellectual class that the leaders of revolution in Russia could be drawn. He set down his ideas on this theme in his pamphlet, *What is to be Done?*, published in 1902. The following extract is a key passage from it:

- 1 The history of every country teaches us that by its own ability the working class can attain only a trade-unionist self-consciousness, that is to say, an appreciation of the need to fight the bosses, to wrest from the government this or that legislative enactment for the benefit of the workers. The Socialist [Communist] doctrine, on the other hand, is the outgrowth of those philosophical, historical and economic theories which had been developed by the representatives of the well to do, the intellectuals. By their social origin, Marx and Engels, the founders of modern scientific socialism, were themselves members of the bourgeois intelligentsia. The blind unfolding of the labour movement can lead only to the permeation of that movement with a bourgeois ideology, because the unconscious growth of the labour movement takes the form of trade unionism, and trade unionism signifies the mental enslavement of the workers to the bourgeoisie.

Therefore our task as Social Democrats is to oppose this blind process, to divert the labour movement from the unconscious tendency of trade unionism to march under the protective wing of the bourgeoisie and to bring it under the influence of Social Democracy instead.

Such beliefs inspired Lenin throughout his life. Orlando Figes said of him:

- 1 [T]here was no 'private Lenin' behind the public mask. He gave all of himself to politics. He rarely showed emotion, he had few intimates, and everything he ever said or wrote was intended only for the revolutionary cause. This was not a man but a political machine.
- 5 Lenin's personal life was extraordinarily dull. ... He did not smoke, he did not really drink, and apart from his affair with the beautiful Inessa Armand, he was not even interested in women. Krupskaya [his wife] called him 'Ilich', his nickname in the party, and he called her 'comrade'. She was more like his secretary than his wife, and it was probably not bad luck that their marriage was childless.

Lenin lived for the revolution.

*From a review article by Orlando Figes in The Sunday Times, Mar 2000*

Lenin wrote *What Is To Be Done?* as an answer to the followers of Plekhanov, who were continuing to assert that success could be gained only by a broad grouping of the progressive, reformist, anti-tsarist elements in Russia. Lenin insisted that the way forward could be effectively organised only by a dedicated group of professional revolutionaries. His reference to the scientific nature of socialism was a crucial part of his argument. Revolution for Lenin was not a haphazard affair; it was part of a natural progression whose laws could be understood by scientific analysis. He considered that Marx had, indeed, already provided this understanding. What remained now was for true Marxist followers to apply the revolutionary message in Russia. This was why the workers could not be left to themselves; only through the leadership of the truly informed could the proletariat of Russia achieve victory in the class war. In the Russian context, this leadership was supplied by the revolutionary intelligentsia, which according to Lenin consisted, in effect, of himself and those Marxists who agreed with him. Only they could rescue the Russian working class and convert it to true socialism.

### a) The Bolshevik–Menshevik split

The dispute between Lenin and Plekhanov came to a head during the second congress of the SD Party in 1903. Plekhanov tried to avoid confrontation, but Lenin deliberately made an issue of who had the right

to membership of the Social Democratic Party. His aim was to force the SDs to choose between Plekhanov's idea of a broad-based party, open to all revolutionaries, and his own concept of a small, tightly-knit and exclusive party of professional revolutionaries. The congress was a heated affair, which often broke down into a series of slanging matches over points of procedure. A deep divide developed between Lenin and his *Iskra* co-editor, Martov. Their quarrel had as much to do with personality as with politics. Martov believed that behind Lenin's procedural tactics was a fierce determination to become dictator of the party. The following was typical of their exchanges:

- 1 Martov – The more widely the title of 'member of the party' is spread, the better. We can only rejoice if every striker, every demonstrator, is able to declare himself a party member.
- Lenin – It is better that ten real workers should not call themselves
- 5 party members than that one chatterbox should have the right and opportunity to be a member.

In a series of votes, the SD congress showed itself to be evenly divided between Lenin and Martov. However, after a particular set of divisions had gone in his favour, Lenin claimed that he and his supporters were the majority. This led to their being called Bolsheviks (from *bolshinstvo*, Russian for majority) while Martov's group became known as Mensheviks (from *menshinstvo*, Russian for minority).

By 1912 the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks had become two distinct and opposed Marxist parties. Lenin deliberately emphasised the difference between himself and Martov by resigning from the editorial board of *Iskra* and starting his own journal, *Vypered* (Forward), as an instrument for Bolshevik attacks upon the Mensheviks. A Bolshevik daily paper, *Pravda* (the Truth), was first published in 1912. Initially, the main point dividing Bolsheviks and Mensheviks was simply one of procedure. However, following the split in 1903 the differences between them hardened into a set of opposed attitudes. These can be illustrated in tabulated form:

Menshevik view	issue	Bolshevik view
↓		↓
Russia not yet ready for proletarian revolution – the bourgeois stage had to occur first	<i>Revolution</i>	Bourgeois and proletarian stages could be telescoped into one revolution
↓		↓
a mass organisation with membership open to all revolutionaries	<i>The Party</i>	a tight-knit, exclusive, organisation of professional revolutionaries

↓	<i>Discipline</i>	↓
Open, democratic discussion within the party – decisions arrived at by votes of members		Authority to be exercised by the Central Committee of the party – this described as 'democratic centralism'
↓	<i>Strategy</i>	↓
Alliance with all other revolutionary and bourgeois liberal parties – support of trade unions in pursuing better wages and conditions for workers (economism)		no co-operation with other parties – economism dismissed as playing into hands of bourgeoisie – aimed to turn workers into revolutionaries

Care should be taken not to allow hindsight to exaggerate the accuracy of Lenin's judgements or the significance of his role during the pre-revolutionary years. The later success of Bolshevism in the October Revolution (see page 95) has tempted writers to overstate the importance of Lenin in the period before 1917. For example, Trotsky, who joined Lenin in 1917 after having been a Menshevik, argued in his later writings that the Bolsheviks had been systematically preparing the ground for revolution since 1903. But the fact was that during the years 1904 to 1917 Lenin was largely absent from Russia; his visits were rare and fleeting. Although he continued from exile to issue a constant stream of instructions to his followers, the Bolsheviks played only a minor role in events in Russia before 1914.

Interestingly, the Bolsheviks were not listed by the police authorities as a major challenge to the tsarist system. In the pre-1914 period the numerical strength of the Bolsheviks varied between 5,000 and 10,000; even in February 1917 it was no more than 25,000. Before 1917, the Mensheviks invariably outnumbered them. Numbers, of course, are not everything. Determination is arguably more important. Whatever the apparent lack of influence of Lenin's Bolsheviks before 1917, the fact is that when a revolutionary situation developed in 1917 it was they who proved the best prepared to seize the opportunity to take over government. That in itself testifies to the real strength of the revolutionary party Lenin had created.

## 5 The Liberals

**KEY ISSUE** What had encouraged the growth of a liberal movement in tsarist Russia?

### Liberalism

As used in Russia, the term 'liberal' described those who wanted political or social change, but who believed that it could be achieved by reforming rather than destroying the tsarist system.

The land reforms of Alexander II, which had led to the spread of the *zemstva*, had helped to create a progressive middle class in the countryside. This had been matched in the urban areas. The economic boom of the 1890s saw the rapid development of a small but ambitious class of industrialists, lawyers and financiers. It was among such social groups that liberal ideas for the modernising of Russia began to take hold. There was also often a strong national element in Russian liberalism. The national minorities viewed the liberal movement as a means of expressing their wish to be independent of Russian imperial control. Two principal liberal parties came to prominence in the pre-1914 period – the Octobrists and the Kadets.

#### a) The Octobrists

This group dated from the issuing of the tsar's manifesto of October 1905, which established the *duma*. The Octobrists were moderates who were basically loyal to the tsar and his government. They believed in the maintenance of the Russian Empire and regarded the manifesto and the establishment of the *duma* as major constitutional advances. The Octobrists were mainly drawn from the larger commercial, industrial and landowning interests. Their leading members were Alexander Guchkov, a factory owner, and Mikhail Rodzianko, a large landowner, both of whom were later to play a leading part in the Provisional Government of 1917 (see page 85). How relatively limited the Octobrists were in their aims can be gauged from their programme, issued in November 1905, which called for:

- 1 unity amongst those who sincerely want the peaceful renewal of Russia and the triumph of law and order in the country, who reject both stagnation and revolution and who recognise the need for the establishment of a strong and authoritative regime, which, together with the
- 5 representatives of the people, could bring peace to the country through constructive legislative work.

The limited objectives of the Octobrists led to their being dismissed by revolutionaries as bourgeois reactionaries. This is far from accurate. In the *dumas*, the Octobrists frequently voiced serious criticisms of the short-sightedness or incompetence of the tsarist government.

#### b) The Constitutional Democrats (Kadets)

The Constitutional Democrats (known alternatively as the Party of the

People's Freedom) also came into being as a party at the time of the 1905 Revolution. The Kadets, the largest of the liberal parties, wanted Russia to develop as a constitutional monarchy, in which the powers of the tsar would be restricted by a democratically-elected constituent (national) assembly. They believed that such a representative body would be able to settle Russia's outstanding social, political and economic problems. Lenin dismissed this as bourgeois political naivety, but there is no doubt that the dream of a constituent assembly remained a source of excitement and inspiration to Russian reformers in the period before the 1917 Revolution.

#### The Kadet Programme

- an All-Russian Constituent Assembly
- full equality and civil rights for all citizens
- the ending of censorship
- the abolition of redemption payments on land
- the recognition of trade unions and the right to strike
- the introduction of universal, free education.

The Kadets were the party of the liberal *intelligentsia*, containing progressive landlords, the smaller industrial entrepreneurs, and members of the professions. Academics were prominent in the party, as typified by the Kadet leader, Paul Milyukov, who was a professor of history. The Kadets became the major opposition voice in the first *duma* and were instrumental in forming the Provisional Government following the February Revolution in 1917.

## 6 The 1905 Revolution

**KEY ISSUES** What grievances gave rise to the 1905 Revolution? How revolutionary was the 1905 Revolution? Did the 1905 Revolution leave the tsarist system weaker or stronger?

#### a) Background

The situation created by the government's policy of political repression after 1881 was graphically described by Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), the great Russian novelist and social reformer:

- 1 Russia lives under emergency legislation, and that means without any lawful guarantees. The armies of the secret police are continuously growing in numbers. The prisons and penal colonies are overcrowded with thousands of convicts and political prisoners, among whom the