

Chronology, events and people

At the beginning of the Twentieth century, Russia was a vast empire spanning two continents - Europe and Asia. Communications were difficult, even though there had been enormous growth in railways in the 1890s, by 1900 Russia had only as many miles of track as Britain. The empire also contained around 130 million people and less than half of the population was Russian. The rest belonged to peoples who had been conquered by Russians. Many did not speak Russian and most were illiterate. Over 80% of the population were peasants and life for them was very hard. From 1894, Russia was ruled by Tsar Nicholas II who ruled as an **autocrat**. He believed that he had a divine right to rule - that is he had been chosen by God. **The Orthodox Church** was closely linked to the Tsar and supported his way of ruling. This is why many people thought of the Tsar as the 'little father'. However, Nicholas was a weak ruler and faced many different opposition groups such as the **Social Democrats** and **Liberals**. He also suffered humiliating defeats in both the Russo-Japanese War and the First World War. As a result, he was forced to abdicate in February 1917 following the Russian Revolution. For a few months, Russia was led by a **Provisional Government** however, in October 1917, the **Bolsheviks** seized power on a promise of **Lenin**, delivering 'Peace, Land and Bread'. Lenin is soon forced into a **Civil War** with the **White army** who oppose his rule and people of Russia suffer serious hardships for the next few years even resorting to cannibalism when a major famine hits in 1921. When Lenin dies in 1924, Stalin emerges as the next leader of the USSR. Throughout Stalin's rule, all groups of Russian people face severe hardships. The workers through the **Five Year Plans**, had to meet high production targets and work long hours. The peasants were forced into **Collectivisation** with anyone refusing being sent to the labour camps or executed. Furthermore, the USSR became a **totalitarian** state in which every aspect of people's lives was controlled and monitored by Stalin. Stalin also executed the **Great Purges** during which, millions of Russians in the Communist Party, the army, the arts and music and many other walks of life were arrested and either sent to the gulags or shot.

Key words

Autocrat - a ruler with complete and absolute power.

Bolshevik - a member of one of the groups formed after the split of the Social Democratic Party in 1903. This group was led by Lenin and believed that a small party of revolutionaries should seize power when the time was right.

Collectivisation - the process introduced by Stalin whereby individuals' land and farms were put together and ran as a committee.

Five Year Plans - These plans set production targets for industry e.g. 75 million tons of coal by 1932.

Great Purges - From 1934 to 1938, millions of Russians were arrested and either sent to the labour camps or shot.

Lenin - Leader of the Bolshevik party.

Liberals - A political group in Russia who wanted free elections and a parliament to rule Russia.

Provisional government - A temporary government set up after the revolution in February 1917 until a new one could be elected.

Social Democrats - A political group in Russia who followed the teachings of Karl Marx and wanted to overthrow the Tsar and create a Socialist state.

The Orthodox Church - A branch of Christianity which was very important in Russia.

White Army - All the opponents of the Bolsheviks e.g. nobles and Tsarists.

Key dates:

1st November 1894 - Nicholas II becomes Tsar of Russia

1904-1905 - The Russo-Japanese War

15th March 1917 - Tsar Nicholas II abdicates

16th March 1917 - Provisional Government declared.

25th October 1917 - The Bolsheviks seize power in Russia

Summer 1918 - The Russian Civil War

21st January 1924 - The death of Lenin

1922 - 1953 - Stalin is General Secretary of the Communist Party.

1st December 1934 - The start of the Great Purges

