

Was Russia an economic and political success at the outbreak of the First World War?

A whole host of economic indicators showed that Russia was making enormous economic progress.

	1900	1910	1913
Pig Iron (millions poods)	179.1	185.8	283.0
Coal (millions poods)	986.3	1,526.3	2,200.1
Railways (thousands km)	53.2	66.6	70.2
Cotton consumption (millions poods)	16.0	22.1	25.7
Imports (millions roubles)	626.3	1,084.4	1,084.4
Exports (millions roubles)	716.2	1,449.0	1,520.0
Budget revenue (millions roubles)	1,704.1	2,780.9	3,417.3
Budget expenditure (millions roubles)	1,559.1	2,473.1	3,094.2

Note. A pood is a Russian measurement equal to 16.39kg

Savings accounts grew from 4,988,000 to 8,992,000 between 1905 and 1913. The National Debt (the money owed by the government – in Russia mainly to foreign banks) dropped from 9,014,000 to 8,835,000 roubles. The average annual growth rate between 1907 and 1914 was over 6 per cent, which surpassed that of any other Western European country. However, to continue this development Russia needed both domestic harmony, which we have seen was under threat, and, even more importantly, peace with her neighbours. The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and the events which followed were to shatter both.

Was Russia on the road to peaceful and successful reform before the First World War?

Here is what two historians have written on the subject:

Source 19

Pre-revolutionary Russia needed a few decades more of peace to be transformed into a society no longer conspicuously backward as compared to the West, and no longer endowed with dangerous tensions. Russia was well on the way towards entering the family of nations enjoying the advantages of modern civilization.

Timasheff, *The Great Retreat*, 1946

Source 20

Social strife was continual. National resentments among the non-Russians were on the rise. Political opposition remained strident and determined. The monarchy was ever more regarded as an oppressive, obsolescent institution which failed to correspond to the country's needs.

Robert Service, *A History of Twentieth Century Russia*, 1997

Think about

- ▶ Which groups in society would have savings accounts?

Activity**KEY SKILLS**

There is a huge gulf between the two historians in Sources 19 and 20. Go back through this chapter and collect evidence under the following headings. Look for evidence both for and against each of these propositions:

- 1 Were the peasants contented in 1914?
- 2 Were the workers contented?
- 3 Was the middle class contented?
- 4 Was there less political opposition, violent and non-violent?
- 5 Did economic growth have a strong basis?
- 6 Had the Tsar built a new stable political basis for the regime?

Which of the views expressed by the two historians above do you think best describes Russia at the outbreak of the First World War?

What do you think were the chances of Russia making a peaceful transition to a west European style democracy?

Prepare notes on each of the propositions and then produce a summary of evidence which supports and undermines the two different views expressed in Sources 19 and 20. You should now write a report or essay explaining your own answer to the main question. You will need to incorporate a visual image in your report.

Why did Russian forces perform so badly in the First World War?

The public reaction to the outbreak of war

The war began with a display of patriotic feeling. When the Tsar appeared on the balcony of the Winter Palace soldiers and civilians fell to their knees and sang 'God bless the Tsar'. Would this emotional attachment be strengthened by a victorious war against the Central Powers, Turkey, Germany and Austria-Hungary – a war which Russia was entering in defence of fellow Slavs in Serbia?

The Duma met a week after the declaration of war and gave the government almost a unanimous vote of confidence. Only 22 socialists walked out of the chamber and refused to support the war. Lenin denounced it from abroad:

Source 21

The slogans of social democracy at this time must be: First, all-embracing propaganda extending to the army and to the theatre of war, propagating socialist revolution, and the necessity of using weapons not against one's own brothers, the hired slaves of other countries, but against the reactionary and bourgeois governments and parties of all nations...a ruthless struggle against the chauvinism and 'patriotism' of the petty bourgeoisie and bourgeoisie of all countries without exception.

Written by Lenin in September 1914

Virtually no one in Russia supported Lenin's call. The first years of the war were a barren time for the would-be revolutionary. Patriotism made a stronger claim on workers everywhere than the summons to class war.

Think about

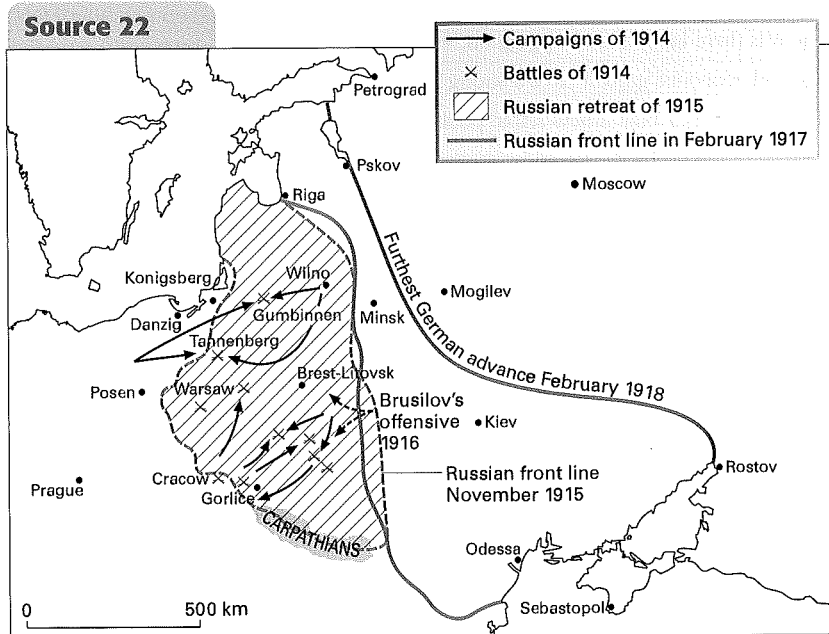
- ▶ What happened in front of the Winter Palace in 1905?

Think about

- ▶ What is Lenin urging Russian soldiers to do in this source?
- ▶ Why do you think this appeal did not have much success with the soldiers in the Russian, or for that matter any other, army?

Military problems

Russian forces quickly found out that they would not find it easy against the modern German army. Their surprisingly quick advance into the east of the German Empire was brought to an abrupt stop at the battle of Tannenberg and later at the Masurian Lakes where a whole army was surrounded. The Russians lost over 4 million men in the first 12 months of the war.



▲ The Eastern Front in the First World War

The heroic efforts of their badly trained and equipped soldiers were no match for German superior tactics and artillery. A British historian who spent much of the war in Russia wrote:

Source 23

The most impressive thing of all is the extraordinary endurance of the men in the trenches. It is a common sight for a man to be five to eight days in the trenches in pouring rain, almost, or sometimes altogether without food, then perhaps to rush on to the enemy, to fall and see half his comrades fall, but the rest still going forward, to lie perhaps through the night, and then to the hospital to lose a limb: and yet...such men are not only patient and affectionate to all who do anything for them, but really cheerful and contented.

Sir B. Pares, *The Fall of the Russian Monarchy*, 1939

They did, however, make some early gains against the Austro-Hungarian army in Galicia. By the end of 1915 the Russian army was in headlong retreat. Difficulties of transport produced other problems, as Sir B. Pares goes on to recount (Source 24).

Timeline

1914

7 August Russian victory at Gumbinnen

18 August Russian defeat at Tannenberg

2 September Russian defeat at Masurian Lakes

1915

February Russian advance into East Prussia repelled

4 March Russia seizes Memel from Germans

7 June Russian defeat at Rawa Ruska

August Tsar Nicholas assumes command of Russian forces

September Russian forces evacuate Vilna

1916

February Russia captures Erzerum from Turkey

June The Brusilov Offensive – halted after early success

1917

4 June Russian offensive against Austrians begins

July Russian forces in retreat

20 August Russians evacuate Riga

5 December Peace talks open with Germany and her allies at Brest-Litovsk

Further reading

N. Stone, *The Eastern Front*

Source 24

The normal monthly wastage exceeded in quantity the supplies received from the rear. The greatest lack was still of rifles. Unarmed men had to be sent into the trenches to wait till their comrades were killed or wounded and their rifles became available.

Source 2

▶ A priest blesses the wounded at a Russian field hospital during the First World War.

Think

▶ What do you think about the Russian situation?

Think

▶ Why did the Russian situation become so dire?

Note

One historian estimates that the Russian army lost more than the German army in 1916. The shells to be used in the trenches were scarce.

**Source 25**

▶ A priest blesses the wounded at a Russian field hospital during the First World War.

Think about

▶ What does Source 25 suggest about the organisation of the Russian army's medical care?

Think about

▶ Why did this simple decision threaten 'the dynasty with serious consequences'?

Note

One historian has suggested that the Russians were producing more shells than the Germans in the autumn of 1916. The problem was getting the shells to the guns.

As Russia's difficulties mounted in August 1915 the Tsar made a crucial decision. He decided to take over the command of the armed forces himself. The Duma chairman Rodzianko and his ministers begged the Tsar not assume leadership of the army. The ministers expressed it most bleakly in this appeal to the Tsar:

Source 26

Sire, we make bold once more to tell you that, to the best of our understanding, your adoption of such a decision threatens Russia, yourself, and your dynasty with serious consequences.

In 1916 the Russian Command was under heavy pressure from their allies to launch an attack to relieve the pressure in France. For a short while the Russians won their most spectacular victories of the war, when General Brusilov's campaign against the Austro-Hungarian forces drove the enemy forces back. However, German troops stemmed the retreat and it was not long before Russian forces were on to the defensive again.

Nevertheless, the shortage of shells had been partially overcome and it is now generally accepted that the Russian army was probably in better shape in the summer of 1916 than it had been in 1914. The Chief of Staff General Alexeev enjoyed the full confidence of the army and the government. The revolution in February 1917 was not, therefore, simply a result of military defeat, though it provided the essential backdrop for the coming events.