

Russia's road to revolution

A look at the build-up to the 1917 revolution, exploring its economic, social and political roots

Political censorship

Before the 1905 revolution, not only was there no parliament or form of representation of the people, it was illegal to form or belong to a political party. Trade unions were banned, as were strikes and political demonstrations. All newspapers, journals and books were subject to official censorship. Open political discussion could only take place abroad. Indeed, after the assassination crisis of 1881, political repression was increasing, not decreasing. Such repression was especially focused on national minorities like the Jews, who were subjected to a policy of Russification (privileging Russian nationality, religion, language and culture over those of the ethnic minorities).

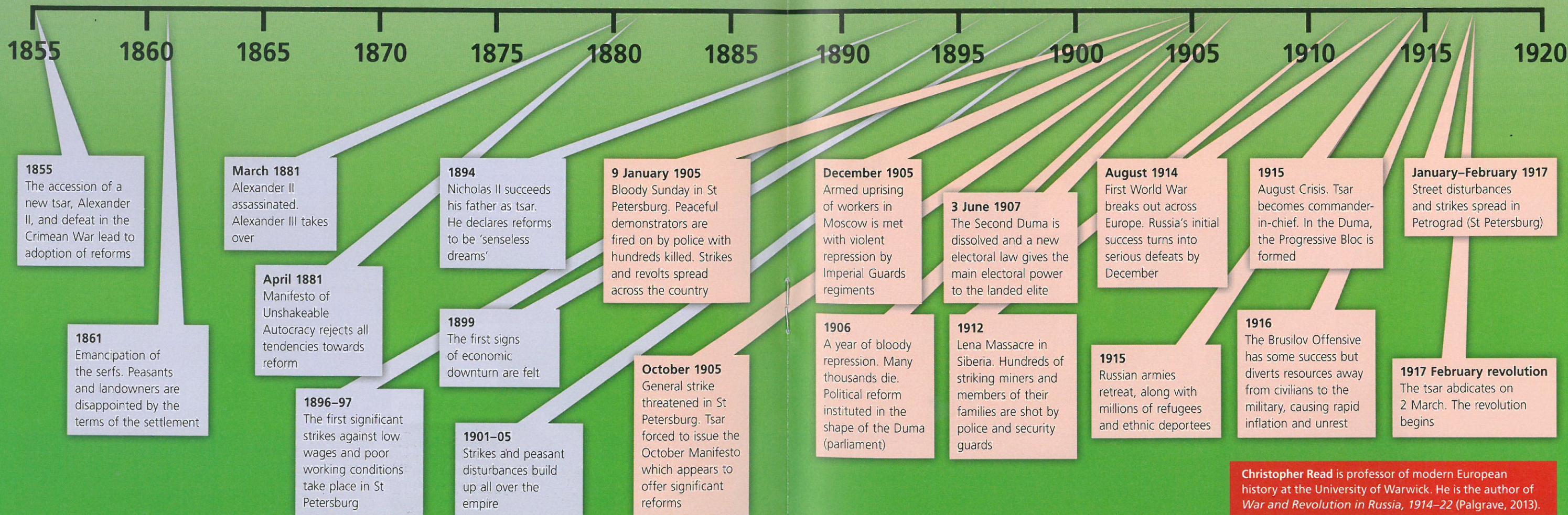
Economic and social change

After the 1861 emancipation of the serfs, economic and social change speeded up. Peasants and landowners were unhappy with the terms of emancipation and remained so for decades afterwards. The peasants, in particular, had a deep desire to take over the landowners' land which they saw as rightly theirs, since they worked on it and the landowners usually did not.

In addition, industry began to develop. This created a middle class composed of financiers, lawyers, managers, entrepreneurs and capitalists, and a working class who laboured in factories, mines and the service industries in rapidly expanding cities. Trying to contain these new pressures in an increasingly repressive political system was the root cause of Russia's revolutionary instability.

After 1905

The immediate result of this instability was the 1905 revolution. Despite this 'warning', the concessions forced out of the tsar — such as the Duma (parliament) — were withdrawn as much as possible. Prior to 1914, no real solutions to the deep, underlying tensions had emerged. However, the stresses of the First World War intensified all pressures on the autocracy. In February 1917, Duma politicians in the Progressive Bloc linked up with the British and French embassies and the army general staff to instigate a coup, as a result of which the tsar abdicated on 2 March. Instead of stopping the revolution from spreading, the coup provided the starting signal for spontaneous revolutions to spread rapidly across the Russian empire.



Christopher Read is professor of modern European history at the University of Warwick. He is the author of *War and Revolution in Russia, 1914-22* (Palgrave, 2013).