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### **SIGNS OF RUSSIAN DISCONTENT – EVENTS LEADING UP TO THE 1905 REVOLUTION**

Since the reign of Ivan the Terrible, the Russian Tsars had followed a fairly consistent policy of drawing more political power away from the nobility and into their own hands. This centralization of authority in the Russian state had usually been accomplished in one of two ways--either by simply taking power from the nobles and braving their opposition (Ivan the Terrible was very good at this), or by compensating the nobles for decreased power in government by giving them greater power over their land and its occupants. Serfdom, as this latter system was known, had increased steadily in Russia from the time of Ivan the Terrible, its inventor. By the time of Catherine the Great, the Russian Tsars enjoyed virtually autocratic rule over their nobles. However, they had in a sense purchased this power by granting those nobles virtually autocratic power over the serfs, who by this time had been reduced to a state closer to slavery than to peasantry.

By the nineteenth century, both of these relationships were under attack. In the Decembrist revolt in 1825, a group of young, reformist military officers attempted to force the adoption of a constitutional monarchy in Russia by preventing the accession of Nicholas I. They failed utterly, and Nicholas became the most reactionary leader in Europe. Nicholas' successor, Alexander II, seemed by contrast to be amenable to reform. In 1861, he abolished serfdom, though the emancipation didn't in fact bring on any significant change in the condition of the peasants. As the country became more industrialized, its political system experienced even greater strain. Attempts by the lower classes to gain more freedom provoked fears of anarchy, and the government remained extremely conservative. As Russia became more industrialized, larger, and far more complicated, the inadequacies of autocratic Tsarist rule became increasingly apparent. By the twentieth century conditions were ripe for a serious convulsion.

At the same time, Russia had expanded its territory and its power considerably over the nineteenth century. Its borders extended to Afghanistan and China, and it had acquired extensive territory on the Pacific coast. The foundation of the port cities of Vladivostok and Port Arthur there had opened up profitable avenues for commerce, and the construction of the Trans-Siberian Railway (constructed from 1891-1905) linked the European Russia with its new eastern territories.

In 1894 Nicholas II acceded to the throne. He was not the most competent of political leaders, and his ministers were almost uniformly reactionaries. To make matters worse, the increasing Russian presence in the far east provoked the hostility of Japan. In January of 1905, the Japanese attacked, and Russia experienced a series of defeats that dissolved the tenuous support held by Nicholas' already unpopular government. Nicholas was forced to grant concessions to the reformers, including most notably a constitution and a parliament, or Duma. The power of the reform movement was founded on a new and powerful force entered Russian politics. The industrialization of the major western cities and the development of the Batu oil fields had brought together large concentrations of Russian workers, and they soon began to organize into local political councils, or soviets. It was in large part the power of the soviets, united under the Social Democratic party, which had forced Nicholas to accept reforms in 1905.

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After the war with Japan was brought to a close, Nicholas attempted to reverse the new freedoms, and his government became more reactionary than ever. Popular discontent gained strength, and Nicholas countered it with increased repression, maintaining control but worsening relations with the population. In 1912, the Social Democrats split into two camps--the radical Bolsheviks and the comparatively moderate Mensheviks. In 1914, another disastrous war once again brought on a crisis. If the Russo-Japanese war had been costly and unpopular, it was at least remote. The First World War, however, took place right on Russia's western doorstep. Unprepared militarily or industrially, the country suffered demoralizing defeats, suffered severe food shortages, and soon suffered an economic collapse. By February of 1917, the workers and soldiers had had enough. Riots broke out in St. Petersburg, then called Petrograd, and the garrison there mutinied. Workers soviets were set up, and the Duma approved the establishment of a Provisional Government to attempt to restore order in the capital. It was soon clear that Nicholas possessed no support, and on March 2 he abdicated the throne in favor of his brother Michael. No fool, Michael renounced his claim the next day.

The Provisional Government set up by the Duma attempted to pursue a moderate policy, calling for a return to order and promising reform of worker's rights. However, it was unwilling to endorse the most pressing demand of the soviets--an immediate end to the war. For the next 9 months, the Provisional Government, first under Prince Lvov and then under Alexander Kerensky, unsuccessfully attempted to establish its authority. In the meanwhile, the Bolsheviks gained increasing support from the ever more frustrated soviets. On October 25, led by Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, they stormed the Winter Palace and deposed the Kerensky government.

Although the Bolsheviks enjoyed substantial support in St. Petersburg and Moscow, they were by no means in control of the country as a whole. They succeeded in taking Russia out of the war (though on very unfavorable terms), but within months civil war broke out throughout Russia. For the next three years the country was devastated by civil strife, until by 1920 the Bolsheviks had finally emerged victorious.