

## Re-sourcing History

### Russia and its Rulers



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### Source 1: Challenges to Authority

We remind the new Tsar, Alexander III, that historical justice exists for him and for everybody. Russia, worn out by famine, exhausted by arbitrary administration, continuously losing its sons on the gallows, in hard labour, in exile, in oppressive inactivity forced on them by the existing regime – Russia cannot live like this any longer...We remind Alexander III that any violator of the will of the people is their enemy...and a tyrant...The death of Alexander II has shown what sort of retribution such a role deserves.

Source: *Executive committee of the People's Will*, 1 March 1881.

### Commentary:

On 1 March 1881 after years of trying, terrorists in Russia finally succeeded in assassinating the tsar Alexander II in an audacious act of public theatre that shook Russia's leadership. This was immediately followed by the above proclamation from the leaders of the People's Will, addressed to the new tsar, Alexander III. This source can help us to reflect on the changing dynamics of power in the late imperial period as terrorists engaged in public with the new tsar. They also present their ideology and practice with utmost clarity here, framing their actions as a defence of the Russian people against autocratic oppression, couching their appeal in language of 'justice'.

## Source 2: Pomp and Slendour

The dignitaries enumerated hereafter, previously informed by the IMPERIAL COURT, will come together at the Winter Palace at 11 and a half o'clock in the morning and shall take their places afterwards as follows: the Holy Synod and the Clergy, in The Palace Church; the Council of the Empire, the Ministers, the Ambassadors, the Envoys Extraordinary and Ministers Plenipotentiary, also the Members and Ladies of the Diplomatic Corps...the Ladies presented, the Dignitaries of the four first classes, the Nobility, the Officers and the retired Civil Servants having entry to the Court, in the Armorial Hall, the Mayor of St. Petersburg, the Mayors of other cities, the Notables of Commerce both Russian and Foreign, in the Field Marshals' Hall.

The Dignitaries are to be in Full Dress Uniform, the Ladies Russian Court Dress.

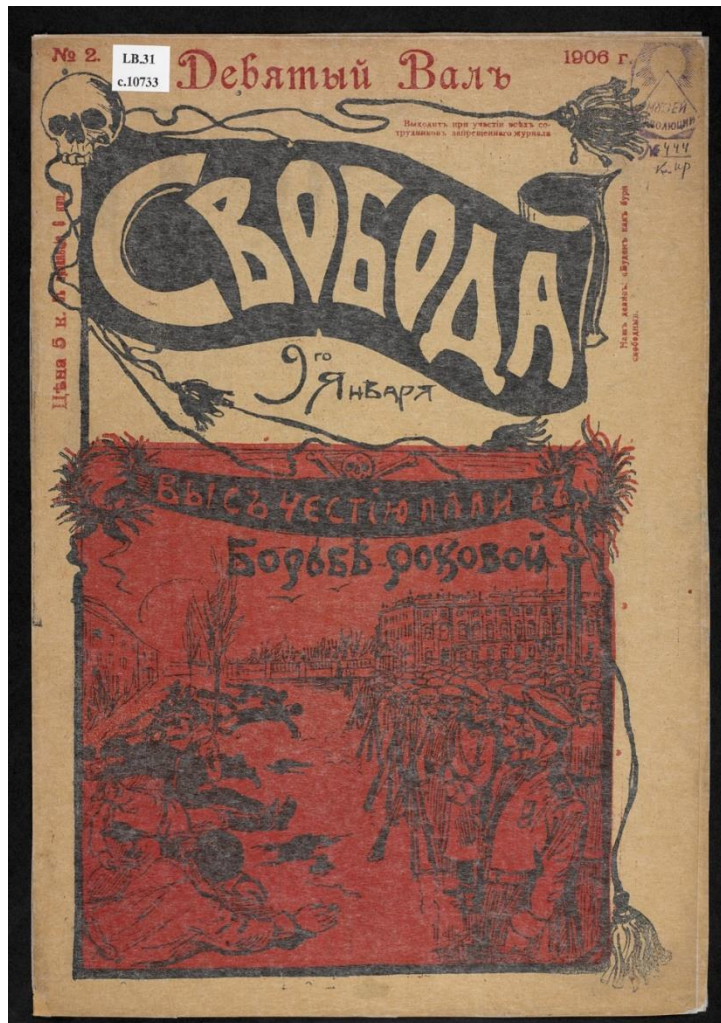
Source: *Nicholas II: programme of his marriage*, 1895.

## Commentary:

A list of dignitaries might not on the face of it seem like the most straightforward text to interpret, but close consideration demonstrates what we have here is an insight into ways in which late imperial Russia's rulers demonstrated their power in the public domain. Nicholas II's marriage programme is at once a familial text, but also an example of how the Romanov dynasty functioned in the 'theatre of public life' (Laura Engelstein). The presence of many from the upper echelons of society,

members of the aristocratic international and the attendance of figures of Church and state show us the institutions that supported Russian autocracy most closely. The marriage was just one example of what Richard Wortman describes in his classic works to be the 'scenarios of power' that constituted the ceremony of Russian monarchy.

Source 3: Violence and Revolution



*The Ninth Wave*, No. 2, 1906. Via <https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/bloody-sunday-in-the-ninth-wave-journal>.

**Commentary:**

This issue of the magazine *The Ninth Wave* was published on the first anniversary of 'Bloody Sunday' (9 January 1905), and on the cover refers to popular revolutionary songs. One year earlier some 150,000 workers and their families marched with a petition led by Father Gapon asking Nicholas II to enact social and political reform. They were fired on by troops following orders to disperse. Some estimated around 4,000 casualties. The symbolism of imperial troops murdering unarmed people greatly impacted upon popular perceptions of the autocracy, and led to lasting impression of the murderous activities of the tsarist regime, as seen in this magazine cover from one year later, drawn in bright primary colours and richly redolent of the events of that day. It can also help us to think about the changing dimensions of print culture.

#### **Source 4: Revolutionary Optimism – the Tides of History**

The first wave of the Russian revolution was smashed by the dull-wittedness of the muzhik, who, at home in his village, hoping to seize a bit of land, fought the squire, but who, having donned a soldier's uniform, fired upon the worker. All the events of the revolution of 1905 can be viewed as a series of ruthless object lessons by means of which history drums into the peasant's skull a consciousness of his local land hunger and the central problem of state power. The preconditions for revolutionary victory are forged in the historic school of harsh conflicts and cruel defeats.

Source: Leon Trotsky, *1905*.

#### **Commentary:**

Trotsky is here reflecting on 1905, a formative experience for many of those involved long-term in Russia's revolutionary movements. 1905 was a brutal and chastening experience for the revolutionaries, as Trotsky notes. The text points out disunity amongst forces opposing tsarism. However, Trotsky also assesses the objective conditions whereby space for a revolutionary movement was being created in Russia, including peasant land hunger. The revolutionaries learned from their mistakes, and put some of these lessons to use in 1917 itself.

### Source 5: Women in the Workplace

I remember what a battle I had to endure when the issue of whether a woman could be a Society member was debated. Working women were not even mentioned, as if they did not exist, as if they were some kind of afterthought in the industrial world, even though all the while there were factories where the workers were almost exclusively women. It was no wonder that with attitudes like these, women themselves felt uncomfortable in the Society and were reluctant to actively participate and speak their minds. We used to gather after assemblies to talk over tea, and the women could immediately feel completely different, more relaxed, since conversations over tea were more family-like.

Source: Vera Karelina, *Working women in the Gapon Assembly: Memoirs*.

### Commentary:

Karelina's lament on the attitudes to working women within the revolutionary movement is an exciting foray into transforming attitudes within the revolutionary movement as regards gender politics. After the 1905 revolution, public forums for women opened up like never before in Russia, but even amongst apparently like-minded colleagues, the struggle to articulate the voices of radical women was a long and arduous one. Often minimized within one such group, the Gapon Assembly, women sought out new strategies and locations in order to get their voices heard, which can open up pathways into how we can consider gender, power and space in the late imperial period.

### Source 6: The Chaos of War – Advising the Tsar

Most gracious Sovereign. Do not find fault with us for appealing to you boldly and frankly. Our action is dictated by loyalty and love for you and our country and by our anxious recognition of the menacing character of what is happening around us. Yesterday at the meeting of the Council, at which you presided, we unanimously begged you not to remove Grand Duke Nicholas from the High Command of the Army.... We venture once more to tell you that to the best of our judgement your decision threatens with serious consequences, Russia, your dynasty and your person.

Source: *Letter from the Russian Cabinet to Tsar Nicholas II, September, 1915.*

### Commentary:

The letter from the tsar's advisors to Nicholas II provides important insights into war, chaos and disaffection within the imperial polity by 1915. Russia's First World War has increasingly attracted the attention of many historians, and it is clear that in many respects the old regime was not up to the challenge of a modern, militarized conflict. After a series of disasters on the front Nicholas II's ministers pleaded with him not to make himself commander in chief as it would tie him to failures. This letter, a private document, helps us reflect on the anguish they felt and the disconnect between public displays of patriotic unity and the private fears of Russia's ruling classes.

**Source 7: The Experience of 'War Communism'**

I have said, the most striking characteristic of all Russia at that period was exhaustion. The whole country was on the verge of succumbing to the triple strain of Civil War, Military Communism, and the attempt at management by people who lacked the necessary training, ability and experience. The spur of war and the fanatic belief in the Tightness of the Communist Cause had kept them going before, although hundreds were broken by excessive effort; but once the pressure was relaxed it seemed as if the whole country was paralyzed by nervous reaction...It was therefore unfair of me to be shocked, as I was shocked, by the apathy and hopelessness of the local authorities at Samara and the other Volga cities I visited, in face of the famine-refugee problem. In Samara, for instance, I went to a so-called "children's home," which was more like a "pound" for homeless dogs. They picked up the wretched children, lost or abandoned by their parents, by hundreds off the streets, and parked them in these "homes"...

Source: Walter Duranty, *I Write as I Please*, 1935.

**Commentary:**

A feature of early Soviet Russia was the vast social dislocation caused by war, revolution and Civil War. This source from the foreign observe Walter Duranty notes a particular problem of homeless children as a result of the migration, death and population movement in the country over the preceding years. How did the transformations in rule affect children's lives in Soviet Russia? Another question that might occur to us, not implied here, is the challenges of the young regime in dealing with the problem of homelessness in a structural sense, thinking about the need for housing, feeding the population and transportation.

Source 8: Mobilizing the Masses



Sources: *Have you joined the volunteers?* Dmitrii Moor, 1920.

**Commentary:**

This propaganda poster is a product of the Bolshevik interest in Agitprop (Agitational Propaganda) that developed during the Civil War period. The Bolsheviks sought to create an idealization of the Red Army soldier in the image, and incorporate people into their state-building project, hence the implied connection between viewer and subject. We can see the ideology of the Bolsheviks as a working-class vanguard from the factors and billowing smoke stacks behind the Red Army soldier.