2.1.3 Analyze the impact of discontent in pre-revolutionary Russia by considering the: (a)
- autocratic government of Tsar Nicholas II;
- plight of peasants and factory workers;
- political reform demands by Liberals and Marxists;
- impact of Russo-Japanese War and World War I; and
- influence of Grigori Rasputin.

Use the information on pages 100 – 103 of your handout to develop an understanding into the
sources of discontent in pre-revolutionary Russia at the turn of the twentieth century.

You are a member of the Tsar's government in 1903. Write a report for him, informing him
truthfully of the situation in Russia.

Your Majesty,

I feel that I must submit this report in order to warn you about the state of your country. I am
first of all concerned about your government because:

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______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

You should also be concerned about the peasants in Russia. Although they are loyal to you they
suffer badly:

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________

______________________________________________________________________________
Russia is not a fair society. There are great differences between the rich and poor. For example:

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The workers in the towns are often no better off than the peasants. For example:

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You should also be aware that there are various groups within Russia which oppose you:

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Peasants and the countryside

Around 80 per cent of Russia's population were peasants who lived in communes. There were some prosperous peasant farmers called kulaks, but living and working conditions for most peasants were dreadful. Famine and starvation were common and in some regions the life expectancy of a peasant farmer was only 40 years of age.

Much of Russia's land was unsuitable for farming. As a result, land was in very short supply because, by the early 1900s, the population was growing rapidly. (It increased by 50 per cent between 1860 and 1897.) Russian peasants were still using ancient farming techniques. In most villages, the land was divided into large fields. Each family was allotted a strip of land in one of the fields. This subdivision of the fields was organized by peasant councils called mir. When a peasant had sons, the family plot was subdivided and shared between them.

There was no basic education in Russia and very few peasants could read or write. But, despite all their hardships, many peasants were loyal to the Tsar. This was partly because they were also religious. Every week, they would hear the priest say how wonderful the Tsar was and how they, as peasants, should be loyal subjects. However, not all peasants were loyal or religious. Many supported the opposition, the Social Revolutionaries (see page 103). Their main discontent was over land – they resented the amount of land owned by the aristocracy, the Church and the Tsar.

The aristocracy

The peasants' living conditions contrasted sharply with those of the aristocracy, who had vast estates, town and country houses and elegant lifestyles.

The aristocracy were about 1.5 per cent of society but owned about 25 per cent of the land. They were a key part of the Tsar's government, often acting as local officials. In the countryside they dominated the local assemblies or zemstva. Most were loyal to the Tsar and wanted to keep Russian society as it was.

Many of the richer aristocrats lived not on their estates but in the glamorous cities. Some landlords were in financial trouble and had to sell their lands, a piece at a time. Perhaps the greatest fear of the aristocracy was that the peasants would rise up and take their lands.

1. Use Sources 3A and 3B to write a description of peasants' living conditions. Make sure you highlight the contrast with the conditions described in Source 4.

Source 3A

The interior of a Russian peasant's cottage.

Source 3B

A typical village in northern Russia.

Source 4

In the big house the two women hardly manage to wash up all the crockery for the gentlefolk who have just had a meal; and two peasants in dress coats are running up or down stairs serving tea, coffee, wine and water. Upstairs the table is laid: they have just finished one meal and will soon start another that will go on till at least midnight. There are some fifteen healthy men and women here and some thirty able-bodied men and women servants working for them.

Count Leo Tolstoy, writer and improving landlord.
New industries, cities and the working class

From the later nineteenth century, the Tsars had been keen to see Russia become an industrial power. The senior minister Sergei Witte introduced policies that led to rapid industrial growth. Oil and coal production trebled, while iron production quadrupled (see Source 17 on page 106). Some peasants left the land to work in these newly developing industries. However, their living conditions hardly improved.

Workers’ living conditions: A shows a dormitory and B shows a canteen in Moscow. Urban workers made up about 4 per cent of the population in 1900.

The greatest concentrations of these workers were in the capital, St Petersburg, and in Moscow. Here the population was growing fast as peasants arrived looking for a new way of life, or simply trying to earn some extra cash before returning for the harvest. Only a short walk away from the fabulous wealth of the Tsar’s Winter Palace in St Petersburg, his subjects lived in filth and squalor. Overcrowding, terrible food, disease and alcoholism were everyday facts of life. The wretchedness of their living conditions was matched by the atrocious working conditions. Unlike every other European power, there were no government regulations on child labour, hours, safety or education. Trade unions were illegal. Low pay, 12 to 15-hour days, unguarded machinery and brutal discipline soon made the peasants realise that working in the factories was no better than working on the land.

The middle classes

As a result of industrialisation, a new class began to emerge in Russia – the capitalists. They were landowners, industrialists, bankers, traders and businessmen. Until this time, Russia had had only a small middle class which included people such as shopkeepers, lawyers and university lecturers. The capitalists increased the size of Russia’s middle class, particularly in the towns. Their main concerns were the management of the economy, although the capitalists were also concerned about controlling their workforce. Clashes between workers and capitalists were to play an important role in Russia’s history in the years up to 1917.
The Tsar and his government

The huge and diverse empire was ruled by an autocracy. One man, the Tsar, had absolute power to rule Russia. The Tsar believed that God had placed him in that position. The Russian Church supported him in this view. The Tsar could appoint or sack ministers or make any other decisions without consulting anyone else. By the early twentieth century most of the great powers had given their people at least some say in how they were run, but Nicholas was utterly committed to the idea of autocracy and seemed to be obsessed with the great past of his family, the Romanovs (see Source 7). He had many good qualities, such as his loyalty to his family, his willingness to work hard and his attention to detail. However, he was not an able, forceful and imaginative monarch like his predecessors.

Nicholas tended to avoid making important decisions. He did not delegate day-to-day tasks. In a country as vast as Russia, where tasks had to be delegated to officials, this was a major problem. He insisted on getting involved in the tiniest details of government. He personally answered letters from peasants and appointed provincial midwives. He even wrote out the instructions for the royal car to be brought round.

Nicholas also managed his officials poorly. He felt threatened by able and talented ministers, such as Count Witte and Peter Stolypin. He dismissed Witte (see Source 8) in 1906 and was about to sack Stolypin (see page 107) when Stolypin was murdered in 1911. Nicholas refused to chair the Council of Ministers because he disliked confrontation. He insisted on seeing ministers in one-to-one meetings. He encouraged rivalry between them. This caused chaos, as different government departments refused to co-operate with each other.

He also appointed family members and friends from the court to important positions. Many of them were incompetent or even corrupt, making huge fortunes from bribes.

Control

Despite everything you have read so far, it is important to remember that the Tsar’s regime was very strong in some ways. Resistance was limited. At the local level, most peasants had their lives controlled by the mir. The mir could be overruled by land captains. Land captains were usually minor landlords appointed by the Tsar as his officials in local areas. The zemstva or local assemblies also helped to control Russia. They were dominated by the landlords in the countryside and by professional people in the towns. Then there were local governors, appointed by the Tsar from the ranks of the aristocracy. In some areas, Russia was a police state, controlled by local governors. There were special emergency laws that allowed the local governors to:

- order the police to arrest suspected opponents of the regime
- ban individuals from serving in the zemstva, courts or any government organisation
- make suspects pay heavy fines
- introduce censorship of books or leaflets or newspapers.

Local governors controlled the police. The police had a special force with 10,000 officers whose job was to concentrate on political opponents of the regime. There was also the Okhrana, the Tsar’s secret police. Finally, if outright rebellion did erupt, there was the army, particularly the Tsar’s loyal and terrifying Cossack regiments.

SOURCE 9

A third of Russia lives under emergency legislation. The numbers of the regular police and of the secret police are continually growing. The prisons are overcrowded with convicts and political prisoners. At no time have religious persecutions [of Jews] been so cruel as they are today. In all cities and industrial centres soldiers are employed and equipped with live ammunition to be sent out against the people. Autocracy is an outdated form of government that may suit the needs of a central African tribe but not those of the Russian people who are increasingly aware of the culture of the rest of the world.

Part of a letter from the landowner and writer Leo Tolstoy to the Tsar in 1902. The letter was an open letter – it was published openly as well as being sent to the Tsar.
Opposition to the Tsar

The Tsarist government faced opposition from three particular groups. Many middle-class people wanted greater democracy in Russia and pointed out that Britain still had a king but also a powerful parliament. These people were called liberals or 'Cadets'.

Two other groups were more violently opposed to the Tsar. They believed that revolution was the answer to the people's troubles. The Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) were a radical movement. Their main aim was to carve up the huge estates of the nobility and hand them over to the peasants. They believed in a violent struggle and were responsible for the assassination of two government officials, as well as the murder of a large number of Okhrana (police) agents and spies. They had wide support in the towns and the countryside.

The Social Democratic Party was a smaller but more disciplined party which followed the ideas of Karl Marx. In 1903 the party split itself into Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. The Bolsheviks (led by Lenin) believed it was the job of the party to create a revolution whereas the Mensheviks believed Russia was not ready for revolution. Both of these organisations were illegal and many of their members had been executed or sent in exile to Siberia. Many of the leading Social Democrat leaders were forced to live abroad.

By 1903 the activities of the opposition parties, added to the appalling conditions in the towns and the countryside, led to a wave of strikes, demonstrations and protests. The Tsar's ministers warned him that Russia was getting close to revolution.

ACTIVITY

Look carefully at Source 10. It was drawn by opponents of the Tsar's regime who had been forced to live in Switzerland to avoid the Tsar's secret police. It is a representation of life in Russia under the rule of the Tsar. Discuss how far you think it is an accurate view of Russian society. Think about:

- ways in which its claims are supported by the information and sources in the text
- ways in which its claims are not supported by the information and sources in the text
- aspects of life in Russia that are not covered by the drawing.

5 Read the section headed 'Opposition to the Tsar'. Is there anything the Cadets, the Socialist Revolutionaries, and the Social Democratic Party might agree on?

6 Look again at Source 7. Do you think the Tsar would listen to the ideas of the Cadets?