siderably, and the Amur river itself had acquired significance as an artery of communication. In 1847 the energetic and ambitious Count Nicholas Muraviev — known later as Muraviev-Amursky, that is, of the Amur — became governor-general of Eastern Siberia. He promoted Russian advance in the Amur area and profited from the desperate plight of China, at war with Great Britain and France and turn by a rebellion, to obtain two extremely advantageous treaties from the Celestial Empire: in 1856, by the Treaty of Aigun, China ceded to Russia the left bank of the Amur river and in 1860, by the Treaty of Peking, the Ussuri region. The Pacific coast of the Russian Empire began gradually to be settled: the town of Nikolaevsk on the Amur was founded in 1853, Khabarovsk in 1858, Vladivostok in 1860. In 1875 Russia yielded its Kurile islands to Japan in return for the southern half of the island of Sakhalin.


The natural conclusion is that Russian live in a period which Shakespeare defined by saying, "The time is out of joint." M. KOVALYNSKY

The reign of Alexander III and the reign of Nicholas II until the Revolution of 1905 formed a period of continuous reaction. In fact, as has been indicated, reaction had started earlier when Alexander II abandoned a liberal course in 1866 and the years following. But the "Tsar-Liberator" did enact major reforms early in his rule, and, as the Loris-Melikov episode indicated, progressive policies constituted a feasible alternative for Russia as long as he remained on the throne. Alexander III and Nicholas II saw no such alternative. Narrow-minded and convinced reactionaries, they not only rejected further reform, but also did their best to limit the effectiveness of many changes that had already taken place. Thus they instituted what have to be known in Russian historiography as "counterreforms." The official estimate of Russian conditions and needs became increasingly unreal. The government relied staunchly on the gentry, although that class was in decline. It held high the banner of "Orthodoxy-autocracy-nationality," in spite of the fact that Orthodoxy — helped, or rather hindered, by police and other more direct compulsive measures — could hardly cement together peoples of many faiths in an increasingly secular empire, that autocracy was bound to be even more of an anachronism and obstacle to progress in the twentieth than in the nineteenth century, and that a nationalism which had come to include Russification could only split a multinational state. Whereas the last two Romanovs to rule Russia agreed on principles and policies, they differed in character: Alexander III was a strong man, Nicholas II a weak one; under Nicholas confusion and indecision complicated further the fundamentally wrong-headed efforts of the government.

Alexander III, born in 1845, was full of strength and vigor, when he ascended the Russian throne after the assassination of his father. The new ruler was determined to suppress revolution and to maintain autocracy, a point that he made clear in a manifesto of May 11, 1881, which led to the resignation of Loris-Melikov, Dmitrii Milutin, Grand Duke Con-
stantine, and the minister of finance, Alexander Abaza. Yet it took a number of months and further changes at the top before the orientation represented by Loris-Melikov was entirely abandoned and the government embarked on a reactionary course. The promoters of reaction included Constantine Pobedonostsev, formerly a noted jurist at the University of Moscow, who had served as tutor to Alexander and had become in 1880 the Ober-Procurator of the Holy Synod; Dmitri Tolstoy, who returned to the government in 1882 to head the Ministry of the Interior; and Ivan Delianov, who took charge of the Ministry of Education in the same year. Pobedonostsev, the chief theoretician as well as the leading practitioner of reaction in Russia in the last decades of the nineteenth century, characteristically emphasized the weakness and vacuities of man and the fallibility and dangers of human reason, hated the industrial revolution and the growth of cities, and even wanted "to keep people from inventing things." The state, he believed, had as its high purpose the maintenance of law, order, stability, and unity among men. In Russia that aim could be accomplished only by means of autocracy and the Orthodox Church.

"Temporary Regulations" to protect state security and public order, issued late in the summer of 1881, gave officials in designated areas broad authority in dealing with the press and with people who could threaten public order. Summary search, arrest, imprisonment, exile, and trial by courts-martial became common occurrences. The "Temporary Regulations" were aimed primarily at the "Will of the People," which lasted long enough to offer the new ruler peace on conditions of political amnesty and the convocation of a constituent assembly. Although the "Will of the People" had been largely destroyed even before the assassination of the emperor and although most of its remaining members soon fell into the hands of the police, the "Temporary Regulations" were not rescinded, but instead applied, as their vague wording permitted, to virtually anyone whom officials suspected or simply disliked. For many years after the demise of the "Will of the People," terrorism died down in Russia, although occasional individual outbreaks occurred. Yet the "Temporary Regulations," introduced originally for three years, were renewed. Indeed, the tsarist government relied on them during the rest of its existence, with the result that Russians lived under something like a partial state of martial law.

Alexander III's government also enacted "counterreforms" meant to curb the sweeping changes introduced by Alexander II and to buttress the centralized, bureaucratic, and class nature of the Russian system. New press regulations made the existence of radical journals impossible and the life of a mildly liberal press precarious. The University Statute of 1884, which replaced the more liberal statute of 1863, virtually abolished uni-

versity autonomy and also emphasized that students were to be considered as "individual visitors," who had no right to form organizations or to claim corporate representation. In fact most policies of the Ministry of Education—which will be summarized in a later chapter—whether they concerned the emphasis on classical languages in secondary schools, the drastic curtailment of higher education for women, or the expansion of the role of the Church in elementary teaching, consciously promoted the reactionary aims of the regime.

The tsar and his associates used every opportunity to help the gentry and to stress their leading position in Russia, as, for example, by the creation in 1885 of the State Gentry Land Bank. At the same time they imposed further restrictions on the peasants, whom they considered essentially wards of the state rather than mature citizens. The policies of bureaucratic control of the peasants and of emphasizing the role of the gentry in the countryside found expression in the most outstanding "counter-reform" of the reign, the establishment in 1889 of the office of zemstvo nadzor, zemstvo chief, or land captain. That official—who had nothing to do with the zemstvo self-government—was appointed and dismissed by the minister of the interior following the recommendation of the governor of the land captain's province. His assigned task consisted in exercising direct bureaucratic supervision over the peasants and, in effect, in managing them. Thus the land captain confirmed elected peasant officials as well as decisions of peasant meetings, and he could prevent the officials from exercising their office, or even fine, arrest, or imprison them, although the fines imposed by the land captain could not exceed several rubles and the prison sentences, several days. Moreover, land captains received vast judicial powers, thus, contrary to the legislation of 1864, again combining administration and justice. In fact, these appointed officials replaced for the peasants, that is, for the vast majority of the people, elected and independent justices of peace. The law of 1889 stipulated that land captains had to be appointed from members of the local gentry who met a certain property qualification. Each district received several land captains; each land captain administered several volosti, that is, townships or cantons. Russia obtained in this manner a new administrative network, one of land captaincies.

The following year, 1890, the government made certain significant changes in the zemstvo system. The previous classification of landlords, that of 1864, had been based on the form of property, so that members of the gentry and other Russians who happened to hold land in individual ownership were not distinguished. In 1890 the members of the gentry became a distinct group—and their representation was markedly increased. Peasants, on the other hand, could thenceforth elect only candidates for
zemstvo seats, the governor making appointments to district zemstvo assemblies from these candidates, as recommended by land captains. In addition, the minister of the interior received the right to confirm chairmen of zemstvo boards in their office, while members of the boards and zemstvo employees were to be confirmed by their respective governors. In 1892 the town government underwent a similar "counterreform," which, among other provisions, sharply raised the property requirement for the right to vote. After its enactment, the electorate in St. Petersburg decreased from 21,000 to 8,000, and that in Moscow from 20,000 to 7,000.

The reign of Alexander III also witnessed increased pressure on non-Orthodox denominations and a growth of the policy of Russification. Even Roman Catholics and Lutherans, who formed majorities in certain western areas of the empire and had unimpeachable international connections and recognition, had to face discrimination: for instance, children of mixed marriages with the Orthodox automatically became Orthodox, and all but the dominant Church were forbidden to engage in proselytizing. Old Believers and Russian seceders suffered greater hardships. The government also began to oppose non-Christian faiths such as Islam and Buddhism, which had devoted adherents among many of the peoples of the empire.

Russification went hand in hand with militant Orthodoxy, although the two were by no means identical, for peoples who were not Great Russians such as the Ukrainians and the Georgians belonged to the Orthodox Church. Although Russification was practiced earlier against the Poles, especially in the western provinces following the rebellions of 1831 and 1863 and to a somewhat lesser extent in Poland proper, and was also apparent in the attempts to suppress the budding Ukrainian nationalism, it became a general policy of the Russian government only late in the nineteenth century. It represented in part a reaction against the growing national sentiments of different peoples of the empire with their implicit threats to the unity of the state and in part a response to the rising nationalism of the Great Russians themselves. Alexander III has often been considered the first nationalist on the Russian throne. Certainly, in his reign measures of Russification began to extend not only to the rebellious Poles, but, for example, to the Georgians and Armenians in Transcaucasia and even gradually to the loyal Finns.

The Jews, who were very numerous in western Russia as a result of the invitation policy of late medieval Polish kings, were bound to suffer in the new atmosphere of aggressive Orthodoxy and Russification. And indeed old limitations came to be applied to them with a new force, while new legislation was enacted to establish additional curbs on them and their activities. Thus, in contrast to the former lenient enforcement of rules, Jews came to be rigorously restricted to residence in the "Pale of Jewish Settlement," that is, the area in western Russia where they had been living for a long time, with the added proviso that even within the Pale they could reside only in towns and smaller settlements inhabited by merchants and craftsmen, but not in the countryside. Educated or otherwise prominent Jews could usually surmount these restrictions, but the great bulk of the poor Jewish population was tied to its location. In 1887 the government established quotas for Jewish students in institutions of higher learning: 10 per cent of the total enrollment within the Pale of Jewish Settlement, 5 per cent in other provinces, and 3 per cent in Moscow and St. Petersburg. In 1881, pogroms—the sad word entered the English language from the Russian—that is, violent popular outbreaks against the Jews, occurred in southwestern Russian towns and settlements, destroying Jewish property and sometimes taking Jewish lives. They were to recur sporadically until the end of imperial Russia. Local authorities often did little to prevent pogroms and on occasion, it is rather clear, even encouraged them. As Pobedonostsev allegedly remarked, the Jewish problem in Russia was to be solved by the conversion to Orthodoxy of one-third of the Russian Jews, the emigration of one-third, and the death of the remaining third. It should be added that the Russian government defined Jews according to their religion; Jews converted to Christianity escaped the disabilities imposed on the others.

Yet even under Alexander III state policies could not be limited to curbing the "great reforms" and generally promoting reaction. Certain more constructive measures were enacted in the domains of finance and national economy where the government had to face a difficult and changing situation, and where it profited from the services of several able ministers. While the development of the Russian economy and of society after the "great reforms" will be discussed in a later chapter, it should be noted here that Nicholas Bunin, who headed the Ministry of Finance from 1881 to 1887, established a Peasant Land Bank, abolished the head tax, introduced the inheritance tax, and also began labor legislation in Russia. His pioneer factory laws included the limitation of the working day to eight hours for children between twelve and fifteen, the prohibition of night work for children and for women in the textile industry, and regulations aimed at assuring the workers proper and regular pay from their employers, without excessive fines or other illegitimate deductions. Factory inspectors were established to supervise the carrying out of the new legislation. It is significant that Bunin had to leave the Ministry of Finance because of the strong opposition to his measures and accusations of socialism. His successors, Ivan Vyshegradsky, 1887-92, and Sergei Witte, 1892-1903,
strove especially to develop state railways in Russia and to promote heavy industry through high tariffs, state contracts and subsidies, and other means.

Nicholas II

Nicholas II, Alexander III's eldest son, who was born in 1868, became the autocratic ruler of Russia after his father's death in 1894. The last tsar possessed certain attractive qualities, such as simplicity, modesty, and devotion to his family. But these positive personal traits mattered little in a situation that demanded strength, determination, adaptability, and vision. It may well be argued that another Peter the Great could have saved the Romanovs and imperial Russia. There can be no doubt that Nicholas II did not. In fact, he proved to be both narrow-minded and weak, unable to remove reactionary blunders even when circumstances forced him into entirely new situations with great potentialities, and at the same time unable to manage even reaction effectively. The unfortunate emperor struck many observers as peculiarly automatic in his attitudes and actions, without the power of spontaneous decision, and — as his strangely colorless and undifferentiated diary so clearly indicates — also quite deficient in perspective. Various, often unworthy, ministers made crucial decisions that the sovereign failed to understand fully or to evaluate. Later in the reign the empress, the reactionary, hysterical, and willful German princess Alexandra, became the power behind the throne, and with her even such an incredible person as Rasputin could rise to the position of greatest influence in the state. A good man, but a miserable ruler lost in the moment of crisis — no wonder Nicholas II has often been compared to Louis XVI. As Trotsky and other determinists have insisted, the archaic, rotten Russian system, which was about to collapse, could not logically produce a leader much different from that ineffective relic of the past. Or, as an old saying has it, the gods blind those whom they want to destroy.

Reaction under Nicholas II

Reaction continued unimpeded. The new emperor, who had been a pupil of Pobedonostsev, relied on the Ober-Procurator of the Holy Synod and on other reactionaries such as his ministers of interior Dmitrii Sipiagin and Visheshav Pliehev. The government continued to apply and extend the "Temporary Regulations," to supervise the press with utmost severity, and as best it could to control and often restrict education. The zemstvo and municipal governments experienced further curtailments of their jurisdictions. For example, in 1900 the limits of zemstvo taxation were strictly fixed and the stockpiling of food for emergency was taken away from

zemstvo jurisdiction and transferred to that of the bureaucracy. Moreover, the authorities often refused to confirm elections of zemstvo board members or appointments of zemstvo employees, trying to assure that only people of unimpeachable loyalty to the regime would hold public positions of any kind.

Religious persecution grew. Russian sectarianism suffered the most, in particular those groups that refused to recognize the state and perform such state obligations as military service. Many of them were expelled from central European Russia to the Caucasus and other distant areas. It was as a result of the policies of the Russian government that the Dukhobory and certain other sects — helped, incidentally, by Leo Tolstoy — began to emigrate in large numbers to Canada and the United States. The state also confiscated the estates and charity funds of the Armenian Church and harassed other denominations in numerous ways. The position of the Jews too underwent further deterioration. Additional restrictions on them included a prohibition from acquiring real estate anywhere in the empire except in the cities and settlements of the Jewish Pale, while new pogroms erupted in southwest Russia, including the horrible one in Kishinev in 1903.

But the case of Finland represented in many respects the most telling instance of the folly of Russification. As an autonomous grand duchy from the time it was won from Sweden in 1809, Finland received more rights from the Russian emperor, who became the Grand Duke of Finland, than it had had under Swedish rule, and remained a perfectly loyal, as well as a relatively prosperous and happy, part of the state until the very end of the nineteenth century and the introduction of a policy of Russification. Finnish soldiers helped suppress the Poles, and in general the Finns participated actively and fruitfully in almost every aspect of the life of the empire. Yet the new nationalism demanded that they too be Russified. While some preliminary measures in that direction had been enacted as early as in the reign of Alexander III, real Russification began with the appointment of General Nicholas Bobrikov as governor-general of Finland and of Pilev as state secretary for Finnish affairs in 1899. Russian authorities argued that Finland could remain different from Russia only so far as local matters were concerned, while it had to accept the general system in what pertained to the entire state. With that end in view, a manifesto concerning laws common to Finland and Russia and a new statute dealing with the military service of the Finns were published in 1899. Almost overnight Finland became bitterly hostile to Russia, and a strong though passive resistance developed: new laws were ignored, draftees failed to show up, and so on. In 1901 freedom of meetings was abrogated in Finland. In 1902 Governor-General Bobrikov received the right to dismiss Finnish officials and judges and to replace them with
Russians. In 1903 he was vested with extraordinary powers to protect state security and public order, which represented a definitive extension of the “Temporary Regulations” of 1881 to Finland. In 1904 Bobrikov was assassinated. The following year the opposition in Finland became part of the revolution that spread throughout the empire.

**Witte and the Ministry of Finance**

However, under Nicholas II, as in the reign of Alexander III, the Ministry of Finance pursued a more intelligent and far-sighted policy than did the rest of the government; and this affected many aspects of the Russian economy and life. The minister, Sergei Witte, was an economic planner and manager of the type common in recent times in the govern-ments of western Europe and the United States, but exceedingly rare in the high officialdom of imperial Russia. Witte devoted his remarkable energy and ability especially to the stabilization of finance, the promotion of heavy industry, and the building of railroads. In 1897, after accumulating a sufficient gold reserve, he established a gold standard in Russia, a measure which did much to add stability and prestige to Russian economic development, and in particular to attract foreign capital. Witte encouraged heavy industry by virtually every means at his command, including govern-ment orders, liberal credits, unceasing efforts to obtain investments from abroad, tariff regulations, and improved transportation. As to railroads, the minister, who had risen to prominence as a railroad official, always retained a great interest in them: the Russian railroad network doubled in mileage between 1895 and 1905, and the additions included the enormous Trans-Siberian line, built between 1891 and 1903 — except for a section around Lake Baikal completed later — the importance of which for Siberia can be compared to the importance of the Canadian Pacific Railroad for Canada. Witte’s activities, as we shall see presently, affected foreign policy as well as domestic affairs.

**Russian Foreign Policy after the Congress of Berlin**

Russian foreign policy had been undergoing important changes in the decades that followed the Congress of Berlin. The most significant developments were the final rupture with Austria-Hungary and Germany and the alliance with France. Although the Three Emperors’ League had founded in the Balkan crisis, a new Alliance of the Three Emperors was concluded in June 1881 for three years and renewed in 1884 for another three years. Its most essential provision declared that if one of the contracting powers — Germany, Austria-Hungary, or Russia — engaged in war with a fourth power, except Turkey, the other two were to maintain friendly neutrality.

But, because of their conflicting interests in the Balkans, it proved impos-sible for Russia and Austria-Hungary to stay in the same alliance. The next major crisis occurred over Bulgaria where — as Charles Jelavich and other specialists have demonstrated — Russia destroyed a great amount of popularity and goodwill by an overbearing and stupid policy. The Russian quarrel with the Bulgarian ruler, Alexander of Battenberg, and the Russian refusal to sanction the unification of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia in 1885 failed to stop the unification but resulted in the abdication of Alexander of Battenberg and the election by the Bulgarian Assembly of the pro-Austrian Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg to the Bulgarian throne. Bulgaria abandoned the Russian sphere of influence and entered the Austrian, leaving the empire of the tsars virtually without Balkan allies. At the same time tension in relations between Russia and Austria-Hungary increased almost to the breaking point. However, Germany, by contrast with Austria-Hungary and despite the fact that in 1879 it had become a close partner of the Habsburg state, tried at first to retain the Russian connection. Thus when the Alliance of the Three Emperors expired in 1887, Germany and Russia concluded in secret the so-called Reinsurance Treaty, Bismarck’s “wire to St. Petersburg” and a veritable tour de force of diplomacy: each party was to remain neutral in case the other fought a war, with the exception of an aggressive war of Germany against France or of Russia against Austria-Hungary — the exception making it barely pos-sible for Germany to square the Reinsurance Treaty with its obligations to Austria-Hungary. Nevertheless, following Bismarck’s forced resignation in 1890, Germany discontinued the Reinsurance Treaty and thus severed its connection with Russia.

The Russian rupture with the Germanic powers and the general isolation of Russia appeared all the more ominous because of Anglo-Russian tension over the expansion of the Russian Empire in Central Asia, which, the British felt, threatened India. That tension attained its high point in 1885 when the Russians, having reached as far south as the vague Afghan border, clashed with the soldiers of the amir. Although an Anglo-Russian war was avoided and the boundary settled by compromise, Great Britain and Russia remained hostile to each other well past the turn of the century as they competed for influence and control in vast lands south of Russia, especially in Iran.

Political realities pointed to a Franco-Russian alliance — Bismarck’s nightmare and the reason behind the Reinsurance Treaty — for France was as isolated as Russia and more threatened. Alexander III, his cautious foreign minister Nicholas Giers, and other tourist high officials reached that conclusion reluctantly, because they had no liking for the Third Republic and no confidence in it, and because the traditional German orientation in Russian foreign policy died hard. Yet France remained the only possible
partner, and it had much to offer. In particular, Paris alone provided a great market for Russian state loans—the Berlin financial market, it might be added, was closed to Russia in 1887—and thus the main source of foreign financial support much needed by the imperial government. In fact, Frenchmen proved remarkably eager to subscribe to these loans as well as to invest directly in the Russian economy. Economics thus joined politics, although it would be fair to say that politics led the way. The alliance was consolidated in several stages, beginning with the diplomatic understanding of 1891 and ending with the military convention of December 1893–January 1894. B. Nolde, Langer, and other scholars have indicated how through the drawn-out negotiations the French pressed for an ever firmer and more binding agreement, gradually forcing the hand of the hesitant Russians. In its final form the alliance provided that if France were attacked by Germany, or by Italy supported by Germany, Russia would employ all available forces against Germany; and if Russia were attacked by Germany, or by Austria-Hungary supported by Germany, France would employ all available forces against Germany. Additional articles dealt with mobilization, the number of troops to be contributed, and other specific military plans. The Franco-Russian agreement was to remain in force for the duration of the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy.

Nicholas II approved Alexander III’s foreign policy on the whole and wanted to continue it. However, as we shall see, the new emperor proved to be less steady and more erratic than his father in international relations as in domestic affairs. Also, while Alexander III relied on the careful and experienced Giers throughout his rule, Nicholas II had several foreign ministers whose differences and personal preferences affected imperial diplomacy. In addition, the reign of the last tsar witnessed more than its share of court cliques and cabals which on occasion exercised a strong and at the same time irresponsible influence on the conduct of Russian foreign policy.

Nicholas II appeared prominently on the international scene in 1899, when he called together the first Hague Peace Conference attended by representatives of twenty-six states. Although instigated by Russian financial stringency and in particular by the difficulty of keeping up with Austrian armaments, this initiative was in accord with the emperor’s generally peaceful views. While the Conference failed to agree on disarmament or compulsory arbitration of disputes, it did pass certain “laws of war”—later often disregarded in practice, as in the case of the temporary injunction against the use of “projectiles thrown from balloons”—and set up a permanent court of arbitration, the International Court of Justice at the Hague. More important, it became the first of a long series of international conferences on disarmament and peace, on which the hopes of mankind ride today. The Second Hague Peace Conference, in 1907, was also attended by Russian representatives, but again it could not reach agreement on the major issues under discussion.

The Russo-Japanese War
Nicholas II’s own policy, however, did not always contribute to peace. Aggressiveness and adventurous involvement characterized Russian behavior in the Far East around the turn of the century, which culminated in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–5. The construction of the Trans-Siberian railroad between 1891 and 1903, entirely justified in terms of the needs of Siberia, served also to link Russia to Manchuria, China, Korea, and even, indirectly, to Japan. Japan had just gone through a remarkable modernization and in 1894–95 it fought and defeated China, obtaining by the Treaty of Shimonoseki the Chinese territories of Formosa, the Pescadores Islands, and the Liaotung Peninsula, together with other gains, including the recognition of full independence for Korea. Before Japan could profit from the Liaotung Peninsula, Russia, France, and Germany forced her to give it up. Next Russia concluded a secret agreement with China, whereby in return for guaranteeing Chinese territory against outside aggression, it obtained the right to construct a railroad through Manchuria to the coast. Although the new railroad, the East China Railway, belonged nominally to a private company with a large Chinese participation, it marked in effect the establishment of a Russian sphere of influence in northern Manchuria, an influence centered in Harbin and extending along railroad tracks and properties guarded by a special Russian railroad guard.

While Russia had legitimate commercial and other interests in Asia—for one thing, selling the products of its factories in the East when they could not compete in the West—and while up to that point Russian imperialism in the Far East had limited itself to peaceful penetration, the situation became increasingly tense. Moreover, Russia responded to new opportunities more and more aggressively. Thus, when the murder of two German missionaries in November 1897 led to the German acquisition of Kiao-chow through a ninety-nine-year lease, Nicholas II demanded and obtained a twenty-five-year lease of the southern part of the Liaotung Peninsula with Port Arthur—in spite of Witte’s opposition to that move and in flagrant disregard of the Russian treaty with China. Witte in turn proceeded to make the most of the situation and rapidly develop Russian interests in southern Manchuria. Following the so-called Boxer rebellion of the exasperated Chinese against foreigners in 1900–1901, which Russian forces helped to suppress, turist troops remained in Manchuria on the pretext that local conditions represented a threat to the railroad. In addition, a group of adventurers with strong connections at the Russian court began to promote a scheme of timber concessions on the Yalu River meant to serve
as a vehicle for Russian penetration into Korea. Witte, who objected energetically to the dangerous new scheme, had to leave the Ministry of Finance; the Foreign Office failed to restrain or control Russian policy in the Far East, and Nicholas II himself sided cheerfully with the adventurers, apparently because he believed in some sort of Russian mission in Asia and, in common with almost everyone else, grossly underestimated Japan. Russian policy could hardly be defended in terms of either justice or wisdom, in spite of the efforts of such able scholars as Malozemoff.

Japan proved to be the more skillful aggressor. Offering partition, which would give the Russians northern Manchuria and the Japanese southern Manchuria and Korea, the Japanese gauged the futility of negotiating, chose their time well, and on February 8, 1904, attacked successfully the unsuspecting Russian fleet in the outer harbor of Port Arthur — thus accomplishing the original Pearl Harbor. What followed turned out to be a humiliating war for the Russians. The Russian colossus suffered defeat after defeat from the Japanese pigmy. This outcome, so surprising at the time, resulted from ample causes: Japan was ready, well-organized, and in effect more modern than Russia, while Russia was unprepared, disorganized, troubled at home, and handicapped by a lack of popular support and even by some defection; Japan enjoyed an alliance with Great Britain and the favor of world public opinion, Russia found itself diplomatically isolated; Japan used short lines of communication, Russian forces had to rely on the enormously long single-track Trans-Siberian railroad, with the section around Lake Baikal still unfinished. In any case, although Russian soldiers and sailors fought with their usual courage and tenacity, the Japanese destroyed the Russian navy in the Far East, besieged and eventually captured Port Arthur, and gradually, in spite of bitter engagements near Mukden and elsewhere, pushed the main Russian army north in Manchuria. Finally, on May 27–29, 1905, in the battle of Tsushima Strait, they annihilated Admiral Zinovii Rozhestvensky's antique fleet which had been sent to the Far East all the way from the Baltic. That fleet, it might be added, had caused a serious international incident when on its journey to the Far East it had fired by mistake at some English fishing vessels on the Dogger Bank, inflicting casualties.

An armistice followed soon after Tsushima. The Russians had suffered numerous defeats, and the government had to cope with revolutionary unrest at home. The Japanese had exhausted their finances and, despite their victories, could not destroy the main Russian army or force a conclusion. In response to a secret Japanese request, President Theodore Roosevelt arranged a peace conference at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in August 1905. The provisions of the Treaty of Portsmouth reflected the skilful diplomacy of Witte, who headed the Russian delegation, and represented, everything considered, a rather satisfactory settlement for Russia: Russia acknowledged a paramount Japanese interest in Korea and ceded to Japan its lease of the Liaotung Peninsula, the southern part of the railroad up to Chang-chun, and the half of the island of Sakhalin south of the fiftieth degree of latitude; both countries agreed to restore Manchuria to China; in spite of strong Japanese insistence, there was no indemnity.

The Russian government ended the war against Japan none too soon, for, as fighting ceased, the country was already in the grip of what came to be known as the Revolution of 1905.