

## Optimised Study Guide — Russia in 1914: Conditions & Significant Ideas

Optimised, exam-focused study guide for Russia in 1914: conditions and significant ideas (Unit 3, Elective 2, Component C01-U3E2). Built from analysis of the 2020–2025 SCSA Modern History ATAR exams, ratified marking keys and the question-words glossary. Leads with how this content is examined (essay propositions on the Tsar/autocracy and February Revolution causation; source-set context), then the detailed knowledge, the significant ideas (autocracy v. communism), historiographical perspectives, recurring question patterns with marking-key expectations, and a recall self-test.

Russia in 1914 is rarely examined as a topic in its own right. Instead it is the **foundation** for the highest-value questions in this elective: essays on why the February Revolution happened, and on whether Tsarism was doomed. Master this content as the "before" picture you will weigh against the pressures of war and 1917 — and you arm yourself for the questions examiners ask most.

**The single most important marking-key warning for this topic.** In the 2020 paper, candidates answering on the February Revolution were explicitly told: *"Candidates should not revert to a 'pre-conditions' essay that focuses heavily on events before 1914."* Know the 1914 situation thoroughly — but in an essay, deploy it as analytical context, not as narrative padding. Brief reference to the pre-war setting is fine; a chronicle of Bloody Sunday and 1905 is not what earns marks.

### How this content is examined

Across the 2020–2025 papers, "Russia and the Soviet Union 1914–45" is **Set 2 / Elective 2**, and appears in every section of the exam:

- **Section One — Source analysis (25% to 2024, 20% in 2025).** One multi-part question on a set of sources. Your knowledge of 1914 conditions supplies the *context* markers reward (the political system, social tensions and ideas a source emerged from). Typical parts: identify origin and message; outline context and account for purpose; compare and contrast messages/purposes; evaluate reliability and usefulness.
- **Sections Two & Three — Essays (25 marks each, 30 in 2025).** This is where 1914 content pays off directly. The 2020 essay asked candidates to *"Evaluate the proposition that the autocratic rule of the Tsar after 1914 was the most important factor in bringing about the February Revolution of 1917."* To answer it you must be able to assess the strengths and fatal weaknesses of the autocratic system established before the war.

**Command words decide your marks.** The marking keys repeatedly reward students who do exactly what the verb demands. For this topic the recurring verbs are:

- **Evaluate** — make a judgement of value/quality; for top marks, weigh the counter-argument *before* concluding.
- **Analyse** — identify components and the relationships between them; draw out implications (not just describe).
- **"To what extent" / Assess** — reach a measured judgement on how far a claim holds, acknowledging what it explains *and* what it leaves out.
- **Explain** — relate cause and effect; make relationships evident (why and how).

## 1. The economic context

By 1914 Russia was a paradox: a great power that was economically backward relative to Western Europe. Understanding this tension is essential, because it explains both the regime's drive to modernise and the social strains that modernisation produced.

- **Agrarian backwardness.** Around 80% of the population were peasants, many farming with pre-modern methods. Land hunger persisted despite Stolypin's reforms, and the [mir](#) (village commune) constrained individual enterprise.
- **State-driven industrialisation.** Under finance ministers Witte (1890s) and others, Russia industrialised rapidly but unevenly, funded by foreign loans (especially French) and grain exports. Heavy industry, railways (the Trans-Siberian) and an urban proletariat grew quickly — but were concentrated in a few cities (St Petersburg, Moscow).
- **Consequence:** a small but militant urban working class, packed into poor conditions, became a concentrated source of unrest disproportionate to its size.

## 2. The political context — autocracy and its machinery

Russia was an [autocracy](#): Tsar Nicholas II held, in principle, unlimited power, ruling by divine right and answerable to no parliament. The system's instruments mattered as much as the principle:

- **The Tsar and bureaucracy.** A vast, inefficient bureaucracy administered the empire. Nicholas II was conscientious but politically rigid, committed to preserving the autocracy he had inherited.
- **The Okhrana** — the secret police — surveilled, infiltrated and repressed political opposition, driving revolutionary parties underground or into exile.
- **The Russian Orthodox Church** sanctified the autocracy, teaching obedience to the "Little Father" Tsar and binding throne to altar.
- **The Dumas.** Forced by the 1905 Revolution to concede an elected assembly, Nicholas neutered it: the Fundamental Laws (1906) reasserted autocratic power, and successive Dumas were dissolved or had their franchise rigged. The result was the *appearance* of reform without its substance — a grievance in itself.

- **The empire.** Russia was a multi-national empire; Russification policies alienated national minorities (Poles, Finns, Jews, Ukrainians and others), adding nationalist discontent to class discontent.

### 3. The social context and growing discontent

Russian society was steeply stratified, and the gaps between groups were widening:

- **The peasantry** — the vast majority — wanted land and resented redemption payments and the commune.
- **The urban proletariat** — small but growing — endured long hours, low pay and dangerous factories; their concentration made them organisable.
- **The middle classes** (professionals, industrialists) wanted political voice and constitutional government.
- **The nobility and landed elite** were the regime's traditional base — but even their loyalty would later fray.

The key analytical point: by 1914 the autocracy had alienated, to varying degrees, almost every social group, while satisfying the deep demands of none.

### 4. Rising political opposition

Repression pushed opposition underground but did not extinguish it. Know the main groupings and what distinguished them:

- **Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs)** — rooted in the peasantry; favoured land socialisation; had a terrorist wing.
- **Social Democrats (Marxists)** — split in 1903 into **Bolsheviks** (Lenin: a tight, disciplined vanguard party) and **Mensheviks** (a broader, more gradualist party). This split is worth knowing precisely, as it shapes the whole elective.
- **Liberals** — the **Kadets** (constitutional democrats, wanting a Western-style constitutional monarchy/republic) and the more moderate **Octobrists** (satisfied by the 1905 October Manifesto).

### 5. The significant ideas: autocracy v. communism

The syllabus names two "significant ideas" for this period. Be able to define and deploy both:

- **Autocracy** — government in which one ruler holds absolute, unchecked power, here legitimised by divine right and Orthodox teaching. The ideology the Tsarist state sought to preserve.
- **Communism / Marxism** — the revolutionary alternative. The marking keys expect students who invoke Marxism to define its core ideas: the abolition of capitalism, the triumph of the *proletariat* over the *bourgeoisie*, collective ownership, and equality. Russian Marxists adapted these ideas to a largely peasant society — a tension that runs through the entire elective.

**Why "significant ideas" matter for marks.** A 2021 essay asked candidates to evaluate whether "the ideas of Marxism were never truly implemented in Russia 1917–1945." The marking key rewarded those who first *defined* Marxism's key ideas and then traced them across the period. Your grasp of these ideas in their 1914 form is the baseline for that kind of long-range argument.

## 6. Historical perspectives

Examiners reward awareness that historians disagree. On Russia in 1914, the central debate is the "**optimist v. pessimist**" question:

- **Pessimists** argue Tsarism was structurally doomed — its refusal to genuinely reform, its alienation of every class, and the contradictions of state-led industrialisation made collapse only a matter of time.
- **Optimists** argue Russia was evolving and might have stabilised as a constitutional, industrialising state had the First World War not intervened — making the war the contingent trigger rather than 1914 conditions the deep cause.

This debate is exactly the axis of the 2020 essay (autocracy as deep cause v. wartime/short-term factors), so rehearse both sides.

## 7. Recurring exam question patterns & what high answers do

Drawing the past papers and marking keys together, the predictable demands on this content are:

- **"Evaluate the proposition that [the Tsar's autocracy / a named factor] was the most important factor in the February Revolution."** High answers: assess the Tsar's actions and the system's weaknesses, then weigh short-term and wartime factors as a counter-argument, then judge. They do *not* drift into a pre-1914 narrative.
- **"To what extent was Tsarism able to reform / survive?"** High answers: balance the concessions (Dumas, Stolypin) against the regime's refusal to surrender real power, reaching a measured verdict.
- **Source context (Section One).** High answers: use precise knowledge of the 1914 political system, social tensions and ideologies to explain a source's origin, purpose and reliability — not vague background.

**Recall self-test.** Before moving on, can you:

- Define **autocracy** and name the four pillars that upheld it (Tsar/bureaucracy, Okhrana, Orthodox Church, the rigged Dumas)?
- Explain the paradox of Russia's economy — a great power that was agriculturally backward yet rapidly industrialising — and why that bred unrest?
- Describe each major social group and the specific grievance the autocracy failed to satisfy?
- Distinguish SRs, Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Kadets and Octobrists in one sentence each?
- State the core ideas of Marxism (anti-capitalism, proletariat v. bourgeoisie, collective ownership, equality) and why they sat awkwardly in peasant Russia?
- Argue **both** the "optimist" and "pessimist" cases on whether Tsarism was doomed by 1914?
- Explain why an essay on the February Revolution must *not* become a pre-1914 narrative?