

---

## Russia 1861-1915

---

# A Continental League for Eurasian development

by William Jones

To the casual observer of the international political scene around 1870, the close relations then existing between autocratic Russia and the American Republic might seem something of a conundrum. On closer examination, however, one could detect amazing similarities between these two very disparate nations. In 1861, Czar Alexander II liberated the serfs of Russia, affecting the status of 52 million peasants, 20 million of them serfs. In 1863, President Abraham Lincoln, with the Emancipation Proclamation, liberated 4 million slaves in the United States. During the U. S. Civil War, Czar Alexander sent a Russian fleet to the United States as a warning to the British that were they to enter the war on the side of the Confederacy, so would Russia enter on the side of the Union. The sealed orders that the fleet commander had received specified that in the case of a declaration of war, he was to "commence hostile action against the commerce of the enemy." In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Russia, like the United States, also began a policy of expansion toward its Pacific Ocean border and settlement of its own Wild West, in the vast Siberian expanses. This move would also involve, as was the case with the United States, the construction of a transcontinental railroad from western Russia to the Pacific.

With the decree of 1861 liberating the serfs, Russia took the first tentative steps on the road to economic and political reform. From that moment on, a grouping in Russia that can best be characterized as a "national party" was intent on bringing the autocratic and economically backward Russia into the modern industrial world.

### **Sergei Witte, finance minister of Russia (1892-1903)**

From 1892, the prime architect of that development policy was Sergei Yulevich Witte, who for 11 years until his dismissal in 1903, would serve as Russia's finance minister. During the Witte years, the Russian economy would experience a more rapid rate of growth than it had ever experienced. An unusual figure, Witte was a member of the lower nobility, born in Tbilisi, in present-day Georgia in the Caucasus. One

of Witte's fondest childhood memories was how the telegraph first came to his hometown.

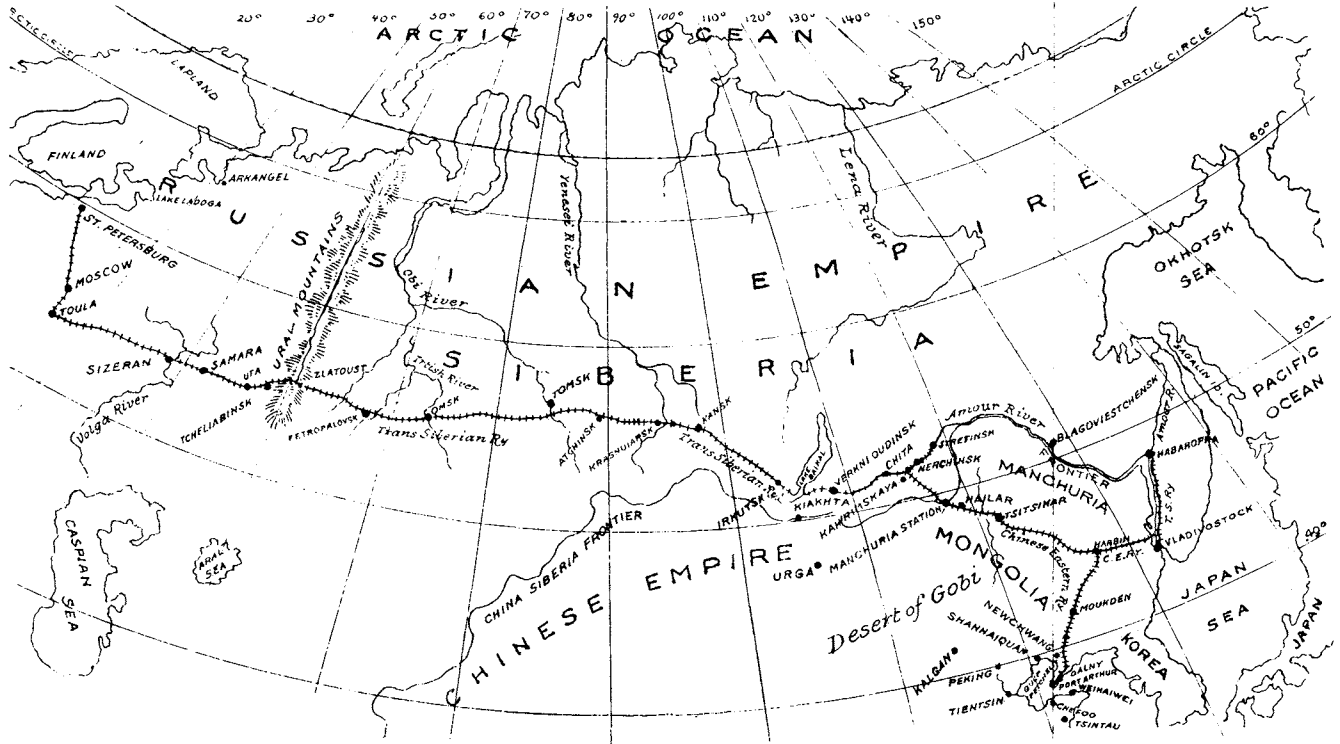
During the Russo-Turkish War, Witte was the sole manager of the Odessa Railway over which all traffic to the front passed. In 1886, Witte moved to Kiev where he became the executive director of the Southwestern Railway, serving western Ukraine and Poland from the Baltic to the Black Sea, with links into Germany and Austria. During his time in Kiev, Witte became a member of the Baranov Commission, which was set up by the czar to formulate government policy on railroad affairs. As a member of the commission, Witte authored a railroad charter, which became the basis for the regulation of railroads throughout Russia. In 1892, Witte was appointed Minister of Ways and Communications, from which post he, at the behest of Czar Alexander III, set up a Siberian Railroad Committee to investigate the possibility of building a railroad to the Pacific. When he became finance minister in October 1892, Witte had the means of realizing that program.

Witte reformed the entire state of Russian finances, stabilizing the widely fluctuating ruble by pegging it to gold. He also converted high-interest domestic loans into low-interest loans taken out abroad. Although Russia would have to borrow heavily during the coming 10 years in order to finance the massive railroad construction, the annual debt service grew only slightly. Witte also used his broad financial powers to move aggressively against any speculative operations on the financial markets against the ruble.

Witte transformed the Finance Ministry into a regular chancellery of the realm, with extensive intelligence networks in all the major political and financial capitals of the world. His aim was to transform Russia from a backward peasant country into a major industrial power. As he expressed it in his annual report to the czar in 1899: "We must give the country such industrial perfection as has been reached by the United States of America, which firmly bases its prosperity on two pillars—agriculture and industry." It was the development of that second pillar—industry, which the predominantly agricultural Russia so sorely needed—that Witte's finance policy was aimed at facilitating.

FIGURE 1

**Route of the Trans-Siberian and Chinese Eastern railways**



**The Witte-Mendeleyev partnership**

In realizing this goal, Witte had some extremely able assistance from the renowned Russian chemist, Dmitri Ivanovich Mendeleyev, better known to all students of chemistry as the discoverer of the Periodic Table.

Mendeleyev had already been appointed director of the Bureau of Weights and Standards by Witte's predecessor as finance minister, Ivan Vyshnegradsky, from which post Mendeleyev introduced the metric system into Russia, thus bringing the Russian system up to international standards. In 1899, Mendeleyev, on behalf of the Ministry of Finance, led a group of scientists through the Ural Mountains to examine the mineral deposits available there, on the basis of which Russia could develop its own iron industry, a prerequisite for railroad building. On his trip, Mendeleyev reports: "When I traveled through the region and saw its wealth of iron, timber, and coal not only with my own eyes but through those of my three travelling companions, I was convinced, in a way that surprised me, that when we have carried out a few not very costly measures which, in any case, will be quite profitable to the state, the Urals will provide Europe and Asia with huge quantities of iron and steel at a production cost which would be quite inconceivable in western Europe." In 1900, Mendeleyev, on behalf of the Finance Ministry, would help organize the Russian section of the Paris Industrial Exhibit.

Mendeleyev and Witte were both followers of the economic theories of German-American economist Friedrich List, a strong proponent of a system of protective tariffs for industrially backward countries, under which they would be able to develop their infant industries safe from the influx of cheaper products from more developed nations. Already in the early 1890s, Witte had written a brochure "On the Question of Nationalism—National Economy and Friedrich List," introducing his own program of utilizing the protectionist system to realize Russia's industrial potential. Witte's brochure helped introduce the work of List to a broader intellectual circle of Russians. The "free market" theories of British intelligence agent Adam Smith, touted so loudly these days by the proponents of Newt Gingrich's Conservative Revolution, were specifically developed by Smith in the late 1700s in order to bamboozle the young American Republic into remaining a mere producer of agricultural goods. Fortunately for us, Alexander Hamilton, the first treasury secretary, didn't fall for these British tricks. Nor did Witte. As he wrote in his *Lectures on National Economy and State Finance* in 1912, "Such a conception [free trade doctrine] is much too one-sided, and disregards the significance of international trade; its implementation, without taking into consideration the level of industrial development of the country in question, can totally paralyze the productive forces of a country and

TABLE 1

**Miles of railroad opened each year in Russia, 1890-1900**

1890	424.8
1891	78.2
1892	324.7
1893	1,120.6
1894	1,402.9
1895	1,255.8
1896	1,505.6
1897	1,586.5
1898	1,898.6
1899	3,109.3
1900	2,934.7

inflict great unhappiness on its people; its introduction in all countries of the world would lead to the suppression of the industrially weak countries by the strong.”

In 1894, the Ministry of Finance also took charge of all commercial and technical schools in Russia, opening up over 100 new schools during the following decade, including the prestigious St. Petersburg Polytechnical Institute, which Witte took special pride in.

In 1891, Russia, under Czar Alexander III, the son of the Czar-Liberator who had been assassinated in 1881, had made important moves toward establishing new relations with republican France, thus opening up the French capital markets for Russian loans. In 1894, this relationship would provide the basis for the important collaboration between Witte and French Foreign Minister Gabriel Hanotaux, which would represent perhaps the greatest impetus to global economic development (and the greatest challenge to the British colonial empire) during that entire century. The collaboration also provided Witte with access to the necessary funding to begin his great railroad construction program.

For Witte, the most important educational program was that provided by a flourishing industry. “With the first investment in industry,” Witte said, “the powerful stimulus of personal interest calls forth such curiosity and love of learning as to make an illiterate peasant into a railway builder, a bold and progressive organizer of industry, and a versatile financier.”

### Witte's Trans-Siberian Railroad

The Trans-Siberian Railroad (Figure 1) would become the longest railroad in the world, and remains so today, stretching over 5,800 miles from Moscow to Vladivostok on the Pacific coast of Siberia, the most remarkable part of an extensive Russian network built during this period.

For Witte, as for Friedrich List, railroads were much more than merely a means of transportation. As Witte himself would later write, the railroad “exerts a civilizing influence, as a theoretical and practical school, where it does not so

much adjust itself to the local conditions, but rather, where the local conditions adjust themselves to the needs of the railroad. The railroad is, as it were, a seed-bed which produces a cultural flowering within the population, and even if it meets on its route an absolutely barbarous people, it will in short time raise them to the necessary level of culture.” For Russia this was a crying necessity, as the level of culture for the broad masses of people was absolutely abysmal.

And the railroad was built. Prior to the decade shown in Table 1, between 1879 and 1892, some 5,466 miles of new rail lines had been opened up. In contrast to that, between 1892 and 1901, some 14,814 miles of new rail lines were constructed, nearly triple the earlier amount. This was a more rapid rate of railroad construction than any other country except the United States had ever experienced.

But the Trans-Siberian was more than simply a quick means of travel through the vast Siberian spaces. It was what Lyndon LaRouche would characterize as a “land bridge” to Asia. Traveling from London to Shanghai during that period would take a traveler 34 to 36 days by ship at a cost of 450 rubles for a second-class ticket. When the Trans-Siberian was completed, the same traveler could arrive in Shanghai in 16 days at a cost of 200 rubles for a second-class ticket. When train speed on the Trans-Siberian was brought up to the speeds current at the time on European railroads, the travel time would be reduced to 10 days.

With the construction of the Trans-Siberian, the vast spaces in Siberia now became available for habitation. The transport of people and goods in the area increased by leaps and bounds in a very short period of time. Between 1896 and 1898 (the track still not being completed), the amount of goods transported grew from 208,000 to 738,000 tons and the number of people transported grew from 175,000 to 208,000. (Over 70,000 tons of grain were then being exported from Siberia compared to 10,000 tons in 1893.) It was the clear policy of the government to encourage colonization to the east. Free land was offered to those who wished to settle there, and grants of money were given them for traveling expenses. Medical and feeding stations were set up by the government to care for the migrant along the way. Between 100,000 and 200,000 people migrated each year. By 1902, over 900,000 settlers had moved to Siberia.

The construction of the railroad also engendered a tremendous upswing in industrial production. Between 1892 and 1902, coal production in Russia more than doubled, production of pig iron tripled, and the production of cast iron and steel increased two and a half times.

The strategic shift created by this infrastructural development in relations with the Far East and, in particular, with the two major powers there, China and Japan, was obvious to all, not least of all to the nervous British, who, as a major maritime power, had achieved a veritable monopoly over the China trade, including the very lucrative tea trade. “The global significance of the Siberian road can no longer be

denied by anyone,” Witte wrote in 1902. “It is likewise acknowledged both at home and abroad. Joining Europe and Asia by a continuous rail connection, that road becomes a global means of transit on which the exchange of goods between West and East will have to flow. China, Japan and Korea, with a population of a half a billion people, and already with a turnover in international trade of more than 600 billion rubles in value, will, with this great steam-propelled transit system producing more rapid and cheaper communication and exchange of goods, enter into closer relations with Europe, a market with a developed manufacturing culture, and thereby create a greater demand there for the raw materials of the East. Thanks to the Siberian road, these countries will also increase their demand for European manufactures, and European know-how and capital will find for itself an extensive new field of employment for the exploration and development of the natural riches of the eastern nations.” Noting how Great Britain, the middle-man in the China tea trade, was doing a disservice to the Chinese by shifting its tea import to Europe away from China to the advantage of its own imperial subjects, India and Ceylon, Witte commented that the Siberian railroad “can be of great assistance to the Chinese tea industry, in removing China’s most dangerous competitor [Britain] from the position of middleman in the Chinese trade with European countries and in securing for Chinese teas much faster delivery to Europe.”

Understanding the full strategic impact of the Trans-Siberian land bridge for the entire area, Witte proposed that the final leg, instead of following the Russian border along the rather tortuous banks of the Amur River, should be drawn straight through Manchuria, then a part of the Chinese Empire. This would help to bring China into the increasing flux of international trade and development, which the railroad facilitated.

In 1895, in collaboration with French Foreign Minister Hanotaux, Witte brought together a coalition of Russia, Germany, and France, which prevented the Japanese seizure of the Liaotung Peninsula, an area which Japan had won as booty for its victory over the Chinese in the Sino-Japanese War of 1895. As a result of the show of unity, Japan agreed to renegotiate its treaty with China, renouncing any annexation of Chinese territory.

Witte and Hanotaux then set up, with French capital, a Russo-Chinese Bank to provide China with a major loan with which it could pay off its war indemnity to Japan, and thereby assuage ruffled Japanese feelings at the loss of the Liaotung Peninsula. Russia also signed a mutual defense treaty, by which they would come to China’s assistance if it were again attacked by Japan.

On the basis of the Chinese good-will thus engendered, the Russo-Chinese Bank was allowed to lease the territory necessary to build the Trans-Siberian Railroad through Manchuria. France was also able to sign a series of agreements promoting its commercial expansion in Indochina and in Chi-



*Russian Finance Minister Count Sergei Witte was the chief architect of a program to bring autocratic and backward Russia into the modern industrial age.*

na, in particular opening up China to increased trade over the Indochina border.

Witte established a private company, the Chinese Eastern Railroad, which would be responsible for building the Manchurian branch of the Trans-Siberian Railroad. The Russo-Chinese Bank also financed French railroad construction between Beijing and French Indochina, traversing the country with new rail lines.

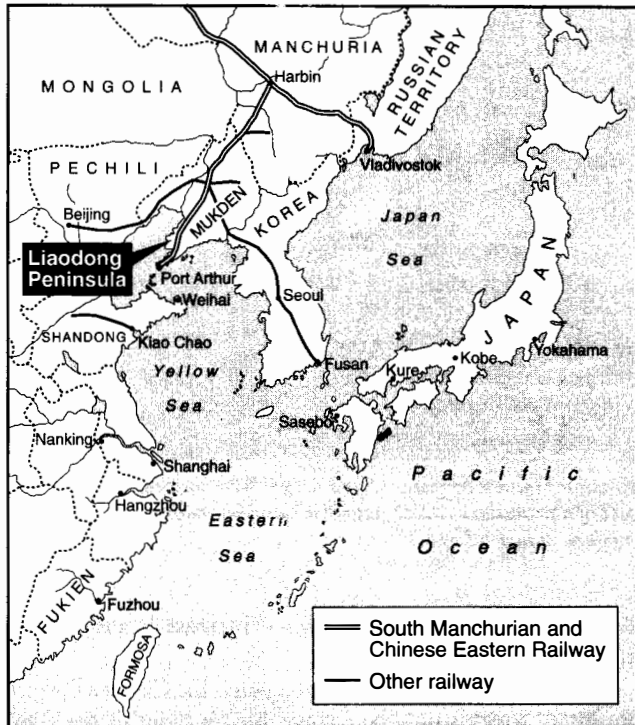
Regarding the second major Asian power, Japan, it was Witte’s hope to engage the Japanese in a treaty by which both nations would profit from the commercial benefits of the new rail access to European markets. To do this, Witte was even willing to sacrifice Russian commercial interests in Korea, acquired by Russia during the course of the Sino-Japanese War, in deference to Japanese interests in that nation. As he explained in a memo to the czar in 1903, “Foregoing to a certain degree Korea, we remove for a sufficiently long period, the object of continual quarrels with Japan, and out of an enemy, we transform her, if not into an ally, then into a neighbor, who will strive to preserve good relations with us for fear of again losing the territories she acquired with such difficulty.” (For Japan’s interests in the area, see **Figure 2.**)

### **A continental alliance**

But in order for Witte’s Far East policy to succeed, the situation in Europe had to remain stable. The first successful formation of what Witte called the Continental League had shown its capabilities in the measures that had prevented Japanese annexation of a part of China. During the following years, Witte’s primary goal would be to make that league a permanent fixture of the political landscape directed against

FIGURE 2

**Area of Russo-Japanese conflict, 1900-05**



the machinations of the real enemy, Great Britain. "Altogether our statesmen must realize the necessity of a central European bloc, consisting of Russia, Germany and France," Witte said. "That would be the bulwark of peace because nobody would be able to violate it." Least of all, the British.

In an appeal to Kaiser Wilhelm in 1897 to help him create such a league, Witte said, "In order to attain this . . . we must first make all haste toward the establishment of solid united relations between Russia, Germany, and France. Once these countries stand together in a firm and steady union, undoubtedly all the other countries on the continent of Europe will join this central union and thus form a union of the whole continent which will free Europe from the burden which she imposes on herself on account of reciprocal rivalry."

Continual vacillation by the czar, since 1894 the weak and almost morbidly self-conscious Nicholas II, as well as machinations on the part of a court coterie that wanted to annex both Manchuria and Korea, prevented a Russo-Japanese agreement from ever really getting off the ground. Instead, the Japanese fell into the trap set up for them by the conniving British monarch. In 1902, the Japanese signed a mutual defense treaty with Great Britain.

But Witte's Far East policy started to unravel long before the Japanese were caught in the British net. In 1897, Kaiser Wilhelm, then toying with the idea of an Anglo-German

rapprochement being dangled before him by British Prime Minister Joseph Chamberlain, and relying on a somewhat ambiguous consent extracted from the czar, sent his fleet to occupy the Chinese port of Kiaochow (Qingdao), a port which the Chinese had occasionally allowed the Russians to utilize as a winter port for the Russian Pacific fleet in connection with the defense pact the Chinese had with Russia.

To his horror, Witte understood that this foolhardy move would lead to the partition of China by the western powers. Witte immediately appealed to the kaiser to call off the operation, so as not to provoke similar actions on the part of Russia. The kaiser replied coolly that Witte simply didn't understand all the details of the reasoning behind the occupation of Kiaochow. Witte then proposed to his own government to "order our squadron to Kiaochow and direct it to stand by until Germany has left this port." This advice, however, did not gain much support from the Russian State Council. The British immediately followed the German example and occupied the Chinese port of Wei-hai-wei (Weihai). Russia, against Witte's strenuous objections, then occupied Port Arthur (Lushun). The French in turn occupied Hang Chow (Hangzhou) in the south. This blatant breach of China's sovereignty by all the western powers helped to foment Chinese xenophobia and provoked in 1900 the anti-foreigner movement known as the Boxer Rebellion.

The Boxer Rebellion led to the dispatch of troops to China by all western powers in order to put down the rebellion. Similarly, Russian troops poured into Manchuria. As the rebellion died down, Witte succeeded in working out a timetable to withdraw the Russian troops as soon as possible in accordance with agreements made with the Chinese government. But a court coterie around the czar convinced him that the troops had to stay. Because of his strenuous objections to the continued troop presence, which he knew would disrupt relations with China and possibly cause military conflict with Japan, Witte was dismissed by the czar.

As Witte had foreseen, with Russo-Chinese relations now strained almost to the breaking point, the Japanese, egged on by their new allies, the British, felt that the time was ripe to rid the area of Russian presence entirely. On Feb. 8, 1904, they therefore launched a surprise attack on the Russian base at Port Arthur. The Russo-Japanese War lasted for 11 months and ended in a massive defeat for Russia and the total destruction of the Russian fleet.

The Russo-Japanese War was a very bloody war; indeed, in many respects, the first modern war, foreshadowing the conflagration that would occur 10 years later on the European continent. Russia was no longer alone in being able to mobilize a million-man army. In the 1890s, Alfred Nobel had invented smokeless gunpowder. By 1900, the infantry of every army in Europe had weapons powerful enough to shatter a human tibia at ranges up to 4,500 meters. Infantrymen carried 20 times the ammunition, their rifles had 20 times the effective range, and they could be fired 20 times faster than

the weapons of their counterparts a half-century before.

After some serious defeats, Russia indicated that it was willing to seek a truce. Witte was again called from retirement to negotiate the treaty, under the rather duplicitous mediation of British stooge Theodore Roosevelt. Indeed, Witte thought that he was chosen for the job in order to bear the brunt of the opprobrium of a humiliating treaty. Returning from Portsmouth, New Hampshire after having negotiated a surprisingly favorable treaty with the Japanese, Witte was asked by the czar to first pay a visit to Kaiser Wilhelm at his hunting lodge in Germany. There Witte was told in broad outline about the recently signed Björkö agreement, the kaiser presenting it as a first step toward Witte's so heartily espoused Continental League. Thinking this was actually the case, Witte was overjoyed. The kaiser describes the scene: "The effect was like a thunderbolt; his eyes filled with tears and enthusiasm and emotion so overwhelmed him that he couldn't speak. Finally he cried. 'God be praised! Thank God! At last this infamous nightmare which weighs upon us disappears.' "

Returning to St. Petersburg and seeing the actual text of the treaty, Witte's enthusiasm subsided considerably. What he thought had been an entente between Russia and Germany turned out to be a regular mutual defense pact, heavily weighted on the side of Germany and in stark violation of the treaty Russia had signed with France 12 years before. At that point, it may have been the only war-avoidance measure then available, but Witte rejected it, hoping to change it in such a way as to have greater likelihood of bringing the French into an agreement. Witte even pleaded with the kaiser to ask the czar to appoint him ambassador to France where he hoped to use his own considerable influence to bring the French into a Continental League. But, instead, other tasks would be placed upon him.

### **Witte's adversaries: reactionaries and communists in the service of London**

The defeat in the Russo-Japanese War had rent the very fabric of Russian society. All the grievances against the autocratic regime were released in the wake of this humiliating defeat in the Far East, leading to revolutionary ferment throughout the country and a major polarization, in which Witte's opponents both on the right and the left attempted to destroy his accomplishments.

On the right there was his perennial nemesis, Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev, was the Ober-Procurator of the Holy Synod, the protector of the Orthodox faith, and teacher of both Czars Alexander III and Nicholas II. An Aristotelian to his very depths, Pobedonostsev believed that the strength of Russia lay in the Russian Orthodox Church and that the strength of the church was that it never changed. Pobedonostsev's task was to make sure that it never would. "The continuation of the regime depends upon our ability to keep Russia in a frozen state," Pobedonostsev said. "The slightest warm



*The famous Russian chemist Dmitri Mendeleev, discoverer of the Periodic Table, was a collaborator of Count Witte in his program to develop the resources and industry of Russia.*

breath of life would cause the whole thing to rot."

"Hostile to creative thinking," was Witte's caustic description of Pobedonostsev. When Witte introduced a bill on factory legislation which would hold the factory owners responsible for accidents or deaths of factory workers on the job, Pobedonostsev objected, and in the spirit of today's Conservative Revolution, declared the measure to be socialist in nature and therefore unacceptable.

Also on the right were the Union of the Russian People and the Black Hundreds, a paramilitary, reactionary, anti-Semitic organization which worked closely with the czarist secret police, the Okhrana. The Black Hundreds were involved in two assassination attempts against Witte when he was appointed prime minister in 1906, attempts which were never investigated by the czarist police.

Undoubtedly the most significant opponent of Witte was the Czarina Alexandra, the wife of Czar Nicholas. She had long resented Witte's assertiveness in formulating policy for Russia, considering it an affront to the dignity of her husband. She was also prone to mysticism and hysteria, with a particular fascination with the mystical cult of the swastika, a rather sinister cult which would later be transmitted to Germany by Russian émigrés in forms that are now well-known. Alexandra soon came under the psychosexual spell of an itinerant, perverse monk named Rasputin, who soon became her most important adviser, and, many claim, her lover. Because of his influence on the czarina, Rasputin's advice was often followed by the czar, even in military matters. The growing influence of Rasputin helped fuel the growing resentment for the Romanovs that became very intense during the course of the war, leading to their ultimate overthrow in 1917.

On the left there were the radicals, including the Bolsheviks. The failure of the 1905 Revolution to effectively establish a constitutional government in Russia laid the basis for the even greater upheaval in 1917, in which Bolshevik leaders Leon Trotsky and Vladimir Lenin would establish in Russia a brutal dictatorship that would last 75 years.

As the revolutionary cauldron bubbled, Witte, banished from his post by the czar, was again called back to rally the nation. "I'm sure the only man who can help you now and be useful is Witte," the czar's mother, Maria Feodorovna, wrote Nicholas. "He certainly is a man of genius, energetic, and clear-sighted." Far from sharing his mother's opinion of his former finance minister, the czar nevertheless reluctantly called again on Witte's services. In the midst of a general strike in St. Petersburg led by Trotsky and his friends, Witte explained that the czar either had to grant a constitution or he would have to institute a dictatorship. It was only on condition of the granting of a constitution, however, that Witte would agree to accept the presidency of the Council of Ministers offered to him by the czar.

Furthermore, there were no volunteers for the post of dictator. Even the old Slavophile, the czar's cousin Grand Duke Nicholas Nicholaievich, who would lead the Russian Army to a disaster in the First World War, when asked to become dictator, brandished the revolver in his holster and shouted, "If the emperor does not accept the Witte program, if he wants to force me to become dictator, I shall kill myself in his presence with this revolver. We must support Witte at all cost. It is necessary for the good of Russia." The czar finally gave in and agreed to grant a constitution. Witte was assigned to write the document.

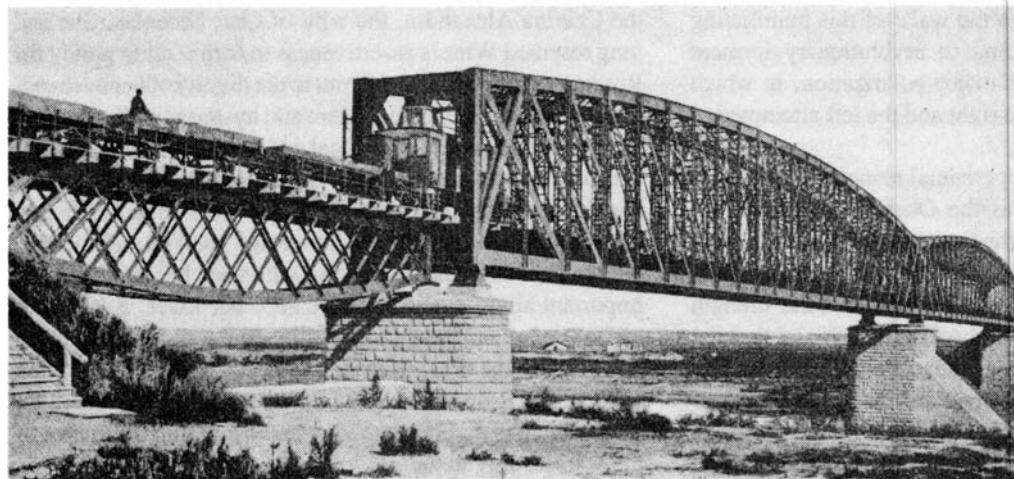
The October Manifesto, as it came to be called, became the fundamental law of the land—at least temporarily. In the manifesto, the czar pledged that he would grant civic freedom—inviolability of person and freedom of conscience, speech, assembly, and association—to his people. By the October Manifesto, the empire of the Romanovs became

a semi-constitutional monarchy, and Witte the first prime minister. Although limited in scope, the manifesto called for the formation of the first Duma (parliament), which was given important legislative and budgetary functions. The czar, however, remained in control of the Executive, the Armed Forces, and foreign policy. The czar could assemble or disband the Duma as he saw fit, but he could not abolish it. Witte also succeeded in forcing the retirement of the aging Pobedonostsev.

Agitation from the left and the right, both heavily financed from British coffers, kept the country on the verge of chaos in spite of Witte's measures. Witte himself would explain his own political position to friends, saying, "I am neither a liberal nor a conservative; I am simply a civilized man. I cannot send someone to Siberia simply because he doesn't think as I do, and I cannot take away his civil rights simply because he does not worship God in the same church as I." His detractors, however, would accuse him of being at the center of a Jewish-masonic conspiracy aimed at destroying the Russian state, an accusation that the czar ultimately came to believe.

"With his trickster's simple-mindedness," Trotsky said of Witte, "he hoped that the revolution would immediately capitulate before his liberalism." When Nicholas appealed to Edward VII to stop a British parliamentary delegation from coming to give moral support to the radicals, he got no help. Nicholas lamented to his mother, "Uncle Bertie [Edward VII] informed us that they were very sorry but were unable to take action against their government." Uncle Bertie knew that the chaos he fomented in Russia would eliminate it as a European power and drive a desperate Nicholas into his waiting arms.

But the czar was not really prepared to allow autocratic rule to be called into question by any constitution. Nicholas called the period of Witte's prime ministership "my nightmare." But the nightmare for the czar was only beginning. In January 1906, the czar dismissed Witte as prime minister.



*The West Siberian Railway crosses a bridge over the Ishim River. The Trans-Siberian Railroad is today the longest railroad in the world. "The global significance of the Siberian road can no longer be denied by anyone," wrote Count Witte.*

“As long as I live, I will never trust that man again with the smallest thing,” Nicholas said. Witte would meet the czar only twice more in the nine years he had left to live.

During this period of revolutionary upheaval, the czar for the first time had seriously to deal with the peasant question. Witte had long pleaded with the czar to break up the outdated peasant communes and to allow the peasants to purchase land. “It is natural for a human being to seek to improve his lot,” Witte wrote Czar Nicholas in 1898. “This is what distinguishes the human from the animal, and it is this trait that makes for economic and political development, that makes for social order. But for man to make use of this impulse, suitable conditions must exist. They do not exist under slavery, which extinguishes this impulse in the slave because he realizes that it is impossible for him to improve his own lot and that of his close ones; as a result he becomes immobile. But liberty restores him to the condition of a human being.” After getting rid of Witte, whom the czar feared, he allowed the new prime minister, Pyotr Stolypin, to institute the long-sought land reform. Under Stolypin, a land reform was carried out, but it was combined with a brutal and violent political crackdown which ultimately led to his own assassination in 1911.

From that point on, the pathetic Nicholas went from one blunder to another. In 1907, under pressure from the French, now fully entangled in the British web and without Witte’s presence to counter the Anglophilia of much of the Russian court, Nicholas signed an Anglo-Russian Convention, effectively bringing Russia into the Triple Entente, that constellation of forces that made war with Germany a virtual certainty.

On Aug. 2, 1914, the czar issued a formal proclamation of hostilities at the Winter Palace. The palace square, one of the largest in Europe, was packed with thousands of sweltering, excited people carrying banners, flags, and icons and waiting impatiently for the moment when they could pour out their emotion in the presence of the sovereign. When Nicholas and Alexandra stepped onto the quay at the Palace Bridge, wave on wave of cheers rolled over them: “Batiushka, Batiushka, lead us to victory.”

Returning to St. Petersburg in 1914, Witte tried to stop it. “This war is madness,” he said. “Why should Russia fight? Our prestige in the Balkans, our pious duty to help our blood brothers? . . . That is a romantic, old-fashioned chimera. We must liquidate this stupid adventure as soon as possible.” But by that point, the die had already been cast. The *punctum saliens* had come and gone. A new geometry had been formed—and there was no returning to the old. Within a year, Witte would be dead, allegedly of a stroke, but with a strong likelihood that foul play had occurred.

Leaving for the front in March 1915, Nicholas wrote his wife, “I am going with such a calm in my soul that I am myself surprised. Whether it is because I had a talk with our Friend [Rasputin] or because of the newspaper telling of the death of Witte, I don’t know.” Two years later, that same

## Great Britain’s open door policy’

The British first succeeded in bringing the United States into their geopolitical gamesmanship with the launching of the so-called “open door policy” in the Far East. Already in March 1898, the British government confidentially invited the United States to cooperate in opposing any action that might violate the “open door” in China. President McKinley, through his Secretary of State John Sherman, told them his nation was not interested.

Previously, the British had had total hegemony in China. With growing Russian and French influence in the area, they were now agitating for “equal rights” for all foreign powers. In particular, they were incensed about the preferential tariffs that Witte had obtained from the Chinese government for the Chinese Eastern Railway. But, for political reasons, the British felt it would be better if the Americans, rather than the British, launched this proposal, as British intentions in doing so would be far too obvious. A.E. Hippisley, a British subject employed in China, while on leave in the United States, spoke to an American friend, W.W. Rockhill, who had served as a diplomat in China and was now a private adviser to the new secretary of state, John Hay, an anglophile and former ambassador to Great Britain.

Hippisley drew up a memorandum outlining the open door policy. Rockhill then put the substance of the memorandum into the form of diplomatic notes which, with minor changes, were adopted by Hay. In September 1899, Hay sent identical instructions to the U.S representatives in Berlin, London, and St. Petersburg, asking for assurances for an “open door” in China. In particular, the Hay note specified that “no power discriminate in favor of its own nationals in the matter of harbor dues or railroad charges.” With the death of McKinley in 1901, the Hay shift toward Britain was consolidated under anglophile President Theodore Roosevelt.

czar, his wife, and his five children would be shot to death by Bolshevik executioners. During the course of the war, Russia would suffer 1.65 million killed, and almost 4 million wounded. The long-term costs would be even greater. The revolutionary upheavals resulting from it would put Russia under the heel of a communist dictatorship for the next 75 years.