

# Britain, France and Russia, 1900–14

They thought it repressive and aggressive. So why did the French and British seek alliances with Russia?

**the near east, the far east and central Asia:** Britain and Russia were rivals for influence and trading advantages in Afghanistan, Tibet and Persia, all of which shared borders with India.

## imperial interests...

### ...a source of friction:

Britain and France both sought to extend their imperial interests in Africa. The *entente cordiale* resolved on-going disputes in west Africa, Siam, Madagascar, the New Hebrides and Newfoundland (fishing rights). France gave Britain a free hand in Egypt in return for a free hand in Morocco.

**central powers:** Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy.

The *entente cordiale*. Emile Loubet, president of the French Republic, crosses the Channel. Edward VII and Joseph Chamberlain are on the left. Théophile Delcassé, French minister of foreign affairs, is top right.

## Key concept

### Causation

#### Before you read this

Look at your notes on the background to the First World War. What did the alliances between Britain, France and Russia actually say?

At the turn of the twentieth century, British relations with France and Russia were not on a stable footing. The British and Russian

empires clashed in a number of theatres (**the near east, the far east and central Asia**). The two countries stood at opposite ends of Europe, though neither was really within it, and they represented opposing ends of the political spectrum: autocracy and parliamentary democracy. While Britain had more in common with France politically, they were old enemies and their **imperial interests were still a source of friction**.

By 1914, however, Britain, France and Russia found themselves in alliance in a war against the **central powers**. The construction of alliances between Russia and France, France and Britain, and finally Britain and Russia, took place against the backdrop of a united and increasingly assertive German state. Nevertheless, as recent scholars, including Keith Neilson, have pointed out, the changing relationships between Britain, France and Russia had as much to do with their governments' attitudes to each other, as they did with attempts to unite against a German threat.

## French agreements with Britain and Russia

An agreement between the French and Russian governments was reached with relative ease in 1894. While Bismarck was in power in Germany, he had succeeded in isolating France and keeping Russia aligned with Germany and Austria-Hungary, though not without difficulty. Germany's policy of friendly relations with Russia was neglected after Bismarck's fall from power in 1890, and this made French overtures to Russia possible. Their first forays were in the financial sphere. French banks began lending money to the Russian government in 1888, and by 1891, the Russian debt totalled 2 billion francs.





## Chronology

- 1894 Signature of Franco–Russian agreement.
- 1902 Signature of Anglo–Japanese agreement.
- 1904–05 Russo–Japanese War.
- 1904 Signature of *entente cordiale*.
- 1905 Year of revolution in Russia.
- 1907 Signature of Anglo–Russian Convention.
- 1914 Outbreak of First World War.

In July 1892, negotiations for a military convention between the two countries began. It took only a month to reach an agreement that bound each side to intervene on behalf of the other if attacked by Germany or its allies, and to mobilise its armies if Germany or its allies mobilised theirs. This Franco–Russian agreement was regarded as the cornerstone of French foreign and security policy by successive French foreign ministers for the next 20 years.

Théophile Delcassé, the French foreign minister between 1898 and 1906, was fiercely anti-German, and sought an agreement with the British government as a further counterweight to German expansion. He felt that the alliances with Russia and Britain would be complementary and that it was too risky to place all ‘France’s eggs in the Russian basket’. The Anglo–French agreement, popularly known as the *entente cordiale*, settled the issue of British and French rights in Egypt and Morocco but also represented a move towards more cordial Anglo–French relations in Europe. It was signed by the British foreign minister, Lord Lansdowne, and the French ambassador in London in April 1904. By this time war had broken out between Russia and Japan.

## Anglo–Russian rapprochement

The Russo–Japanese War of 1904–05 marked a turning point in relations between Britain, France and Russia. The British had signed a defensive agreement with Japan in 1902. In combination with the Franco–Russian alliance, this threatened to bring Britain and France into the war on opposing sides. When the Russian Baltic fleet sank a number of British trawlers off the Dogger Bank on the night of 21 October 1904, apparently believing them to be Japanese torpedo boats, it seemed to Lord Lansdowne that ‘the betting was about even as between peace and war’.

In fact, Russia’s defeat in the Russo–Japanese War made a *rapprochement* between the British and Russian governments possible. The outbreak of revolution in Russia in January 1905 weakened the



country internally, and defeat in the war brought about a reassessment of Russia’s foreign policy with the appointment of a new foreign minister, Izvol’skii, in May 1906. In Britain, a Liberal government and a new foreign secretary — Sir Edward Grey — came into office in December 1905. Grey was committed to the French alliance and to a reduction in defence spending, both of which made an anti-Russian policy difficult to pursue. A new ambassador, Sir Arthur Nicolson, was sent to Russia, having ‘talked *entente* in and out, up and down’ with his senior colleagues before he left. The negotiations faced numerous stumbling blocks, but were assisted by the personal commitment of both Nicolson and Izvol’skii in securing an agreement.

The agreement dealt principally with the areas of central Asia in which Britain and Russia both had interests: Afghanistan, Persia and Tibet. Both sides agreed to accept Chinese suzerainty over Tibet and not to send representatives there or attempt to obtain concessions or control Tibetan revenues.

This involved the surrender of many of the rights Britain had gained by the Lhasa Convention of 1904.

*Russo–Japanese War: the Japanese occupy Vragalschensk.*

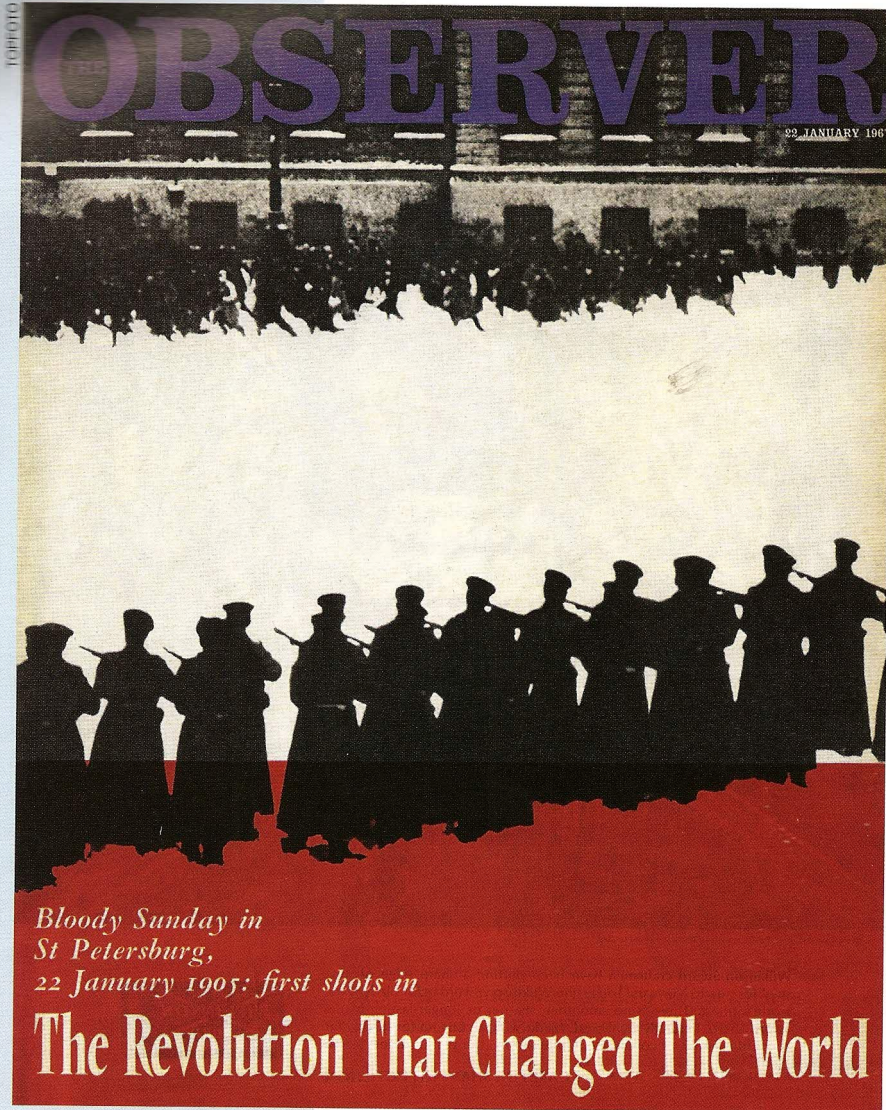
## Russo–Japanese War:

caused by rivalry in Korea and Manchuria. The Russians held the Japanese along the border of Manchuria, but were defeated by the Japanese navy at Tsushima. The war was ended with the Treaty of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, whereby the Russians acknowledged Japanese predominance in Korea.

## Key points

- French foreign policy at the turn of the century rested on the maintenance of alliances with Russia (1894) and Britain (1904), to counter the threat posed by an assertive Germany.
- Russia’s defeat in the Russo–Japanese War (1904–05) made possible an improvement in relations between Britain and Russia.
- The Anglo–Russian agreement of 1907 was the beginning, rather than the conclusion, of improved relations between the two countries.
- Negative public images of Russia made the alliances controversial, but this was counteracted by reform measures in Russia and the support of sections of the press.
- The alliance between Britain, France and Russia was not rigid in 1914. It took the outbreak of war to cement it diplomatically and in the public domain.





Front cover of the *Observer* magazine, 22 January 1967. *Bloody Sunday in St Petersburg, January 1905. First shots of the revolution.*

**Russian émigré revolutionary movement:** Russian tsars and government members were subjected to various assassination attempts by revolutionary groups. Those who escaped punishment lived in exile abroad.

The British and Russian governments settled on equality of trading rights in Afghanistan and a commitment to ‘friendly discussion’ if the status quo in Afghanistan were to change in any way.

The Persian section of the convention was the most difficult. The two governments eventually settled for a division of the country into ‘spheres of interest’ (though this terminology was studiously avoided). The British sphere was much smaller than the Russian but contained areas they considered vital for the defence of India.

While these agreements dealt purely with imperial interests, their significance was also European. Sir Edward Grey saw the Anglo–Russian agreement as a ‘natural complement’ to the British alliance with France and the Anglo–Russian *rapprochement* was firmly supported by the French foreign minister, Stephen Pichon. Nevertheless, the British and French governments had different objectives. For both Delcassé and Pichon, the French alliances were directed at countering an aggressive and expansionist Germany. While the British were aware of the possibilities these alliances would bring

## Questions

- If the Russians could not defeat Japan, what use were they as an ally for Britain or France?
- How much did press opinion matter in the development of British and French links with Russia?
- What does the need to improve the public image of Russia suggest about Britain’s war aims in 1914?

for checking German expansion, they were just as much about putting British relations with France, and Russia in particular, on a safer footing.

## Public opinion and the Russian alliance

Alliance with Russia was controversial in both Britain and France. This was partly a result of imperial rivalry, but the controversy also had an ideological basis. In Western Europe, Russia was seen typically as a ‘land where a grim tyranny, with the help of idle, corrupt aristocrats, oppressed an ignorant, dark, unwashed peasantry’. The **Russian émigré revolutionary movement** was active in both countries and activists like Prince Kropotkin, along with homegrown groups like the Society for Friends of Russian Freedom, played an important role in shaping opinion. In Britain even the mainstream press was overwhelmingly hostile to the Russian government at the turn of the century. This was partly a result of resentment at the censorship of news from Russia. *The Times’s* correspondent, Dudley Braham, was expelled from Russia in 1903 on a charge of ‘hostility to the Russian government and the invention of false news’.

When government troops fired on a procession of peaceful protestors in St Petersburg in January 1905, there was an international outcry, with much press criticism directed personally at the tsar. Even the mainstream French press, which tended to be more pro-Russian than the British (partly as a result of heavy Russian subsidies to French newspapers in the early years of the twentieth century), was full of deeply hostile coverage.

However, just as Russia’s failure in the Russo–Japanese war made diplomatic alliance with Russia possible, the October Manifesto of 1905, in which the tsar granted freedom of speech and the press and a representative assembly with legislative powers, made such an alliance more palatable for the British public. While the manifesto divided the opposition in Russia, it broadly satisfied the Western press. In Britain some journalists worked hard to cement the alliance. They did this either by restoring the Russian government in the eyes of the British people or by laying emphasis on Russia’s





Tsar Nicholas II and his family meet his cousin Edward VII and family at Cowes, 1909.

liberal elements, which, it was argued, could only be strengthened by alliance with democracies like Britain and France.

### The outbreak of war

None of these alliances was set in stone. Eyre Crowe, of the British Foreign Office, regarded the *entente cordiale* as a document so vague that it represented 'nothing more than a frame of mind'. The Anglo-Russian agreement of 1907 was a tentative beginning to the *rapprochement* between the two countries; an understanding 'which may gradually lead to good relations in European questions also', as Sir Edward Grey put it. The alliance was cemented in public by an exchange of royal visits, by Edward VII to Reval (Tallinn) in June 1908 and Nicholas II to Cowes in 1909, and by an exchange of parliamentary delegations in 1909 and 1912.

The details within the agreement often proved hard to sustain, especially in Persia. The Russian representative in Tehran, N. G. Hartwig, tended to follow his own policy rather than that of his government, and the Persian revolution in 1909 provided the pretext for a Russian occupation in the north of the country that lasted until the First World War.

German foreign policy in the early years of the century was often specifically directed at disrupting the Franco-Russian and Anglo-Russian alliances. In 1905, Kaiser Wilhelm II arranged a meeting with Tsar Nicholas II on his boat at Björkö, and persuaded him to sign a secret defensive alliance. Upon his return to St Petersburg, Nicholas's leading ministers were horrified to learn the details of the treaty, given their alliance with France, and it was quickly nullified.

In the summer of 1914, as the **July crisis** escalated, governments and foreign ministries across Europe had to make decisions about what they were and were not prepared to risk. It was never the case that Russia's involvement in the war would automatically bring about French — and therefore British — involvement. The French government was

**July crisis:** following the assassination in Sarajevo of minor Austrian royalty by Serbian nationals, Austria-Hungary, Germany's allies, declared war on Russia's ally, Serbia, on 18 July 1914.



Map of the Austria-Hungary empire, 1914.

### Weblink

Pre-1914 diplomacy does not lend itself to eye-catching material, though there are some good cartoons on the Franco-Russian alliance at: [www.cartoonstock.com/vintage/directory/f/franco-russian\\_alliance.asp](http://www.cartoonstock.com/vintage/directory/f/franco-russian_alliance.asp).

The text of the alliance, along with that of other important documents from the period, is available at: [www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/frumil.htm](http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/frumil.htm) and at the excellent [www.firstworldwar.com/source/index.htm](http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/index.htm).

The centenary of the *entente cordiale* was in 2004 and to mark the occasion, the Bodleian Library in Oxford put a special collection of documents on line, which can be seen at: [www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/projects/entente/entente.html](http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/dept/scwmss/projects/entente/entente.html).



ultimately more willing to risk war with Germany than it was to abandon the Russian alliance. The British government calculated that it had more to lose through non-involvement than through entering the war on the side of Russia and France. Even at the outbreak of war, there was some vocal public opposition in Britain to the alliance with Russia, which seemed to contradict the war aims the British

government was articulating. As Morgan Phillips Price (later a British correspondent in Russia) put it, 'we were supposed to be crushing Prussian militarism and "making the world safe for democracy", and yet we were in alliance with the most reactionary and tyrannical power in Europe'.

From August 1914, however, the mainstream press in Britain began to fill with positive images of Russia, many of which centred on the size and strength of the Russian army, which was represented as a steamroller, a glacier or a river in flood. Numerous books on Russia appeared in print, attempting to explain the Russian psyche to British readers and encouraging closer understanding between the two countries. It took the outbreak of war to cement the three-way alliance between Britain, France and Russia, which, although it had represented a departure in these countries' relations with one another, had never been rigidly fixed.

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### Further reading

Hinsley, F. H. (ed.) (1977) *British Foreign Policy under Sir Edward Grey*, Cambridge University Press. Contains useful essays by B. Williams on 'Great Britain and Russia, 1905 to the 1907 Convention' and by D. W. Sweet and R. T. B. Langhorne on 'Great Britain and Russia, 1907–1914'.

Keiger, J. (1983) *France and the Origins of the First World War*, Macmillan. Provides a detailed explanation of French foreign and security policy from 1871 up to the outbreak of war in 1914, including the formation and maintenance of France's alliances with Britain and Russia.

Neilson, K. (1995) *Britain and the Last Tsar*, Oxford University Press. Gives a comprehensive account of the British government's relationship with Russia between 1894 and 1917, emphasising the need to consider Anglo-Russian relations in their own right, rather than as part of an anti-German alliance system.

Wilson, K. (ed.) (1995) *Decisions for War, 1914*, St Martin's Press. Collection of essays dealing with each European government's decision to go to war in 1914. It includes contributions on Russia by K. Neilson, on France by J. Keiger, and on Britain by K. Wilson.

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