Witte and Stolypin: Potential saviours of Tsarism?

Introduction: A common aim
It is helpful to regard the work of Witte and Stolypin as complementary. **Witte was mainly concerned with the development of industry and Stolypin the development of agriculture.** However, the men did not work together in a common policy, and Witte was in fact deeply jealous of Stolypin. Rather, **the men had a shared objective – the preservation of the tsarist system.** It has been suggested that their reforms were the last hope of preserving tsardom. Had the tsarist government actually supported Witte and/or Stolypin in their efforts to modernise the Russian economy, the build up of social and political tension which subsequently led to the 1917 Revolutions could possibly have been avoided.

1. Sergei Witte

- **1849** Born Sergei Yulevich to noble mother; father of Dutch ancestry.
- Married Jewish divorcee.
- Joined government railway department where he showed great efficiency.
- **1891** Transport Minister
- **1892** Finance Minister
- **1903** Dismissed in reaction to unrest and disruption caused by European economic slump.
- **1905** Negotiated peace with Japan.
- Advised granting of Duma.
- President of Council of Ministers.
- **1906** Negotiated crucial massive French loan.
- Then dismissed in April.
- Jealous of successor Stolypin; helped weaken his position.
- **1914** Opposed Russian entry into World War I.
- **1915** Died embittered, predicting revolution.

Witte became **Minister of Finance in 1892 and held the post until 1903.** He had risen to this high profile post by the unusual route of outstanding service in railway administration. Witte was self-confident and dynamic. **He regarded the ultimate aim of his policies as being the salvation of Russia and the creation of a strong modern state.** To Witte, the key to Russia’s future greatness lay in industrialisation.
His view was not original and his real contribution lay not in his beliefs but in the
but in the programme of reform that he proposed in the 1890’s in order to bring about such
industrialisation. The basis of the policy was the strengthening of protective tariffs to
safeguard Russia’s young industries against the destructive competition of stronger European
economies. The problem he faced was how to develop industry when vital investment capital
was lacking and the total amount of capital lying in Russian banks amounted to only 200
million roubles. Witte’s answer was to invite these powers to continue to participate in Russian
industry but to do so by investing capital into it, rather than off-loading their own consumer
goods onto it. Thus, the capital would be provided for the development of Russian industry.
Such industrial development would have the added benefit of reducing social unrest by
providing fuller employment, and in the long run, higher wages and cheaper goods. The
following three policies Witte therefore believed would lead to the creation of a great industrial
Russia:

- Protective tariffs
- Foreign investment
- Placing the Russian rouble on the Gold Standard (January 1897) to inspire greater foreign
  confidence.

**Witte was very successful in gaining capital from outside Russia.** Foreign
investment increased from 98 million roubles in 1880 to 911 million roubles in 1900. The
result was an increase in annual production:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Coal</th>
<th>Pig Iron</th>
<th>Oil</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>3.2</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>0.89</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>2.99</td>
<td>9.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*(NOTE: All figures are given in millions of tons)*
Much of the foreign capital that Witte was successful in raising was directly invested in railways. The centrepiece of Russia’s railway expansion was the Trans-Siberian Railway, linking Russia and the Far East. It was constructed between 1891 and 1902 and stretched over 6000 kilometres from Moscow to Vladivostok. It was intended to open up the remoter regions of the central and eastern empire by connecting them with the industrial west, thereby encouraging the internal migration of workers and increasing Russia’s production and export potential. However, it promised more than it delivered. Sections of it were still incomplete in 1914 and it did not greatly improve east-west communications.

**Witte was dismissed from two influential posts during his career.** In 1903, Nicholas, who made no secret of the fact that he disliked Witte, had him removed from his position as Finance Minister. He was later appointed as Prime Minister from 1905-1906 as a recognition of his ability to deal with a crisis. However, he was dismissed as soon as he regained control.

Witte has been **criticised by historians** for his extravagance and making Russia dependent on foreign capitalists. He concerned himself with prestige projects such as the Trans-Siberian Railway or heavy industry. In doing so, lighter industry was neglected. He also paid no attention to Russia’s agricultural needs. Nevertheless, Witte’s policies had a major effect on the Russian economy and he was forced to deal with problems such as military requirements frequently interfering with his plans and the mistrust he suffered at the royal court. **He was regarded with suspicion by the representatives of the very system he was trying to save.**

**2. Peter Stolypin**

1862  
Born Pyotr Arkadyevich to gentry family.
Became civil servant, then governor of Saratov Province.

1906  
May, Minister of Interior. July, President of Council of Ministers.

1906-7  
Organised post 1905 repression.

1906-11  
Agrarian Reforms.

1911  
Assassinated.

There were two main aspects to Stolypin’s work. The first was his **treatment of violent political opposition** in the aftermath of the October Manifesto. He conducted a vigorous campaign against terrorists and revolutionaries. So many people were arrested and executed that the hangman’s noose came to be nicknamed ‘**Stolypin’s necktie/necklace**’. The figures below show the extent of terrorist violence after the 1905 Revolution, but also the effectiveness of the police response:

The bases of radical politics were also attacked through **pressure upon unions and upon the press**. Six hundred of the former were closed down between 1906-12, and 1000
newspaper ceased to publish during the same period. AI Guchkov, the leader of the Octoberists in the Duma, said begrudgingly of Stolypin:

“If we are now witnessing the last convulsions of the revolution, and it is undoubtedly coming to an end, then it is to this man that we owe it”.

Stolypin, however, realised that counter terror alone could not restabilise the tsarist regime. He believed that the best way to strengthen support for the regime was by careful reform.

Thus, where Witte had set himself the task of modernising Russian industry, Stolypin turned his attention to the deep-rooted problem of the Russian peasantry. He believed that the key in building a coalition of support in the Duma, and also in the country, lay in solving the peasant question. Firstly the peasants made up the majority of the electorate, and secondly their numbers were growing rapidly. The Russian population was the fastest growing in Europe, increasing from 133 million to 161 million in just the decade 1900-1910. Stolypin persuaded the Tsar to introduce a number of reforms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Terrorists’ victims killed</th>
<th>Number of Terrorists’ victims wounded</th>
<th>Death Sentences given</th>
<th>Number of Death Sentences carried out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1905</td>
<td>233</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906</td>
<td>768</td>
<td>820</td>
<td>450</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>1231</td>
<td>1312</td>
<td>1056</td>
<td>456</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>394</td>
<td>615</td>
<td>1741</td>
<td>825</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- All State and Crown lands were made available to the Peasants Land Bank for purchase by enterprising peasants.
- Peasants were allowed by imperial decree to withdraw from their commune (mir) without needing its consent first. Peasants who left the mir were later able to have all their land together, rather than have to farm in strips like the rest of the village.
- He declared an end to the redistribution of land as the population grew, making all the land the hereditary property of the head of the family.

By his reforms, Stolypin hoped to create a new class of well-to-do peasants. They would be able to leave their communes (mir), extend their landholdings and build up independent consolidated farms. This meant they would be able to try new agricultural techniques and grow what crops they wished. An end to redistribution meant that there was
now encouragement for every peasant to improve his land. **Stolypin believed that these new independent farmers would provide stable support for the imperial government.** His measures met with some success, as the table below shows.

By the outbreak of World War One almost 2 million peasant families had left their communes, but the war quickly put an end to further departures. Many peasants were opposed to the idea; they appreciated the security of the mir. Furthermore, those that did leave the mir were often those with little land, who took their land in order to sell it and move away with the money they made. During the same period, 3 million peasants also left their communes to take up land in Siberia, with government financial help.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Households Leaving the Mir</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1907</td>
<td>48,271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1908</td>
<td>508,344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>579,409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>342,245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>145,567</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>122,314</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>134,554</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The number of peasant households leaving the mir. There were about 13 million households in total.**

Stolypin’s reforms in other areas met with fierce opposition. The Tsar was always suspicious of change, as was the extreme right in the Duma and a substantial number in the State Council. **The greatest weaknesses of Stolypin’s reforms, like those of Witte, was they never enjoyed Nicholas’ support.** In fact, Nicholas was probably on the verge of dismissing Stolypin in 1911 when the latter was killed. Stolypin’s attempt to bring about religious toleration, especially for Jews, was passed by the Duma after a struggle, but was then vetoed by the Tsar. A plan to extend the zemstva into non-Russian areas was rejected by the State Council. Both were felt to be a threat to the nationality principle that they believed held Russia together. Similarly, a proposal to extend participation in local government by setting up a new lower level zemstva was never accepted.

Stolypin’s suffered a number of assassination attempts and was finally killed when he was shot at point blank range at a gala performance at the Kiev Opera in October 1911. His death was greeted with enthusiasm from both the extreme left and the extreme right. Perhaps this shows that his policies were best suited to Russia at that moment in history. Or, perhaps it shows that those policies would never have been allowed to work for long. After Stolypin’s death, Nicholas seems to have decided that if a Prime Minister was essential it would have to be one who had no interest in working with the Duma and would follow the advice of the State Council and the Tsar. With this in mind, he reappointed Goremykin, now aged 74, a man who had no commitment to the post. **Nicholas was back in charge.**