

The Fall of the Romanovs

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Summary: There is an ongoing debate among historians about the importance of the First World War as a cause of the revolutionary overthrow of tsarism in February 1917. The 'optimists' argue that after the 1905 revolution Russia, in 1906-14, was being peacefully reformed along Western lines, and that only the stresses created by the war made another revolution possible. The 'pessimists', by contrast, argue that long-term unresolved problems made a new revolution highly likely even in the absence of war. Once war had broken out, it led to the overthrow of the monarchy not only by its effect on the economic position of ordinary people, but also by the way in which it alienated the Tsar from the political and military élites.

ON 2 MARCH 1917 (Note 1) Tsar Nicholas II signed an act of abdication, and the 300-year-old dynasty of the Romanovs effectively came to an end. Less than two weeks earlier, the prospect of such a dramatic outcome had seemed remote and unlikely. Strikes in Petrograd, the Russian capital,² began on 23 February, and were accompanied by housewives' protests against wartime bread shortages. At first, these events on the streets of the capital did not seem any more dangerous than previous demonstrations that had been suppressed, or had petered out ineffectually. The unrest of February 1917, however, became potentially much more significant when the troops of the Petrograd garrison refused to open fire on the demonstrators when ordered to do so. Some regiments mutinied, turning their guns on their own officers rather than on the protesting civilians. Events might yet have been brought under control if troops loyal to the Tsar's government could have been brought into the city from outside; and this option was seriously considered by Nicholas and his advisers. But orders issued to General Ivanov to move his forces against Petrograd were cancelled, and the Tsar began to negotiate with the politicians in the capital. Nicholas opted for concessions to the critics of his autocratic government, rather than repression. He at first agreed to form a new government, accountable to the elected parliament (the State Duma), but the demands of the revolutionary population of Petrograd became more and more extreme, culminating in a call for the Tsar's abdication.

When the unrest in the capital began, Nicholas had been at the General Headquarters of the Russian army at Mogilev, in the western part of the Empire. He attempted to return to Petrograd but, because of striking railway-workers, his train was diverted, and he ended up in the town of Pskov, the headquarters of the northern front. Poor communications with the capital meant crucial delays in the Tsar's responses to the series of demands issuing from Petrograd. His closest advisers, both at Mogilev and Pskov, were army generals: it was they who persuaded him to make political concessions rather than attempt military repression. Nicholas's abdication, however, led to a much more unstable and potentially dangerous situation than these advisers had expected. A Provisional Government of liberal politicians associated with the Duma was formed in the capital, but at the same time there came into existence the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, dominated by socialist intellectuals. The rivalry for power between these two institutions was to last throughout the spring and summer of 1917, and to lead to the Bolsheviks' seizure of power in a new revolution in October.

In February, of course, these developments still lay in the future. Those who advised Nicholas to abdicate had hoped that this act would lead to greater stability and to the more effective continuation of the war under a constitutional monarchy headed by Nicholas's young son, Alexis. But why were the generals willing to sacrifice Nicholas II in February 1917? In order to understand this, it is necessary to examine the background to the February revolution.

The 1905 Revolution and its Causes

The events of February 1917 were not the first revolution that Russia had experienced in the twentieth century. In 1905 a wave of opposition to the Tsar's government forced Nicholas to issue his October Manifesto promising full civil liberties and creating the State Duma as Russia's first national elected representative assembly.

In the opening years of the twentieth century, virtually all sectors of Russian society were in tumult. In the countryside, the peasants still harboured grievances against the Emancipation Act of 1861. Although they had been liberated from serfdom, the peasants were left with less land than they felt entitled to, while the nobles retained their large estates. Conflicts between peasants and landowners were coming to a head in some areas: there were widespread peasant disturbances in parts of the Ukraine and on the Volga in 1902-3. Unrest was also common among industrial workers. The rapid growth of heavy industry in the 1890s had created a new urban labour force whose living and working conditions were poor. Strikes became frequent at the turn of the century, and often led to clashes between workers and police or troops. At the same time, organised political opposition to tsarism was developing. Many members of the intelligentsia, the small minority of the population with higher education, had access to Western ideas of liberalism and socialism, and wished to see radical transformations in Russia. Before 1905 such opposition groups were illegal, and had little opportunity to recruit popular support, but they were able to provide leadership for the mass movement during the revolutionary year.

It was against the background of this widespread unrest that Russia became involved in a war with Japan in 1904. The series of Russian military failures in the Far East fuelled the opposition's criticisms of the Tsar's government; and the events of 'Bloody Sunday' - 9 January 1905 - when troops opened fire on unarmed demonstrators in the capital, precipitated widespread strikes and demonstrations throughout the Empire. In the countryside, peasants took advantage of the crisis in order to assert their claims to a fairer share of the land. The Tsar's October Manifesto made some political concessions; but his government also resorted to harsh measures of repression against the forces of revolution.

1906-14: a Transition to Western-style Development?

The aftermath of the 1905 revolution saw change in two main areas of Russian life. First of all, although Russia was not yet a constitutional monarchy, the creation of the State Duma provided her first experience of a Western-style parliamentary institution. But the Duma was elected on the basis of an indirect system of voting that gave predominance to the propertied classes. Even so, the first two Dumas, in 1906 and 1907, came into conflict with the government, and were disbanded on the Tsar's orders. The new electoral law of June 1907 restricted the voting rights of peasants and workers even further. The Third and Fourth Dumas, elected in 1907 and 1912 respectively, were more compatible with the government, although the Fourth Duma, as we shall see, became highly critical of its policies during the First World War.

The second area in which there was major change after 1905 was agriculture. In 1905 the peasants' political representatives had demanded an agrarian reform that would divide up the land of the large estates among them. The government, under pressure from the noble landowners, refused to consider such a reform. Instead, in November 1906, Prime Minister P.A. Stolypin introduced measures designed to lead to the break-up of the peasant commune. This traditional rural institution, in which the arable land was held collectively in an open-field system and periodically redistributed among the households in the village, had been retained after Emancipation. Stolypin wanted to encourage the peasants to claim private property rights in their own share of the land, and to consolidate and enclose it into Western-style family farms.

The period 1906-14 has been the subject of considerable debate among historians. One school of thought - the 'optimists' - argues that as a result of the reforms introduced after 1905 Russia was securely on a path of stable Western-style development, with the rudiments of a parliamentary democracy, and an economy which, as a result of the Stolypin reforms and the revival of industrial growth, was coming closer to a capitalist market system. The opposing school of thought - the 'pessimists' - claims that the post-1905 changes were very superficial: the Duma was no more than a sham parliament, with limited powers, which represented the interests of only the more privileged sectors of society; and the Stolypin reforms did not tackle the fundamental agrarian issue, the peasants' desire for the land of the large estates. Far from stability having been created, the 'pessimists' argue, a new revolutionary crisis was developing on the eve of the war, with a militant strike movement in St Petersburg and in the south of Russia.

It is not easy to judge the relative merits of the arguments of the 'optimists' and 'pessimists'.³ We are dealing with a relatively short period of time - only seven or eight years - in which it is difficult to distinguish the likely course of events if war had not broken out in 1914. Russia's transition to democracy and capitalism was, undoubtedly, going to be a difficult one; but where the 'optimists' regard the problems of the pre-war years as merely the teething troubles of a new westernised Russia, the 'pessimists' consider them to have been the death throes of a chronically sickly child. In line with their disagreement on the direction of developments in 1906-14, the optimists and pessimists differ on the importance to be attached to the First World War as a cause of the revolutionary overthrow of tsarism in February 1917. For the optimists, in whose eyes pre-1914 Russia had embarked on a path of peaceful reform and evolution, it was primarily the exceptional strains imposed on the Empire by the war that led to revolution. Most pessimists, believing, as they do, that a revolution against tsarism was likely even in peacetime, regard the war only as an accelerator of events. Some pessimists, however, who interpret the events of the summer of 1914 as a potentially revolutionary situation, argue that the outbreak of war may actually have postponed the revolution for nearly three years.

But there is general agreement among historians of all persuasions about the ways in which the war, once it had broken out, led inexorably to the events of February 1917. The effects of the war on the economy, on the armed forces, and on the political system all combined to bring about the revolutionary overthrow of tsarism.

The Effects of the War on the Economy

It has sometimes been suggested that Russia on the eve of the war had a backward economy that went into a steep downward spiral when faced with the stresses and strains of an unprecedentedly prolonged and 'total' war. In fact, as Norman Stone has shown,⁴ Russian industry expanded very rapidly in response to the new demands imposed upon it by the war: the armaments-related metal-working and engineering sectors, in particular, achieved significant increases in output. The economic crisis that the country was, undoubtedly, suffering by the winter of 1916-17 was, in many ways, a crisis of over-rapid expansion, rather than a crisis of collapse and decline. But the priority that was given to the production of armaments meant shortages of many basic consumer goods.

The immense cost of the war led to inflation: prices by the end of 1916 were four times those of 1914. Wages rose more slowly than prices, and this lag contributed to the revival of strikes in the capital at the end of 1916. Food supply was an additional problem. Although wartime harvests were generally good, the peasants put a smaller proportion of their crop on to the market. In a situation where in exchange for their grain they received only paper money that was rapidly depreciating in value, and where there were few consumer goods available for purchase in rural shops, the peasants preferred to keep their produce in the village. Disruptions of transport systems meant that those food products that were marketed did not always reach the urban consumers, but often rotted in railway sidings. The food supply situation in Petrograd was especially vulnerable to transportation difficulties, since the Russian capital lay so far to the north of the main grain-producing regions.

Thus, we can see how the effects of the war contributed to social and economic unrest in Petrograd at the beginning of 1917: workers and their families had many grievances about wages that failed to keep pace with inflationary prices, and about the shortages of bread and other foodstuffs in the shops.

The Effects of the War on the Armed Forces

The military course of the First World War was generally disastrous for the Russian army. By the beginning of 1917 - during the third winter of the war - the soldiers at the front were generally demoralised. Although Russia had a larger population than any of the other countries involved in the war, the heavy casualties suffered, together with the inefficiencies of the conscription system, meant that she was already suffering manpower shortages. Boys of 16, and men in their 50s, were due to be called up in 1917. The Petrograd garrison included many reservists, recent civilians and family men, who shared and sympathised with the hardships of the people of the capital on whom they were ordered to open fire in February 1917.

The High Command of the army, too, was in a critical situation by the winter of 1916-17. In August 1915 the Tsar had personally assumed supreme command of the armed forces and moved to General Headquarters at Mogilev. But Nicholas knew little of military affairs, and his presence at Headquarters was more of a hindrance than a help to the generals. The halting of General Brusilov's offensive in the summer of 1916 led to recriminations and low morale within the High Command. It is not surprising that the generals were so willing to encourage Nicholas to abdicate in February 1917: they had come to regard him as a liability, who could be sacrificed in the interests of the war effort.

The Political Effects of the War

When the Tsar left Petrograd in August 1915, his wife, the Empress Alexandra, became virtual regent in the capital. Public criticism of the government's conduct of the war came to focus on the Empress. Alexandra at this time was increasingly under the influence of Gregory Rasputin, a strange 'holy man' from Siberia, who had gained access to the court because of his apparent powers to control the bleeding of the haemophiliac Tsarevich Alexis. During the Tsar's wartime absence from Petrograd, Rasputin's influence extended to advising the Empress on ministerial appointments. Alexandra was of German origin, and rumours came to attribute Russia's defeats by Germany to 'treason in high places': it was alleged that the Empress was passing Russian military secrets to her cousin the Kaiser.

The Duma became increasingly critical of the government's conduct of the war, and conflicts between Duma and government were intensified by the high-handed way in which the government treated the Duma. In the summer of 1915 a 'Progressive Bloc' of influential Duma deputies was formed, which demanded a 'government of confidence' - that is, a cabinet of ministers who were accountable to the elected Duma rather than solely to the Tsar. Although this demand was supported by some of the generals, and by representatives of Russia's wartime Allies, Britain and France, Nicholas refused to make any concessions to the Progressive Bloc.

By the winter of 1916-17, even some traditional monarchists had come to believe that Russia's interests were being damaged by Nicholas and Alexandra. The murder of Rasputin in December was carried out by members of the aristocracy with close links to the royal family, hoping to save the Tsar and the Empress by removing their evil adviser. But it was too late. Various conspiracies were hatched by generals and Duma politicians to persuade Nicholas to abdicate in favour of his 12-year-old son. Alexis would - it was assumed - reign as a constitutional monarch, with Nicholas's younger brother, Grand Duke Michael, as regent, and with a new government based on the Duma. The events on the streets of the capital in late February 1917, however, meant that the Tsar's abdication occurred in very different circumstances from those envisaged by these armchair plotters. Nicholas's abdication also assumed a different form from that expected by the politicians. He abdicated not only on his own behalf, but also on behalf of Alexis. The succession passed to Grand Duke Michael, but Michael refused to accept the throne unless it was offered to him by a future Constituent Assembly, elected on the basis of universal suffrage. The consequence of Nicholas's abdication, therefore, was not a constitutional monarchy, but the effective end of the Romanov dynasty, and the unstable political situation of 'dual power' - rivalry between the Provisional Government and the Soviet - which led to the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917.

Thus, the First World War brought about the February Revolution not only through its effects on the social and economic position of the ordinary people - the workers and soldiers - of Petrograd, but also through its impact on the attitudes of the 'lites of Russian society towards the Tsar. By the beginning of 1917 Nicholas was alienated from influential courtiers, from the Duma politicians, and

from his own generals: it was these key figures who persuaded him to make the fateful decision to respond to the revolutionary events in Petrograd not by military repression but by political concessions, culminating in his own abdication and the end of the Russian monarchy.

Notes

1 Dates in this article are given according to the 'Old Style' or Julian calendar then in force in Russia, which was 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar used in the West.

2 The city had been renamed Petrograd on the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, since its previous name, St Petersburg, was considered too German-sounding for the capital of a country that was at war with Germany.

3 For the terms 'optimist' and 'pessimist', see A. Mendel, 'On Interpreting the Fate of Imperial Russia', in T.G. Stavrou, ed., *Russia under the Last Tsar*, Minneapolis, 1969, pp. 13-41.

4 Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front, 1914-1917*, London, 1975.

Words and concepts to note

autocracy, autocratic government: the Russian form of absolute rule.

Duma: the Russian parliament; an elected national assembly, created after the 1905 revolution.

Provisional Government: the temporary government formed after the February revolution of 1917, to hold power until elections could be held to a Constituent Assembly.

Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies: council of representatives of workers and soldiers.

Bolsheviks: the most radical of the Russian socialist parties, led by V.I. Lenin.

constitutional monarchy: a political system in which the monarch's power is significantly restricted by a democratically elected parliament.

serfdom: system under which peasants are not free, but are obliged to work without payment for their owners.

intelligentsia: intellectuals; educated Russians who were opposed to tsarism.

regent: one who rules as a temporary stand-in for an absent or under-age monarch.

haemophilia: an incurable medical condition in which the blood is unable to clot properly.

Constituent Assembly: a representative assembly, elected on the basis of universal, equal, direct and secret voting, that would determine the future constitution of Russia.

Questions to consider

- ♦ Why was Russia so vulnerable to revolution during unsuccessful foreign wars?
- ♦ How far-reaching were the changes that were introduced in 1906-14?
- ♦ Was the war the most important cause of the February Revolution?
- ♦ What were the effects of the war on the Russian economy, and how did they contribute to revolutionary unrest in February 1917?
- ♦ Why did the February Revolution begin in Petrograd?

- ◆ How far was Nicholas II responsible for his own downfall?
- ◆ Why did strikes and demonstrations in Petrograd lead so quickly to the end of the monarchy?

Further Reading: The most authoritative of the many biographies of Nicholas II is Dominic Lieven, *Nicholas II, Emperor of All the Russias*, London: John Murray, 1993. A detailed scholarly account is provided in Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *The February Revolution: Petrograd 1917*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981. A useful textbook on the period is Hans Rogger, *Russia in the Age of Modernization and Revolution, 1881-1917*, London, 1983 (Longman History of Russia series). Fuller narratives are Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution, 1899-1919*, London: Collins Harvill, 1990; and Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy. The Russian Revolution 1891-1924*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1996. Older accounts that retain their value are Michael T. Florinsky, *The End of the Russian Empire*, New Haven, 1931; and Sir Bernard Pares, *The Fall of the Russian Monarchy*, London, 1939.

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