

## Why was Nicholas II forced to abdicate in 1917?

Graham Darby - The Russian Revolution (pp. 68-87)

### Objectives

To determine the causes of the abdication

To analyse why the Revolution happened when it did.

Russia was not ready for war in 1914 yet Nicholas felt unable to resist some gesture of support for Serbia. Once the war had begun, defeat brought the regime to the verge of collapse, though this took over two years. By 1917 the government and the Tsar, in particular, were completely discredited; the generals asked for Nicholas's abdication to avoid a revolution, but the belief that things would get better once he had gone proved illusory. He was swept away by defeat (as indeed the Habsburgs and Hohenzollerns were to be the following year) but there was no satisfactory alternative to put in his place.

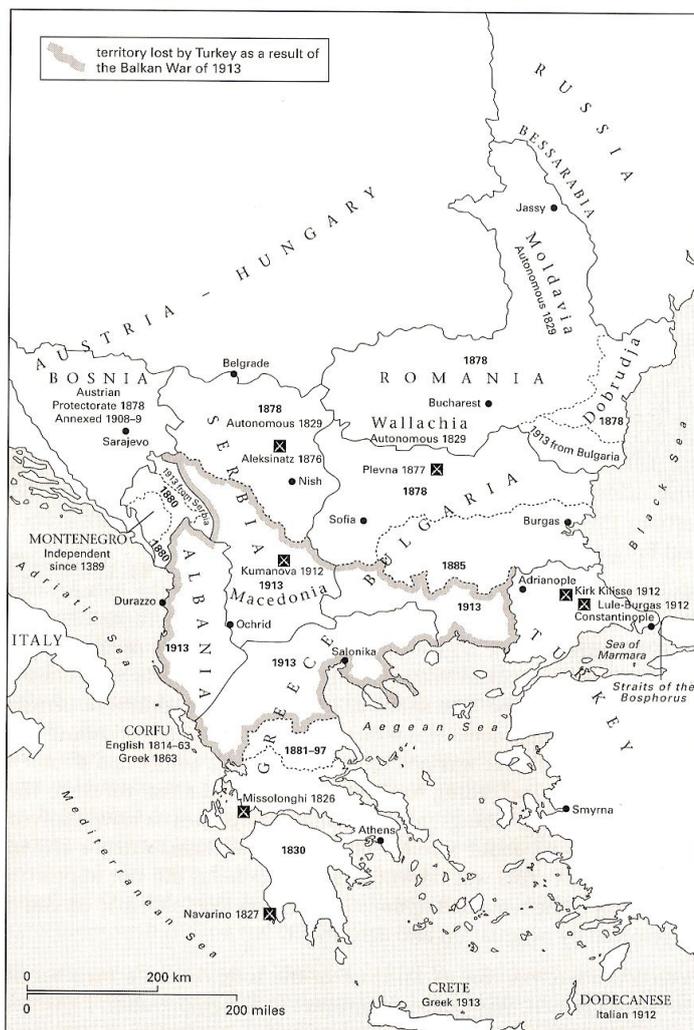
### Russian foreign policy 1905-14

The prestige of the dynasty was very much bound up with maintaining Russia's status as a great power. Consequently, defeat at the hands of the Japanese in 1904-5 proved to be a considerable humiliation not only for Russia but for the monarchy itself. In the aftermath of defeat, Russia was weak and the foreign secretary, Izvolski, tried to remain on good terms with all the powers. However, in the increasingly competitive and polarised world of the early twentieth century, this proved to be an impossible task. An agreement with Great Britain in 1907 which sought, among other things, to resolve spheres of influence in Persia reinforced ties with Paris as Britain and France were drawing closer together. On the other hand, Izvolski's attempts in 1908 to reach an agreement with Austria proved disastrous.

The so-called Bosnian Crisis of 1908-9 originated in Austria's determination to annex Bosnia outright. Izvolski attempted to arrange a tit-for-tat agreement whereby Russia would secretly approve the annexation in return for Austrian support for the free passage of Russian warships through the Straits of the Bosphorus, from the Black

Sea to the Sea of Marmara and into the Mediterranean (see Figure 5 overleaf). Britain and France were not enthusiastic about Russia's wish, for free passage. Despite this, Austria went ahead and annexed Bosnia claiming full Russian support. Stolypin, the Duma and the Russian, press were appalled at this betrayal of fellow Slavs. But worse was to come; in 1909 Vienna demanded Russia's formal recognition of the annexation and Germany sent an ultimatum demanding immediate and unconditional compliance. Russia was too weak to do anything other than agree: its humiliation was complete. Nicholas was furious; Izvolski was eventually removed.

This crisis proved to be a significant turning-point in Russian foreign policy. Russia was determined not to be humiliated again, and stepped up its rearmament programme. There was to be no *rapprochement* with Austria; indeed Russian strategy was now to build up its influence in the Balkans to thwart Austrian expansion. At the same time, attempts were made to keep on reasonable terms with the Germans who could restrain the Austrians - but clearly Russia's true friends were France and Britain. However, any policy that sought to control events in the Balkans was also bound to fail. Italian success against the Ottoman Turkish Empire in 1911 proved to be a green light for the aspirations of the Balkan states and in two Balkan Wars (1912 and 1913); the Turks were almost pushed out of Europe. The failure of Russia to either control or benefit from these developments was a matter of concern in St



**Figure 5** The growth of Balkan independence, 1822-1913. The dates refer to the year in which independence was gained from Turkey.

Petersburg but in truth the real loser was not Russia but Austria. Serbia had doubled in size and now, according to Vienna, constituted a real threat to the integrity of the Habsburgs' multi-ethnic empire. Austria now resolved to do something about Serbia - but Serbia was Russia's major ally in the Balkans. A crisis was brewing though Nicholas did not appear to see it coming; he remained optimistic that these complex matters could be resolved by negotiation and agreement. In fact, on the surface, relations between Russia and Germany were quite good though Germany's role in reforming the Turkish army was a source of some concern. Of greater concern in Berlin, however, was Russia's Great Military Programme announced in 1912, initiated in 1914 and due for completion in 1917. Though this programme remained largely on paper, it envisaged significant improvements in the railway network and administrative procedures which would enable the Russians to mobilise in 18 days. This alarmed the German High Command as it would render their Schlieffen Plan inoperable. This plan, originally drawn up from 1895 but subsequently amended, had become something of a holy writ in German strategic thinking. It was devised to fight a war on two fronts after the formation of the Franco-Russian alliance (1892/4); it envisaged a massive attack on France which would knock it out in six weeks (as in 1870), followed by the transfer of the army to the eastern front to deal with the Russians who would take that time to mobilise. The Russian programme created enormous pessimism among the German High Command and Moltke, the Chief of Staff, was heard to recommend a war 'sooner rather than later' while Germany could win. Indeed Germany's fear of Russia's potential military might well have been the fundamental cause of the First World War; but of course it was the assassination in Sarajevo that provided the spark.

### **The outbreak of war**

The Austrian Archduke, Franz Ferdinand, was assassinated by Serb terrorists in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914. After that, events moved rather slowly although the Germans did give Vienna the so-called 'blank cheque' (a promise of full support) on 5 July. The Austrians finally sent their ultimatum to Serbia on 23 July. When Sazonov, the Russian foreign minister, saw the text, he exclaimed: 'This means war in Europe!' He informed the Tsar that the ultimatum was impossible to accept and probably concocted with connivance from Berlin (he was right on both counts). He also maintained that the Central Powers were starting a war now because they believed they could win it. Nicholas, however, felt Sazonov was panicking and remained oblivious to the seriousness of the situation. Indeed as Europe stood on the brink of catastrophe his diary makes it clear that the Tsar still found time to fill his life with trivia - playing tennis, going for walks with his family and visiting relatives for tea. Finally on 28 July, Nicholas responded to his ministers' argument that Russia could not stand idly by and let Austria swallow Serbia; he agreed to a partial mobilisation of the army. This was meant to be a warning to Austria, but Vienna declared war on Serbia the same day. Now Nicholas hesitated. Two days later, after pressure from his military advisers, he agreed on full mobilisation. This set off alarm bells in Berlin and on 31 July the Germans demanded a halt, but Nicholas did not respond. On 1 August Germany declared war on Russia, and proceeded to put the Schlieffen Plan into operation. The First World War had begun.

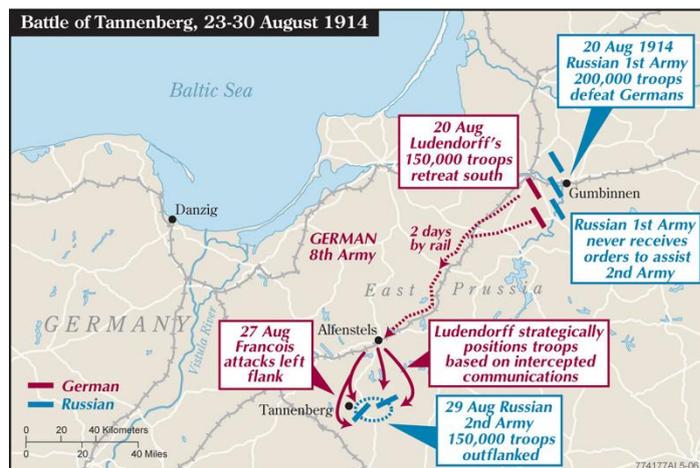
Lenin had commented in 1913 that a war in Europe would be a very useful thing for the revolution 'but it is hardly possible that Franz Josef and Nicky would give us this pleasure'. Nicholas II did not want war in 1914; Russia was not ready, and would not be so until the completion of the military programme in 1917. However, many felt Russia's status as a great power was at stake. It is important to remember that the aristocratic sense of honour which had for so long been settled by the duel, made prestige and status inordinately important to the decision-makers of 1914. After the humiliations of 1904-5 and 1908-9 Russia could not afford to abandon its fellow Slavs in Serbia. But Russia did not declare war and many in the upper echelons of society had no illusions about the risks involved. On announcing the news, Nicholas himself was pale and gaunt, and the Empress burst into tears. Nicholas appears to have been swept along by events almost against his will, and it is characteristic of him that he should order a partial mobilisation and only later discover that this was not feasible. Could war have been avoided? Of course it could, but if we accept that Germany was determined to force a war, then the Russian government did not have much room for manoeuvre in this crisis.

### **The war**

In Russia and elsewhere across Europe, the declaration of war was greeted with a surge of patriotic enthusiasm. Huge crowds gathered at the Winter Palace in St Petersburg and sang hymns; the crowds were even larger in Moscow. The Duma politicians united in unconditional support for the war effort. Strikes almost ceased and mobilisation went smoothly. All were united in the desire to beat the Germans, and with British and French help this was thought to be possible. Moreover, most thought the war would be short - Peter Durnovo was unusual in arguing that the war could prove lengthy and disastrous. Germany's failure to achieve a rapid victory over France in the West ensured that he would be right.

**The first year, 1914-15** - Enthusiasm for the war lasted about six months or so. Initially, the Imperial army - the 'Russian steamroller' as it was known in the West - moved swiftly into East Prussia but soon suffered large-scale defeats at Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes. However, these were offset by success against the Austrians in Galicia, which was overrun. At the end of 1914 honours were even, but the extent of Russian casualties was

considerable and the shortage of munitions showed up the inadequacies of the war effort. Six and a half million men had been mobilised by November, but they were issued with only 4.6 million rifles. The front stabilised until the spring of 1915.



If the first six months of the war had been barely satisfactory, then the next six were disastrous. A combined Austro-German offensive pushed the Russians out of Galicia and a major German attack along the rest of the line pushed them back 200-300 miles, with the loss of Poland, Lithuania and even parts of the Ukraine. After a year, Russian casualties were approaching a staggering 4 million killed, wounded, captured or missing; and it was little comfort that the Germans had failed to achieve their objectives (they had committed two-thirds of their army to this offensive in the hope of inflicting a decisive defeat). Polivanov, the Minister for War, perceptively observed that 'one should not

forget that the army now is quite different from the one which marched forth at the beginning of the war'. Most of the officers were dead, as were the infantry and reserves: the army was no longer the loyal one of 1914.

The mood which had been enthusiastic at the beginning of the war changed drastically by the spring. All the belligerents faced munitions crises but in Russia the lack of shells and rifles created a political crisis fuelled by critical press reports and personal jealousies. The government was charged with incompetence and anyone with any responsibility usually blamed somebody else. In no other country was the war effort so undermined internally. 'By June 1915, the spirit of common purpose that had united the government and opposition . . . vanished, yielding to recriminations and hostility even more intense than the mood of 1904-5' (Richard Pipes). However, criticism in 1915 was mainly confined to the middle classes who had, in their turn, been the most enthusiastic group for the war in the first place. Nicholas responded with a ministerial shake-up in June. In addition, the Tsar conceded the principle of cooperation, with the establishment of joint boards - committees consisting of government officials, private businessmen and Duma deputies - to deal with military shortages. The significance of these organisations was more political than economic. They were seen as a sort of parallel bureaucracy and were considered to be more efficient than the government one. Although the important principle of cooperation with the educated elite was conceded with regard to the war effort, Nicholas would not make comparable political concessions.

Indeed at this time of crisis he made two significant decisions that were to have a detrimental effect in the long-term;

- he decided to become Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces at the front;
- he rejected the overtures of the 'Progressive Bloc' to form a Duma-based cabinet.

### Nicholas as Commander-in-Chief

There were good reasons why Nicholas should take over as Commander-in-Chief. The incumbent, the Grand Duke Nicholas, was in a state of panic and his generals were incompetent; the Tsar would be a more calming influence and his Chief-of-Staff, General Alekseev, who would decide strategy and operations, had some ability. In addition, many peasant soldiers still venerated their Tsar and there was some hope that morale would improve. Another consideration was that it prevented the military from colluding with the opposition at Nicholas's expense. Nicholas himself saw it as a necessary act of duty and patriotism. He left for the front on 22 August.

On the other hand, the Council of Ministers was horrified. They felt Nicholas would be held responsible for every reverse; but as it happened the front stabilised in the autumn as the Germans ran out of steam. However, the absence of the Tsar from the home front did have unfortunate consequences in the capital where the unpopular Tsarina, Alexandra, interfered with government, often at the behest of Rasputin. In addition, the opportunity to create a broad-based government was missed.

The 'Progressive Bloc' came into being in the summer of 1915 and consisted of two-thirds of the Duma and a sizeable proportion of the State Council (it thus represented conservatives as well as liberals). It had the support of some government ministers, much of the press and two important organisations - the Town Union and the *Zemstvo* Union - that had been created in August 1914 to help the war effort. The Bloc also appeared to have middle-class support in Moscow and the provinces. It concocted a legislative programme (presented on 25 August) but the details are unimportant; what is important is the fact that it was an attempt to create a partnership in government with wide support, an attempt to create a 'National Government' - a ministry of public confidence.

On 21 August most ministers requested that Nicholas let the Duma form a government. Nicholas was unmoved; he was determined not to make the mistake he believed he had made in October 1905. He would not surrender any power, he would not compromise. Indeed he even decided to prorogue the Duma (which he did on 3 September). His response was greeted with disbelief. It isolated him from virtually all the educated classes. To ignore even conservatives was indeed short-sighted. But there was little the politicians could do; they did not want a revolution. However, as the front stabilised, the crisis abated. In the nine months that followed, Nicholas's firmness seemed to be vindicated.



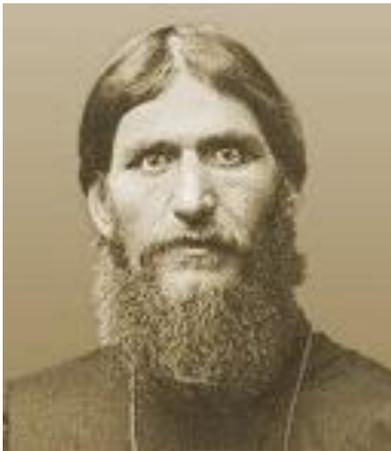
**1916** - In the second year of the war the Russian army recovered. As we have stated, the front stabilised and the Germans decided to suspend offensive operations in the East. Thanks to greater cooperation between industry and government, and imports, the shortages of shells and rifles were finally overcome. When the 1916 campaigning season began, the Russian army was in fact larger and better equipped than at any previous time in the war. Indeed by the summer, the Imperial army was in a position to launch a major offensive. Prior to that, at the beginning of the year, it had enjoyed quite a bit of success on the Caucasian front against the Turks. The Brusilov Offensive - named after the general (left) who led it - brought the Austrian army to the verge of collapse in the summer. The Russian advance continued for 10 weeks on a front 200 miles long and Austrian losses may have been nearly a million (300,000 prisoners were taken). Once again Austria was saved by the Germans who transferred 15 divisions from the West. From here on the Austrians ceased to function independently but the Russians could not get the better of the Germans. Brusilov's success inspired the Romanians to join the

war on the Allied side but they were soon overrun and their participation only succeeded in extending Russia's front line to the Black Sea. Despite suffering half a million casualties in this offensive, Russia's military performance in 1916 was quite encouraging.

**The home front** - Just as the front line was at its strongest, the home front began to crack. Whereas in 1915 it had been the educated classes which had become disaffected, in 1916 they were joined by all urban dwellers, but particularly the proletariat. The causes were primarily economic - shortage of food and fuel, and high prices - but the fusion of urban mass discontent with that of the liberal politicians (as in October 1905), proved to be a dangerous political cocktail. It completely unnerved many members of the establishment who now came to so fear revolution that they too demanded political change - and when that was not forthcoming, came to consider the removal of the Tsar himself. Inflation was not initially a problem in Russia but prices began to rise at the end of 1915 and then more than doubled in 1916. This benefited the peasantry who could command high prices for their grain and high wages for labour (which was scarce because of conscription). In the autumn of 1916 the Department of Police reported that rural areas were 'contented and calm'. A succession of good harvests also meant there was plenty of surplus grain to sell. The situation in the cities, however, was not good, and inflation and shortages of food and fuel became acute in 1916. The urban population is estimated to have grown from 22 million to 28 million between 1914 and 1916, another colossal increase comparable to that which occurred after 1910. Wages could not keep pace with prices; in October 1916 the Police estimated that wages had risen 100 per cent in the past two years, but prices had gone up by 300 per cent. Everyone was affected - industrial workers, white-collar workers, government bureaucrats, and even the police themselves. The Department of Police warned that great danger existed of a popular explosion brought on by collapsing living standards. 'The ordinary inhabitant [is] condemned to a half-starved existence.' The head of police added that the government, including the Emperor himself, was held to blame. Indeed it was reported at the end of September 1916 that disaffection among the masses was now at a level comparable with that of 1905 (though the number of workers on strike was much less). Most observers agreed that a crisis was looming. What were the reasons for this crisis? There were three: A the collapse of the rail network A the requirements of the army A the hoarding of grain by the peasants. There was no shortage of grain; it was simply not getting to the towns. The rail network was in a state of serious deterioration (it had not been very good to begin with), the rolling stock was worn out, repairs were not being made, and the same applied to the railroad itself which was often single track. The retreat had also led to the loss of one of the two main north-south lines. The army had requisitioned about one-third of the rolling stock to transport soldiers and supplies including vast shipments of foodstuffs. The peasants began hoarding grain when it got to the point that there was nothing to buy (or what there was, was too expensive); there was no incentive to sell if there were no farming tools or consumer goods available. These were not being made as industry was concentrating on armament production.

The Tsar was aware of the crisis on the home front but bewildered as to how to resolve it. He had become, by the autumn of 1916, a shadow of his former self (which many would say was not much). Back in Petrograd (as St Petersburg was renamed at the beginning of the war), the Tsar's absence left a great deal of power in the hands of the Tsarina Alexandra. Because she was German she was an easy target for rumours of treachery. She knew little

about policies (Benckendorff described her as having 'a will of iron linked to not much brain') and concentrated more on personalities.



Alexandra was also influenced by Rasputin (left), who only now began to have some say in appointments and policies, a factor which became well known in Petrograd. Regardless of his actual influence, popular perception believed it to be considerable; the fact that the Imperial couple could be swayed by an ignorant, debauched peasant did little for the monarchy's prestige. Alexandra encouraged Nicholas to change ministers with such frequency that the process became known as 'ministerial leapfrog'. Anyone who showed some independence of mind was replaced by someone whom the Empress and Rasputin liked - someone who would be loyal, obedient and unquestioning. These changes not only weakened the government but administrative continuity as well (in fact between August 1915 and February 1917 13 major ministries saw 36 ministers come and go). Together with the Tsar's apathy, all this meant that the civilian government was in many ways leaderless, in a state of drift. A vacuum was developing. In the winter of 1916-17 enormous pressure built up on Nicholas II to concede a government which would be

chosen from the Duma. When in September 1916 Nicholas had appointed the deputy chairman of the Duma, Alexander Protopopov, as Minister of the Interior, it aroused great hopes of a responsible ministry, but it was not to be. In fact, Protopopov turned out to be something of a disaster and seriously undermined the effectiveness of a crucial ministry at a critical time. At the beginning of November, Miliukov, the Kadet leader, made an inflammatory speech in the Duma in which he attacked the government for its incompetence and ended by wondering whether it was the result of stupidity or perhaps even treason.



Conservatives, and even members of the royal family, now warned Nicholas of impending revolution and begged him to make concessions. Nicholas did not respond. Many now came to see him as an obstacle to victory and a guarantee of revolution. For the first time liberals and monarchists made common cause against the crown. The oppositional mood even spread to the generals - General Krymov told Rodzianko (left), the chairman of the Duma, that the army would welcome a *coup d'etat* even the murder of Rasputin in December - undertaken by members of the aristocracy in a desperate attempt to reduce the damage being inflicted on the monarchy - could not reverse the Tsar's growing isolation. Although Nicholas appeared to no longer have the will to stand firm, he still failed to respond constructively to any suggestions. As 1916 drew to a close, the political situation was serious. The extreme left wanted a revolution; the liberals wanted constitutional government and many on the right simply wished to replace Nicholas. Indeed a number of conspiracies were afoot to that end but they were not successful at this time. The Tsar himself was exhausted and depressed, a man out of his depth.

## The February Revolution

Even before the war the cities of the north - Petrograd and Moscow - were dependent on the grain-producing regions of the south. During the war, as we have already indicated, the pattern of supply had broken down as the rail network became increasingly disrupted. By late 1916 the two cities were only getting about one-third of their food requirements; and Petrograd only about half the fuel it needed. After two mild winters, 1916-17 proved to be bitterly cold so the fuel shortage became even more serious - factories had to be shut, and bakeries could not bake. Moreover, freezing weather also immobilised much rolling stock (about 60,000 trucks) and heavy snow blocked lines. Army rations had to be reduced as well. However, despite all this hardship and the anxiety of the middle class, the workers endured these deteriorating conditions with remarkable restraint. No one was actually starving, and industrial unrest was not yet serious. Despite police comparisons, the level of strikes in 1916 was running at less than a quarter of that of 1905 (and the demands were economic rather than political). The panic developing in the elite was not based on what was happening, but what might happen. On 9 January 1917 the Workers' Group (of the War Industries Committee) in Petrograd issued a strike call for the anniversary of Bloody Sunday and 140,000 workers responded. Next the group planned a demonstration on 14 February when the Duma was due to reconvene, to call for a radical change in government. Protopopov moved to prevent this by arresting the Workers' Group leadership on 27 January and placing military control of the city under the Cossack General Khabalov. This had the desired effect; the demonstration was called off, but even so 90,000 workers went on strike that day. The strike movement was now gaining a momentum of its own, though demonstrations remained peaceful for the time being and the cold weather kept many indoors. However on 21 February the Putilov Works had to shut down because of lack of fuel and tens of thousands of workers were laid off. The next day the Tsar, who had returned to Petrograd for Christmas, decided to return to the front. Suddenly, to everyone's

surprise, the situation transformed dramatically; disorders broke out that would not subside, aided perhaps by a short period of mild weather.

On International Women's Day (23 February) a procession of demonstrating women, protesting against the shortages of bread and the long queues, coalesced with about 100,000 workers on strike or locked out. On 24 February, 200,000 workers came out on the streets and the following day the numbers rose as high as 300,000. It was becoming clear that the workers were determined to sustain the protest. Nicholas, unaware of the seriousness of the situation, demanded that order be restored by military force. On 26 February, military units took up positions around the city and in several districts the troops opened fire. By nightfall order seemed to have been restored though ominously a small mutiny had occurred among some of the garrison troops but it had been contained. On the same day, Nicholas ordered that the Duma be prorogued. Then on 27 February, all hell broke loose. The garrison mutinied and the mutinous soldiers fraternised with the striking workers. Prisoners were released from the Peter and Paul Fortress, the Ministry of the Interior was sacked, the Okhrana headquarters overrun and the Winter-Palace occupied. Shops, restaurants and private houses were looted and arsenals rifled. Of the 160,000-strong garrison, half was in full mutiny and the rest simply looked on. The authorities were helpless. The ministers asked to resign so they could make way for a Duma ministry. Nicholas refused their request and decided to return to Petrograd himself. He called upon his generals to assemble reliable troops to put down the mutiny. At this stage only Petrograd was in revolt; the rest of the country was quiet. On 28 February General Chief of Staff Alekseev reported these events to his generals:



*On 27 February about midday, the President of the State Duma reported that the troops were going over to the side of the population and killing their officers. General Khabaiov around midday on the 27th reported to His Majesty that one company of the Pavlovsky Regiment's reserve battalion had declared on 26 February that it would not fire on the people. The Commander of a battalion of this regiment was wounded by the crowd. On 27 February training detachments of the Voynsky Regiment refused to proceed against the rebels, and its commander shot himself. Then this detachment together with a company of the same regiment proceeded to the quarters of other reserve battalions, and men from these units began to join them...*

*On the 27th, after 7 p.m., the Minister of War reported that the situation in Petrograd had become very serious. The few units which have remained faithful to their duty cannot suppress the rebellion, and troop units have gradually joined the rebels. Fires have started. Petrograd has been placed under martial law...*

*On 28 February at 1 a.m. His Majesty received a telegram from General Khabalov stating that he could not restore order in the capital. The majority of the units have betrayed their duty and many have passed over to the side of the rebels. The troops which have remained faithful to their duty, after fighting the whole day, have suffered many casualties.*

*Towards evening the rebels seized the greater part of the capital, and the small units, which have remained faithful to their oath, have been rallied in the vicinity of the Winter Palace. At 2 a.m. the Minister of War reported that the rebels had occupied the Mariinsky palace and that the members of the revolutionary government were there. At 8.25., General Khabalov reported that the number of those who had remained faithful had dropped to 600 infantrymen and 500 cavalrymen with 15 machine guns and 12 guns having only 80 cartridges and that the situation was extremely difficult...*

*We have just received a telegram from the Minister of War, stating that the rebels have seized the most important buildings in all parts of the city. Due to fatigue and propaganda the troops have laid down their arms, passed to the side of the rebels, or become neutral. In the streets disorderly shooting is going on all the time; all traffic has stopped; officers and soldiers who appear in the streets are being disarmed.*

*The ministers are all safe, but apparently the work of the Ministry has stopped.*

*According to private information, the President of the State Council, Shcheglovitov, has been arrested. In the State Duma, a council of party leaders has been formed to establish contact for the revolutionary government with institutions and individuals. Supplementary elections to the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies from the workers and the rebel troops have been announced.*

*We have just received a telegram from General Khabalov which shows that actually he cannot any longer influence events. Communicating to you the foregoing, I should add that we, the active army, all have the sacred duty before the Tsar and the motherland to remain true to our duty and to our oath, and to maintain railway traffic and the flow of food. - Martin McCauley, **The Russian Revolution and the Soviet State***

The people in Petrograd now looked to the Duma politicians for leadership but as many of them did not wish to defy the Tsar they compromised; the Duma was dissolved but a Provisional Duma Committee remained in existence to restore order. It was clear that the politicians had been taken by surprise and were being 'led' by the will of the people. Members of the establishment, paralysed by fear, also pledged loyalty to this 'Provisional Government'. On the same day, the Workers' Group revived the Petrograd Soviet which pledged to restore order and food supplies.

Meanwhile the Tsar's train journey was blocked by 'unfriendly troops' and he was forced to make a detour to Pskov, where he arrived on 1 March. Nicholas's fate now lay with his generals. Their main aim was to win the war against Germany. Putting down internal disorder could weaken the front line and mutiny might spread. The generals favoured a ministry of Duma politicians as the easiest way to restore order in the rear. Nicholas agreed to this at the end of the day, but the following morning (2 March) Rodzianko, Chairman of the Duma Committee, made it clear that the people wanted the Tsar to abdicate. The senior generals, who had lost confidence in Nicholas's ability to rule, then all advised the Tsar to do so. They did this believing that the Duma leaders were in control and that revolution would be avoided by abdication. Abandoned by his generals, Nicholas had no real choice but to step down.

Two Duma politicians, Shilgun and Guchkov, also arrived in Pskov to demand the Tsar's abdication. They did, however, hope to save the monarchy and hoped the Tsar would step down in favour of his son, Alexis. But the Tsar would not because of his son's haemophilia; instead he designated Grand-Duke Michael as his heir. However, this discussion was academic; by the following day the Duma Committee had decided that the continuation of the monarchy in any form was unacceptable to the workers and soldiers of Petrograd and Grand-Duke Nicholas II Michael was persuaded to stand aside. So ended 300 years of Romanov rule. Nicholas II broke down and wept.

## Analysis

When the end came it was sudden, swift and, despite the many forecasts of doom, something of a surprise. Why did it happen when it did? What were the causes of this dramatic event? Obviously there are so many, the student can be forgiven for being unable to distinguish which are the more important ones. It might be instructive to begin by comparing 1917 with 1905. What were the similarities? What were the (crucial) differences?

The similarities are reasonably clear: in October 1905 and February 1917 discontent fuelled by defeat in war fused liberal political aspirations with the grievances of the proletariat (industrial working class). Workers and middle-class politicians came together to shake the monarchy. Nicholas was able to survive in 1905 because the war with Japan was over, he made timely concessions, and because he retained the support of the elite and the loyalty of the bulk of the army, which enabled him to use force to restore order and suppress discontent. The difference in 1917 was that all of these options were unavailable to him.

There are, then, important differences that distinguish 1917:

- the war was not over
- the army was not loyal
- the elite was prepared to sacrifice the Tsar.

As all three of these points are interrelated it is impossible to determine which of them is more important than the other.

Quite clearly the war was crucial - without it what happened could not have happened. Defeat in 1915 had alienated the liberal politicians; food and fuel shortages in 1916 had alienated all urban dwellers - the professional classes as well as the industrial workers. However, mass urban discontent could be contained by force and the liberals were always wary of unleashing a revolution. These groups could be controlled in 1905. What was crucially different in 1917 was the condition of the army.

During the course of the First World War nearly 15 million men were called up - about half were the victims of enemy action (2.4 million prisoners; 2.8 million wounded; 1.8 million killed). The loyal soldiers of 1914 (and more importantly, their loyal, upper-class officers) no longer existed in 1917. The soldiers in the army of 1917 were an unknown quantity whose loyalty and patriotism the generals and the Tsar could not be sure of. Moreover, the bulk of the trained army was in the front line facing the enemy. They did not mutiny: the Tsar was brought down by the 160,000 garrison troops of Petrograd. Of course, the garrison troops were not professional soldiers; they were not even trained soldiers; they were freshly drafted peasant recruits who were crammed into barracks designed to hold about 20,000. Rodzianko observed 'these of course were not soldiers but peasants taken directly from the plough'. Could they have been dealt with? The answer is hypothetical, but possibly yes. There must have been some loyal troops the government could rely on to restore order but removing them from the front to recapture Petrograd would have undoubtedly weakened the line against the Germans and jeopardised the war effort. Such action might have led to civil war and it might have failed. However, it should be observed

that most of Russia was calm - the countryside was quiet, as indeed were most of the cities (though Moscow quickly fell to the revolutionaries after 27 February). It has been suggested that the situation was indeed manageable.

**If this is the case, then the key factor becomes the decision of the elite to abandon Nicholas.** The monarchy was so discredited by February 1917 that even committed monarchists had turned against it. No one was prepared to save the monarchy. The blame for this situation rests squarely with Nicholas II whose weakness and failure to make concessions earlier, say, in the autumn of 1916, deprived the monarchy of all support. The government was entirely discredited and under the guidance of 'that German woman', the Tsarina, had virtually disintegrated. Therefore it was the decision of the generals not to support Nicholas and not to restore order that brought him down. Had Nicholas embraced the Duma politicians, he would have probably retained the support of the elite, but this takes no account of the disaffection of the urban masses. Nevertheless, hypothesis played an important role in the revolution, in the form of fear of what might happen. The middle classes and the elite were driven by fear: fear of revolution, fear of the masses rising up and depriving them of their wealth and privileges. There was so much fear that the educated classes came to expect a revolution, even when it was not imminent. Accordingly, when mass unrest did break out, the Duma politicians and the generals were paralysed and did not know what to do. By removing the Tsar they thought they were preventing a revolution. They made the false assumption that after his removal things could only get better. In fact, the middle classes greeted the abdication with relief and, in many instances, delight. How wrong they were!

What the generals and politicians had done was to unleash the revolution they had sought to prevent. They came to be swept along by events, swept along by the aspirations of the masses. The people knew what they wanted; the elite did not know how to hold on to what it had. Once the Tsar was removed, the state was decapitated, authority collapsed, the whole structure of society began to unravel and a climate of disobedience developed. It was allowed to develop by paralysis at the top. The problem was that there was really no one at the top at all, there was a vacuum: no one was prepared to take the responsibility and use force to restore law and order.

The revolution was a spontaneous affair; unplanned and with no clear leadership. That does not mean to say that the revolution was not consciously willed; it was the result of many long-standing grievances and a determination by ordinary people to bring about real change and an improvement in their living and working conditions. It had little to do with the revolutionary parties. The motivation of the masses was very much their own; the revolution was a truly popular movement 'from below'. This was not going to be easily reconciled with the very different aspirations of the generals and the Duma politicians.

## Questions

1. Explain why the Bosnian crisis of 1908-9 had such an influence on Russian foreign policy in the period before WWI.
2. Explain the statement 'Germany's fear of Russia's potential military might well have been the fundamental cause of the First World War'.
3. How did Russian mobilization help bring about WWI?
4. Explain why 'by June 1915, the spirit of common purpose that had united the government and opposition ... vanished, yielding to recriminations and hostility even more intense than the mood of 1904-5' (Richard Pipes).
5. To what extent was the Tsar's decision to take over as Commander-in-Chief a good decision?
6. Why, by the autumn of 1916 had the home front begun to 'crack'?
7. How important was the role of Rasputin to the political crisis in 1916?
8. Make a timeline of the events leading up March 2<sup>nd</sup>.
9. What were the immediate causes of the February Revolution?
10. Which was the most important cause of the February Revolution?