

## Why did the authority of the Tsarist State collapse so completely in 1917?

The Tsarist regime was put under severe pressure by the challenges imposed by the First World War. The stresses and strains evident in Russia before 1914 were deepened by the enormous demands placed on the country by its involvement. The start of the war saw a rallying of support for the Tsar but as military defeats occurred and economic dislocation caused shortages in the cities, the survival of the regime was undermined. As disillusionment grew, even the Tsar's own supporters turned against him. By February 1917, faced with serious unrest across the Empire, the regime collapsed.



### TO ALL MILITARY AND NAVAL FORCES

Today I have assumed command of all the military and naval forces operating in the theatre of war.

With firm trust in divine mercy and unshakeable confidence in ultimate victory, we shall fulfil our sacred duty of defending our country to the death, and we will never allow Russian soil to be dishonoured.

Given at General Headquarters, 5 September 1915.

*signed* NICHOLAS

rioters ransacked the bakers shop; the police were overpowered in parts of the city; and Cossack and Guards regiments sent to deal with the strikers chose instead to support them. Finding themselves powerless, the government ministers went into hiding. Tsar Nicholas abdicated on 15<sup>th</sup> March 1917. The rule of the Romanov dynasty, which had held autocratic sway in Russia for over three hundred years, was at an end.

- There had been demonstrations in the past and these had effectively been dealt with by the Cossacks and other troops. The difference this time was that the soldiers joined the demonstrators. Many of the soldiers in the Petrograd garrison were young reservists, some fresh from the villages, who identified more easily with the people on the streets. They were desperate not to be sent to the front line where the Russian army was suffering huge losses, and they shared the dissatisfaction with the way the war was being conducted and the impact it was having on the living conditions of ordinary Russian in the cities.

It was, paradoxically, Tsar Nicholas himself who initiated the mutiny of his own soldiers. Hearing about the trouble in Petrograd, he ordered that troops put down the disorders. On Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> February, some regiments opened fire on the crowds, killing a number of demonstrators. This tipped the scales. The crowds became hostile and the soldiers now had to decide which side they were on: were they going to join the people or fire on them. One by one, regiments moved over to the side of the people. There were some fighting between soldiers in different regiments and a number of officers were killed, but this was largely over by 27<sup>th</sup> February. As Orlando Figes puts it, ***“The mutiny of the Petrograd garrison turned the disorders of the last four days into a full-scale revolution.”***

The main struggle now took place between the soldiers and the police. The police had taken the main role in attacking demonstrators and had a habit of putting snipers on rooftops to fire down on the crowds. Soldiers rooted them out, throwing them off the roofs on to the streets to the cheers of the crowds below. Police stations were attacked and police records destroyed. The prisons were thrown open and the prisoners released.

## The Downfall of the Tsar

### Factor 1 –

#### The Disintegration of the Russian Army

- At the outbreak of war in 1914 the Imperial Russian Army faced its German and Austro – Hungarian adversaries with one considerable advantage – manpower. Unfortunately, the defects of the Russian military system were so considerable as to largely negate this priceless asset.

Russia had a number of able commanders. There were others, however, whose ineptitude and carelessness beggared belief. Furthermore, the commanders were served by a poor staff: too many unsuitable and untrained young aristocrats thronged its ranks, whilst many staff-trained officers had little or no regimental experience. Weaponry and equipment were also much behind western standards. Heavy artillery was very scarce. Reserves of rifles and ammunition for the inadequately trained conscripts were insufficient and the Russian munitions industry was poorly developed. Corruption pervaded the army's administrative services.

In the campaign of 1914 huge casualties were sustained by the Russians, who suffered severely from their shortage of munitions. The enormous losses of weapons and equipment and the dearth of reserve stocks left the Russian armies in poor condition for the conduct of a major campaign in 1915. Theoretically they had six and a quarter million men under arms, but over a third of them were without rifles, while others were armed with an assortment of imported foreign weapons. Artillery ammunition was still insufficient. Russia's army was still in being, but it lacked many of its best fighting divisions and was desperately short of munitions. Recruits were now being sent to the front after only four weeks' training armed simply with clubs. Over two million men had been lost, half of them as prisoners. Desertion from the ranks was already serious.

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In the 1916 campaign Russia lost a further million men. The bitter fighting finally broke the spirit of the army. By the onset of winter 1916 a further million had deserted the ranks and returned to their homes. The Tsar's regime did not last long. The succession of colossal military defeats, the worsening food supply situation in Petrograd, growing indiscipline in the armies and seething political discontent were at the heart of its failure.

- The soldiers of the so-called Russian "steamroller" army lacked adequate training and were poorly led. Recruits drafted in as replacements for the losses were often without weapons and had to use agricultural implements or wait to take rifles from the fallen. They were inadequately equipped, had insufficient artillery and very few aircraft. For their offensives, they still depended heavily on the success of cavalry charges and even such skilled horsemen, as the Cossacks were no match for German machine gunners. It has been estimated that during the first year of the war Russia lost four million men. Of the slaughter, Hidendurg wrote, "Sometimes we had to remove the mounds of enemy corpses from before our trenches in order to get a clear field of fire against fresh assaulting waves." John Erickson in *The Eastern Front*, summed up the situation:

"the Russian infantry ill-equipped and under-fed performed great feats of endurance and showed raw, unflinching courage, but manpower could not match the murderous enemy firepower: German superiority in artillery mangled the Russian army. Within a month of the opening of the war, Russian armies were chronically starved of ammunition and their gun batteries bereft of shells..... The Russian High Command was inept and allowed the army to take to the field inadequately trained, incompetently led, badly supplied-and for all this the peasant soldier had to pay with his life. His back proved broad, but not unbreakable."

The war not only revealed poor government planning but also the political ineptitude of the Tsar. The Duma was dissolved in 1915 and the Tsar made clear his view that he should have sole control over the conduct of the war. In September, Nicholas, under pressure from Alexandra, took over command of the armed forces and went to the front to direct the fighting. He was now in a position where he could be seen as responsible for military defeats and be the target of officers' criticisms of the war effort. He was also cut off from information about the situation in St Petersburg, now renamed Petrograd (St Petersburg was considered to sound too German).

With Nicholas away at the front, Alexandra was left in control of government in the capital. Already unpopular because of her German background, Alexandra further added to the demoralisation of the government by taking the advice of Rasputin, a holy man and confidant of the Tsarina. He was able to exert a strong influence over Alexandra because of his apparent ability to control the condition of Alexis, the only son and heir of Nicholas, who suffered from haemophilia. Rasputin used his influence to get both church and government positions for his friends and cronies and as a result upset many of the aristocrats at court who saw their own influence over the Tsar threatened. Ministers were regularly sacked. During the course of 1916 there was a succession of three Ministers of War, four Ministers of Agriculture and five Ministers of the Interior. The government was in chaos and the aristocracy, who made up most of its personnel, was beginning to lose faith in the regime as an instrument for preserving its power.

## The Downfall of the Tsar

### Factor 2 -

The Tsar makes a "fatal" mistake by becoming the Commander – in - Chief

In August 1915 the Tsar decided to take personal command of the armed forces in place of his uncle, the Grand Duke Nikolai. This was a mistake. Nicholas II had little experience and, as commander, he was held personally to blame for every defeat. His new responsibilities kept him away from Petrograd and the day to day business of government was left in the hands of the Tsarina and Rasputin. The Tsar was bombarded with nagging letters from his wife, who insisted that he follow Rasputin's advice and ignore the suggestions of the Duma. Rasputin, like Nicholas, believed that the Tsar should wield supreme power. Many of the men who were, on Rasputin's advice, promoted to important government positions were incompetent.

### Factor 3 -

The Tsar fails to grant political concessions.

- Under growing pressure, the Tsar finally agreed to recall the Duma on 19 July 1915. The liberal opposition now had a platform on which to renew its demands for a ministry of national confidence.
- Two-thirds of the Duma deputies, along with like-minded members of the State Council, formed them into a Progressive Bloc to consolidate this campaign.
- The Bloc's aim was to prevent the country slipping into revolution by persuading the Tsar to appoint a new government capable of winning the people's support. Only this, they argued, could lead the country to victory.
- After four months of unrelieved gloom, with daily reports of defeats at the Front, industrial strikes and growing social chaos, the leaders of the Bloc saw their programme as the last real chance for the regime to find a political solution to its crisis of authority. They bent over backwards to make their proposals acceptable to the Tsar.
- Within the Council of Ministers there was a growing majority in favour of a compromise with the Progressive Bloc, especially after the Tsar had announced his decision to take over the military command thus leaving the government to the mercy of the Tsarina and Rasputin.
- On 28 August the "revolt of the ministers" came to a head with a direct appeal to the Tsar to appoint a new ministry enjoying the confidence of the Duma.
- Nicholas deemed it intolerable that at this critical moment for the Empire, when the firm hand of autocracy was needed more than ever, his ministers should think fit to ask him to renounce his personal rule.

- On 2 September he ordered the dissolution of the Duma. The Tsar had made up his mind to rule as an autocrat should, and no counsel, however wise or loyal, could make him change his mind.
- There followed a two-day strike in Petrograd against the Duma's closure. But otherwise the opposition's response was muted.
- On 16 September the ministers were summoned to Mogilev for a final dressing down.
- The ministers, having come determined to argue their case for reform, lost their nerve when confronted by the Tsar.
- The "revolt of the ministers" was over and the monarchy's final chance to save itself by political means had now been thrown away.



## The Downfall of the Tsar

### Factor 4 -

#### The mounting discontent in the cities

“The February Revolution was born in the bread queue.”

Orlando Figes

“The war destroyed the Russian Empire not because the army was defeated but because the home front collapsed.”

Dominic Lieven

“In March 1917 the imperial regime was brought down by a revolt of the Petrograd population caused, above all, by, the collapse of living standards during the war.”

Dominic Lieven

- In February 1917, a wave of popular unrest swept Tsar Nicholas II from office and the Romanov dynasty to oblivion. By the time Nicholas abdicated, it was clear that support for him had almost universally collapsed and there were few people left who wanted to see him or his family continuing to run the country.

The main push came from the workers in the cities whose pent-up frustration exploded after the hard, cold winter of 1916. Shortages of food, fuel and other materials-caused by the war-had driven up prices. Strikes and lock-outs had created high levels of tension in the capital, Petrograd.

Workers who had been laid off wandered the streets. Some women spent almost 24 hours in queues for food and other goods. When news of the introduction of bread rationing hit the streets towards the end of February 1917, the flood gates opened. Queues and scuffles over remaining bread stocks turned into riots.

The demonstrations grew and took on a more political nature. Demands for bread were accompanied by demands for an end to the war and an end to the Tsar. All classes of people joined the ranks of the workers marching towards the centre of the city. There seemed to be no general organisation of events. Certainly no political party was in charge: all the main leaders of the revolutionary parties were abroad or in exile. By Saturday, there was virtually a general strike as most of the major factories shut down and many shops and restaurants closed their doors.

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 proved to be a dangerous political cocktail.

Inflation was not initially a problem but prices began to rise at the end of 1915 and then more than doubled in 1916. Shortages of food and fuel also became acute in 1916. The urban population is estimated to have grown from 22 million to 28 million between 1914 and 1916. 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 Downfall of the Tsar

### Factor 5

**The mutiny of the Petrograd garrison and the collapse of the Tsar's government**

- The strikes that had been building up during the war came to a head in early March 1917. There was a huge demonstration on International women's Day, 8<sup>th</sup> March. Women from Petrograd joined workers from the vast Putilov factory. There were as many as 200,000 protestors on the streets of the capital. In the days that followed, the protests turned into a general strike with more and more people joining it. They were not only demanding more food but also an end to the war and the removal of the Tsar. In 1905 the Tsar had been able to call on the troops to put down the revolt. This was not the case in 1917. Many of the troops were sick of the war and so they joined in the protests rather than put them down. On 15<sup>th</sup> March Tsar Nicholas was forced to abdicate. He handed over power to his brother, Grand Duke Mikhail. However, Mikhail realised that very few people wanted an all-powerful ruler and so he stood down as well. Three hundred years of Romanov rule was over.
- In the long, bloody and increasingly punishing campaign of 1916 Russia lost a further million men. This bitter fighting finally broke the spirit of the army. By the onset of winter 1916 a further million had deserted the ranks and returned to their homes.

The Tsar's regime did not last long. The succession of colossal military defeats, the worsening food supply situation in Petrograd, growing indiscipline in the armies and seething political discontent were at the heart of its failure. The reaction of the Tsar and the corrupt clique around him was to tighten their control, which served only to heighten their unpopularity, complete the alienation of the liberal middle classes and finally break the loyalty of the army. In the capital food was scarce and strikes by the workers became general;