

# 4 War and Revolution 1914–17

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## POINTS TO CONSIDER

This chapter considers three principal interlocking themes: the reasons why Russia went to war in 1914, the effect that the war had on the internal situation in Russia, and how this contributed to the downfall of tsardom in February 1917. Your aim during your first reading of the chapter should be to gain a clear picture of these developments. The narrative of the February Revolution is fairly detailed so you may need to read it a number of times.

## KEY DATES

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### 1914

**28 June** Assassination of Franz Ferdinand at Sarajevo.

**28 July** Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia.

**29 July** Russian full mobilisation orders given.

**1 August** Germany declared war on Russia.

**August** Suspension of fourth duma.

### 1915

**June–July** The duma reconvened.

**June** The Progressive Bloc formed in the duma.

**August** Nicholas II made himself commander-in-chief of the Russian armies.

### 1916

**November** Duma reconvened.

**December** Rasputin murdered by a group of aristocrats.

### 1917

**18 February**  
**–4 March** February Revolution

**18 February** Strike began at Putilov factories in Petrograd.

**23 February** International Women's Day saw the beginning of widespread workers' demonstrations.

**25 February** A general strike began.

**27 February** unofficial meeting of committee of duma coincided with the first meeting of the Petrograd Soviet.

**28 February** Nicholas II prevented from returning to Petrograd.

**1 March** Soviet 'Order Number 1' was issued.

**2 March** Provisional Government formed from the duma committee.

Nicholas II abdicated.

# 1 Russia's Entry into the First World War

**KEY ISSUE** Why was Russia drawn into war in 1914?

There were no clear signs that the tsarist government wanted war in 1914. Russia's experience ten years earlier against Japan had made it wary of putting itself at risk again, and its foreign policy after 1905 had been essentially defensive. It had joined France and Britain in the Triple Entente as a means of safeguarding itself against the alliance of the Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary. However, the events that followed the assassination in June 1914 of Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, by Serbian nationalists made it virtually impossible for Russia to avoid being drawn into a European conflict.

By tradition, Russia was the protector of the Slav peoples of the Balkans. With the decline of Turkey, the old enemy, in the nineteenth century, Austria-Hungary was seen by Russia as the new threat. Sazonov, the tsar's foreign secretary in 1914, described the link between the commitment to defend Slav nationalism in the Balkans and Russia's long-standing strategic interests:

- 1 Russia's historical mission – the emancipation of the Christian peoples of the Balkan peninsula from the Turkish yoke – was almost fulfilled by the beginning of the twentieth century. Although these younger countries no longer needed the guardianship of Russia, they were not strong
- 5 enough to dispense with her help in the event of any attempt upon their national existence by warlike Teutonism [Germanic expansionism]. Serbia in particular was exposed to this danger, having become the object of the decorously concealed covetousness of Austrian diplomacy. Russia's sole and unchanging object was to see that those Balkan
- 10 peoples should not fall under the influence of powers hostile to her. The ultimate aim of Russian policy was to obtain free access to the Mediterranean, and to be in a position to defend her Black Sea coasts against the threat of the irruption of hostile naval forces through the Bosphorus.

A month after Franz Ferdinand's murder, Austria-Hungary, with German encouragement, declared war on Serbia. Russia still expected to be able to oblige the Austrians to withdraw, without itself having to go to war. It hoped that if it mobilised this would act as a deterrent to Austria. This was not unrealistic. Despite Russia's defeat by Japan, its armies were still regarded as formidable. Germans often spoke of 'the Russian steamroller', a reference to the immense reserves of manpower on which it was calculated that Russia could draw

It was at this stage that the great length of its western frontier became a critical consideration. Russia had two basic mobilisation

schemes, partial and full. 'Partial' involved plans for a campaign in the south-west in defence of its Slav interests in the Balkans; 'full' involved plans for a general European war. Both forms of mobilisation were based on detailed railway timetabling aimed at transporting huge numbers of men and vast amounts of material. The complexity of the timetables meant that the adoption of one type of mobilisation ruled out the use of the other. The Russian fear in July 1914 was that if it mobilised only partially it would leave itself defenceless should Austria's ally, Germany, strike at Russia's East Prussian and Polish borders. On the other hand, full mobilisation might well appear to Germany as a deliberate provocation. The German government did, indeed, warn Sazonov that if Russia mobilised Germany would have to do the same. The fact was that, according to German contingency plans, if Russia mobilised war became unavoidable. The German 'Schlieffen Plan' was based on the concept of eliminating the danger to Germany of a two-front war against France and Russia by a lightning knock-out blow against France. Speed was of the essence. Germany could not play a game of diplomatic bluff; it had to strike first. The French ambassador in St Petersburg at the time described the fateful Russian decision:

- 1 29th July ... At eleven o'clock tonight, Basily [deputy director at the Russian Foreign Office] came to tell me that the imperious language used by the German Ambassador this afternoon has decided the Russian Government (1) to order this very night the mobilisation of the  
5 13 corps earmarked for operations against Austria-Hungary, (2) secretly to commence general mobilisation.

These last words made me jump.

'Isn't it possible for them to confine themselves – provisionally at any rate – to a partial mobilisation?'

- 10 'No. The question has just been gone into thoroughly by a council of our highest military officers. They have come to the conclusion that in the existing circumstances the Russian Government has no choice between partial and general carried out only at the price of dislocating the entire machinery of general mobilisation. So if today we stopped at  
15 mobilising the 13 corps destined for operations against Austria and tomorrow Germany decided to give her ally military support, we should be powerless to defend ourselves on the frontiers of Poland and East Prussia.'

The Russian full mobilisation order, eventually signed by an uncertain tsar on 30 July, had been intended as a diplomatic manoeuvre which would still leave Russia free to hold back from war. In the event, it was the step that precipitated war. On 31 July Germany demanded that the Russians cease their mobilisation. The following day, not having received a response, Germany declared war on Russia. Four days later Austria-Hungary did the same.

## 2 Russia at War

**KEY ISSUE** To what extent did the 1914-18 War reveal the backwardness of the Russian state?

Nicholas had had reservations about war with Germany. In July he had exchanged a series of personal telegrams with his cousin, Kaiser William II, regretting the growing crisis in Russo-German relations. However, once war had been declared, the tsar became wholly committed to it. By 1917 the war would prove to be the undoing of tsardom, but in 1914 the outbreak of hostilities greatly enhanced the tsar's position. Nicholas became the symbol of the nation's resistance in its hour of need. Watching the great crowds cheering the tsar as he formally announced that Russia was at war, the French ambassador remarked: 'To those thousands the tsar really is the autocrat, the absolute master of their bodies and souls.' At a special session of the duma, all the deputies, save for the five Bolshevik representatives, fervently pledged themselves to the national struggle.

It was the same story in all the warring countries. The socialist parties abandoned their policies and committed themselves to the national war effort. Lenin was bitter in his condemnation of 'these class traitors'. He called on all true revolutionaries 'to transform the imperialist war everywhere into a civil war'. But the prevailing mood in Russia and Europe was all against him. The early stages of the war were dark days for Lenin's Bolsheviks. Vilified as traitors and German agents for their opposition to the war, they were forced to flee or go into hiding. Lenin, who was already in exile in Poland, made his way with Austrian help into neutral Switzerland. Had the war gone well for Russia there is good reason to think that the Bolshevik Party would have been hard pressed to survive.

But the war did not go well for Russia, and the reason was only partly military. The basic explanation for its decline and slide into revolution in 1917 was an economic one. Three years of total war were to prove too great a strain for the Russian economy to bear. War is a time when the character and structure of a society are put to the test in a particularly intense way. The longer the war lasts, the greater the test. During the years 1914-17, the political, social and economic institutions of Russia proved increasingly incapable of meeting the demands that war placed upon them. This does not prove that Russia was uniquely incompetent. The pressure of total war on all countries was immense and it should be remembered that of the six empires engaged in the First World War - Germany, Austria, Turkey, Russia, France and Britain - only the last two survived. Differing estimates have been made of Russia's potential for growth in 1914. But how-ever that is assessed, the fact remains that the demands of the 1914-18 War eventually proved too heavy for Russia to sustain.

The impact of the war on Russia can be conveniently studied under four headings.

### a) Inflation

Russia had achieved remarkable financial stability by 1914. 98 per cent of its bank notes were backed by gold and it had the largest gold reserves of any European country. This happy position was destroyed by the war. Between 1914 and 1917 over 1.5 billion roubles were spent on the war effort. The national budget multiplied from four million roubles in 1913 to 30 million in 1916. Increased taxation at home and heavy borrowing from abroad were only partially successful in supplying the capital Russia needed. The gold standard was abandoned, which allowed the government to put more notes into circulation. In the short-term this enabled wages to be paid and commerce to continue, but in the long-term it made money practically worthless. The result was severe inflation, which became particularly acute in 1916. In broad terms, between 1914 and 1916 average earnings doubled while the price of food and fuel quadrupled.

Prices (to a base unit of 100)		notes in circulation (to a base unit of 100)	
July 1914	100	July 1914	100
January 1915	130	January 1915	146
January 1916	141	January 1916	199
January 1917	398	January 1917	336

### b) Food Supplies

To the growing problem of food prices were added the difficulties of food supplies. Military needs led to the requisitioning of farm horses and a drastic cut in the supply of chemical fertilisers. It was difficult to sustain agricultural output in such circumstances. However, the decline in food production should not be exaggerated. During the first two years of the war the grain yield was maintained at a slightly higher rate than the average for the five years before 1915. It was not until 1916 that it began to fall. Part of the reason was that inflation made trading unprofitable and so the peasants stopped marketing their produce and began hoarding their stocks. What increased the problems for the ordinary Russian in acquiring regular supplies was that the army had first claim on the more limited amount of food that was produced. The armed services also had prior use of the transport system. They commandeered the railways and the roads, with the result that food distribution to civilian areas became unreliable and inadequate.

Hunger bordering on famine was a constant reality for much of

Russia during the war years. Shortages were at their worst in the towns and cities. Petrograd (the Russian name for St Petersburg, adopted for patriotic reasons soon after the war began) suffered particularly badly because of its remoteness from the food-producing regions and because of the large number of refugees who swelled its population and increased the demand on its dwindling resources.

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**Daily civilian bread ration in Petrograd (in pounds weight)**

January 1916	2.7
December 1916	2.3
March 1917	1.8

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### **c) Transport**

It was the disruption of the transport system rather than the decline in food production that was the major cause of Russia's wartime privations. The growth of the railways, from 13,000 to 44,000 miles between 1881 and 1914, had been an impressive feature of Russia's economic development, but it still did not meet the demands of war. The integrated character of a railway network means that even a minor hold-up in one place can badly affect the whole system. The attempt to transport millions of troops and masses of supplies to the war fronts created unbearable pressures. Blocked lines and trains stranded by locomotive breakdown or lack of coal became increasingly common.

Less than two years after the war began, the Russian railway system had virtually collapsed. By 1916, 575 stations were no longer capable of handling freight. A graphic example of the confusion was provided by Archangel, the northern port through which the bulk of the allied supplies to Russia were sent. So great was the pile-up of undistributed goods that they sank into the ground beneath the weight of new supplies. Elsewhere there were frequent reports of food rotting in railway trucks that could not be moved. One of the tsar's wartime prime ministers later admitted: 'There were so many trucks blocking the lines that we had to tip some of them down the embankments to move the ones that arrived later.' By 1916 Petrograd and Moscow were receiving only a third of their food and fuel requirements. Before the war Moscow had received an average of 2,200 wagons of grain per month; by February 1917 this figure had dropped to below 700. The figures for Petrograd told a similar story; in February 1917 the capital received only 300 wagon-loads of grain instead of the 1,000 it needed.

### **d) The Army**

A striking statistic of the Great War is that Russia, in proportion to its population, put fewer than half the troops into the field that either Germany or France did.

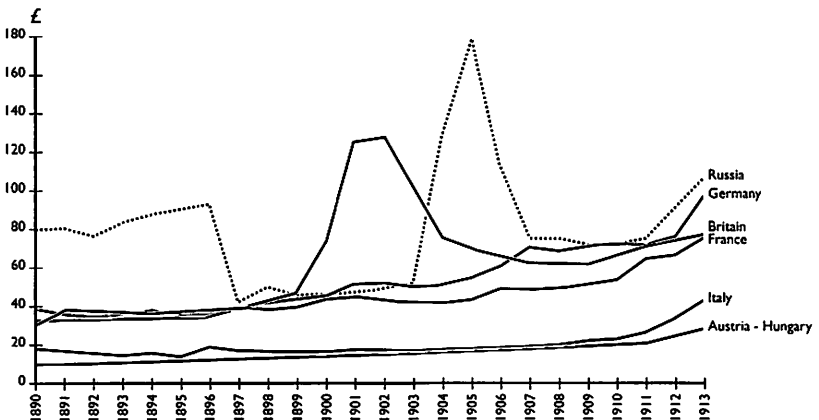
### Numbers and percentages of the population mobilised

	1914	1918	total population	% of population mobilised
Russia	5.3 million	15.3 million	180 million	8.8
Germany	3.8 million	14.0 million	68 million	20.5
France	3.8 million	7.9 million	39 million	19.9
Britain	0.6 million	5.7 million	45 million	12.7

Yet in aggregate numbers the Russia army was still a mighty force. It had by far the largest army of all the countries that fought in the war. Its crippling weakness, which denied it the military advantage that its sheer size should have given it, was lack of equipment. This was not a matter of Russia's military underspending. Indeed, until 1914 Russia led Europe in the amount and the proportions it spent on defence.

The problem lay not in lack of resources but in poor administration and confused liaison. Despite commandeering the transport system, the military was as much a victim of the poor distribution of resources as the civilian population. In the first two years of the war the army managed to meet its supply needs, but from 1916 serious shortages began to occur. Rodzyanko, the president of the duma, who in 1916 undertook a special fact-finding study of conditions in the army, reported to the duma on the widespread disorganisation and its dismal effects:

- 1 General Ruzsky complained to me of lack of ammunition and the poor equipment of the men. There was a great shortage of boots. The soldiers fought barefooted.



The comparative defence expenditure of the European powers, 1890–1913 (£million).

The hospitals and stations of the Red Cross, which came under my  
 5 notice, were in excellent condition; but the war hospitals were disor-  
 ganised. They were short of bandages and such things. The great evil  
 was, of course, the lack of co-operation between the two organisations.  
 At the front, one had to walk about ten or more versts from the war  
 hospitals to those of the Red Cross. [A verst is two thirds of a mile.]  
 10 The Grand Duke stated that he was obliged to stop fighting, tem-  
 porarily for lack of ammunition and boots.

There was plenty of material and labour in Russia. But as it stood  
 then, one region had leather, another nails, another soles, and still  
 another cheap labour. The best thing to do would be to call a congress  
 15 of the heads of the *zemstvos* and ask for their co-operation.

The clear implication in Rodzyanko's account was that the strong  
 central leadership which the war effort desperately needed was not  
 being provided. This was a view that became increasingly widespread.  
 Nicholas had made the momentous decision in 1915 to assume direct  
 command of Russia's armed services. It was a gesture intended to rally  
 the nation around the tsar, but what it did was to make him person-  
 ally responsible for Russia's performance in the war. If things went  
 badly he was to blame. Lack of success could no longer be blamed  
 upon his appointees.

The suffering that the food shortages and the dislocated transport  
 system brought to both troops and civilians might have been bearable  
 had the news from the war front been encouraging or had there been  
 inspired leadership from the top. But, despite occasional military suc-  
 cesses, such as those achieved on the south-western front in 1916  
 when a Russian offensive under General Brusilov killed or wounded  
 half a million Austrian troops, took another 300,00 as prisoners, and  
 brought Austria-Hungary to the point of collapse, the gains made  
 were never enough to justify the appalling casualty lists. The enthusi-  
 asm and high morale of August 1914 had turned by 1916 into pes-  
 simism and defeatism. Ill-equipped and under-fed, the 'peasants in  
 uniform' who composed the Russian army began to desert in increas-  
 ing numbers.

Care should be taken not to understate Russia's military capabili-  
 ties. Modern research, such as that undertaken by E.Mawdsley and  
 Norman Stone, has challenged the notion that the Russian army was  
 on the verge of collapse in 1917. Mutinies had occurred but these  
 were not exclusive to Russia. The strains of war in 1917 produced  
 mutinies in all the major armies, including the French and British.  
 Norman Stone dismisses the idea of a disintegrating Russian army as  
 a Bolshevik 'fabrication'. With all its problems the Russian armies  
 were still intact as a fighting force in 1917. Stone also emphasises the  
 vital role that Russia played as an ally of Britain and France in tying  
 down the Germans for over three years on the eastern front. An inter-  
 esting detail, indicating how far Russia was from absolute collapse in



1916, is that in that year Russia managed to produce more shells than Germany. To quote these findings is not to deny the importance of Russia's military crises, but it is to recognise that historians have traditionally tended to exaggerate Russia's military weakness in 1917.

### 3 The Growth of Political Opposition to Tsardom

**KEY ISSUE** Was the growth of opposition to the tsarist regime evidence of an 'institutional crisis' in Russia?

By 1916 all important sections of the population shared the view that the tsar was an inept political and military leader, incapable of providing the inspiration that the nation needed. It is significant that the first moves in the February Revolution in 1917, the event that led to the fall of tsardom, were not made by the political revolutionaries. The Revolution was set in motion by those elements of Russian society which in 1914 had been the most eager to rally to the tsar, but which, by the winter of 1916, were too wearied by his incompetence to wish to save him or the barren system he represented.

In August 1914, the duma showed its total support for the tsar by voting for its own suspension for the duration of the war. But within a year Russia's poor showing in the war led to its demanding its own recall. Nicholas II bowed before the pressure and allowed the duma to reassemble in August 1915. One major political mistake of the tsar and his ministers was their refusal to co-operate fully with the non-governmental organisations such as the Union of *Zemstva* and the Union of Town Councils, which at the beginning of the war had been wholly willing to work with the government in the national war effort. These elected bodies formed a joint organisation, *Zemgor*, which devoted itself to providing help for Russia's war wounded. The success of this organisation both highlighted the government's own failures and hinted that there might be a workable alternative to tsardom.

A similar political blindness characterised the tsar's dismissal of the duma's appeal to him to replace his palpably incompetent cabinet with a ministry of national confidence'. In rejecting this proposal, Nicholas destroyed the last opportunity he would have of retaining the support of the politically progressive parties. Milyukov, the Kadet leader, commented: 'They brushed aside the hand that was offered them. The conflict on the one hand between the representatives of the people and society on the other became an open breach.' Denied a direct voice in national policy, 236 of the 422 duma deputies formed themselves into a 'Progressive Bloc' composed of the Kadets, the Octobrists, the Nationalists and the Party of Progressive Industrialists.

The SRs did not formally join the Bloc but voted with it in all the дума divisions. Initially, the Bloc did not directly challenge the tsar's authority, but tried to persuade him to make concessions. However, as he and his government showed themselves increasingly incapable of running the war the Bloc became the focal point of political resistance. The government continued to shuffle its ministers in the hope of

## NICHOLAS II

## -Profile-



1868 Born into the Romanov

dynasty.

1894 Became tsar on the death of

his father, Alexander III, mar-

ried Princess Alexandra, the

German grand-daughter of

Queen Victoria.

1905 Granted the October constitu-

tion.

1906 Opened the first дума.

1913 Led the celebrations of 300

years of Romanov rule.

1914 Signed the general mobilisation

order which led to Russia's entry into the First World War.

1915 Took over personal command of the Russian armed forces.

1917 Tried to return from HQ to Petrograd but prevented by

rebellious soldiers and workers, advised by military high

command and дума to stand down, abdicated on behalf

of the Romanov dynasty.

1918 Nicholas and his family murdered in Ekaterinburg on

Lenin's orders.

The character of Nicholas II is important in any analysis of revolutionary Russia. The evidence suggests that, though he was far from being as unintelligent as his detractors asserted, his limited imagination prevented him from fully grasping the nature of the events in which he was involved.

1 'His character is the source of all our misfortunes. His outstand-

ing weakness is a lack of willpower.' (Sergei Witte)

'The tsar can change his mind from one minute to the next; he's a

sad man; he lacks guts.' (Rasputin)

5 'My poor Nicky's cross is heavy, all the more so as he has nobody

on whom he can thoroughly rely.' (Empress Alexandra)

'His mentality and his circumstances kept him wholly out of touch

with his people. From his youth he had been trained to believe that

his welfare and the welfare of Russia were one and the same thing.

10 so that "disloyal" workmen, peasants and students who were shot down, executed or exiled seemed to him mere monsters who must be destroyed for the sake of the country.' (Alexander Kerensky).

15 'He has a naturally good brain. But he only grasps the significance of a fact in isolation without its relationship to other facts.' (Pobedonostsev)

'He kept saying that he did not know what would become of us all, that he was wholly unfit to reign. He was wholly ignorant about  
20 governmental matters. Nicky had been trained as a soldier. He should have been taught statesmanship and he was not.' (Grand Duchess Olga, his sister)

The tsar made a number of crucial errors in his handling of the war, the most significant being his decision in 1915 to take direct command of Russia's armed forces. This in effect tied the fate of the Romanov dynasty to the success or otherwise of Russia's armies. There are good grounds for arguing that the war had offered tsardom its last great opportunity to identify itself with the needs of modern Russia and so consolidate itself beyond challenge as the legitimate ruling system. That opportunity was squandered.

In 1914 there had been a very genuine enthusiasm for the tsar as representative of the nation. Within three years that enthusiasm had wholly evaporated, even among dedicated tsarists. The fall of Nicholas was the result of weak leadership rather than of savage oppression. He was not helped by his wife's German nationality or by court scandals, of which Rasputin's was the most notorious. But these were minor affairs which by themselves would not have been sufficient to bring down a dynasty.

finding a successful team. In the year 1915–16, there were four prime ministers, three foreign secretaries, three ministers of defence, and six interior ministers. It was all to no avail. None of them was up to the task. The description by the British ambassador in Petrograd of one of the premiers, Sturmer, might have been fairly applied to all the tsar's wartime ministers:

- 1 Possessed of only a second-class mind, having no experience of statesmanship, concerned exclusively with his own personal interests, and distinguished by his capacity to flatter and his extreme ambition, he owed his appointment to the fact that he was a friend of Rasputin
- 5 and enjoyed the support of the crowd of intriguers around the empress.

The reference to Rasputin introduces the individual on whom much

Photo of one the many pornographic postcards that circulated in Petrograd in 1917. The word 'samoderzhavie' means 'holding'. It is used here as a pun to suggest Rasputin's hold on Russia as well as his physical holding of the Empress. Despite this cartoon and all the scurrilous things said about Rasputin and Alexandra then and since, it is highly unlikely they were ever lovers in a sexual sense. There is certainly no reliable evidence for it.



of the hatred of the tsarist system came to be focused. By any measure Rasputin's rise to prominence in Russia was an extraordinary story, but its true significance lay in the light it shed on the nature of tsarist government. Rasputin was a self-ordained holy man from the Russian steppe, who was notorious for his sexual excesses. As far back as 1907 he had inveigled himself into the imperial court on the strength of his reputation as a faith healer. The Empress Alexandra, desperate to cure her haemophilic son, Alexei, the heir to the throne, fell under Rasputin's spell and made him her *confidant*. Scandal inevitably followed. Alexandra's German nationality had made her suspect and unpopular since the outbreak of war, but she had tried to ride out the storm. She would hear no ill of 'our dear friend', as she called Rasputin, and obliged her husband to maintain him at court. Since Nicholas was away at military headquarters for long periods after 1915, Alexandra and Rasputin effectively became the government of Russia. Even the staunchest supporters of tsardom found it difficult to defend a system which allowed a nation in the hour of its greatest trial to fall under the sway of a debauched monk. In December 1916, in an attempt to save the monarchy, a group of aristocratic conspirators murdered him.

From time to time there have been various attempts to present Rasputin in a more sympathetic light but any new evidence that appears seems to bear out the description given of him in the last paragraph. Where he does deserve credit is for his achievement in reorganising the army's medical supplies system. He showed the common sense and administrative skill that Russia so desperately needed and which his aristocratic superiors in government so lamentably lacked. It was his marked competence that infuriated those who wanted him out of the way. But no matter how much the reactionaries in the court and government might rejoice at the death of the upstart, the truth was that by the beginning of 1917 it was too late to save tsardom. Rasputin's extraordinary life as a courtier and his murder by courtiers were bizarre symptoms of the fatal disease affecting the tsarist system.

## 4 The February Revolution

**KEY ISSUES** Were the events of February 1917 a collapse at the top or a revolution from below?  
 Why was there so little effort to save tsardom in 1917?

### a) The course of events

The rising of February 1917 was not the first open move against the tsar or his government. During the preceding year there had been a

number of challenges. The Octobrists in the *duma* had demanded the removal of unwanted ministers and generals. What made February 1917 different was the range of the opposition to the government and the speed with which events turned from a protest into a revolution. Rumours of the likelihood of serious public disturbances breaking out in Petrograd had been widespread since the beginning of the year. An *Okhrana* report in January, 1917 noted:

- 1 There is a marked increase in hostile feelings among the peasants not only against the government but also against all other social groups. The proletariat of the capital is on the verge of despair. The mass of industrial workers are quite ready to let themselves go to the wildest
- 5 excesses of a hunger riot. The prohibition of all labour meetings, the closing of trade unions, the prosecution of men taking an active part in the sick benefit funds, the suspension of labour newspapers, and so on, make the labour masses, led by the more advanced and already revolutionary-minded elements, assume an openly hostile attitude towards
- 10 the Government and protest with all the means at their disposal against the continuation of the war.

On 14 February, Rodzyanko, the president of the *duma*, warned the tsar that 'very serious outbreaks of unrest' were imminent. He added ominously, 'there is not one honest man left in your entourage; all the decent people have either been dismissed or left'. It was this desertion by those closest to the tsar that unwittingly set in motion what proved to be a revolution.

The Revolution occupied the period from 18 February to 4 March 1917. (Down to February 1918, Russia used the Julian calendar which was thirteen days behind the Gregorian calendar in general use in most western countries.) A full-scale strike was started on 18 February by the employees at the Putilov steel works, the largest and most politically-active factory in Petrograd. During the next five days, the Putilov strikers were joined on the streets by growing numbers of workers, who had been angered by rumours of a further cut in bread supplies. It is now known that these were merely rumours and that there was still enough bread to meet the capital's basic needs. However, in times of acute crisis rumour often has the same power as fact.

23 February happened to be International Women's Day. This brought thousands of women onto the streets to join the protesters in demanding food and an end to the war. By 25 February, Petrograd was paralysed by a city-wide strike. Factories were occupied and attempts by the authorities to disperse the workers were hampered by the growing sympathy among the police for the demonstrators. There was a great deal of confusion and little clear direction at the top. Events which were later seen as having had major political significance took place in an atmosphere in which political protests were indistinguishable from the general outcry against food shortages and the privations of war.

The tsar, at his military headquarters at Mogilev, 400 miles from Petrograd, relied for news largely on the letters received from the tsarina, who was still in the capital. When he learned from her about the disturbances, Nicholas ordered the commander of the Petrograd garrison, General Khabalov, to restore order. Khabalov cabled back that, with the various contingents of the police and militia either fighting each other or joining the demonstrators, and his own garrison troops showing open insubordination, he doubted that the situation could be contained. Khabalov had earlier begged the government to declare martial law in Petrograd, which would have given him the power to use unlimited force against the demonstrators. But the breakdown of ordinary life in the capital meant that the martial law proclamation could not even be printed, let alone enforced. More serious still, by 26 February all but a few thousand of the original 150,000 Petrograd garrison troops had deserted. Desertions also seriously depleted a battalion of troops sent from the front under General Ivanov to reinforce the garrison.

Faced with this near-hopeless situation, Rodzyanko on behalf of the duma informed the tsar that only a major concession on the government's part offered any hope of preserving the imperial power. Nicholas, with that occasional stubbornness that he mistook for decisiveness, then ordered the duma to dissolve. It did so formally as an assembly, but a group of twelve members disobeyed the order and remained in session as a 'Provisional Committee'. This marked the first open constitutional defiance of the tsar. It was immediately followed by the boldest move so far, when Alexander Kerensky, a lawyer and a leading SR member in the duma, called for the tsar to stand down as head of state or be deposed.

On that same day, 27 February, another event took place that was to prove as significant as the formation of the Provisional Committee. This was the first meeting of the 'Petrograd Soviet of Soldiers, Sailors' and Workers' Deputies, which gathered in the Tauride Palace, the same building that housed the Provisional Committee. The moving force behind the setting up of the Soviet was the Mensheviks, who, had grown in strength in Petrograd during the war. These two self-appointed bodies – the Provisional Committee, representing the reformist elements of the old duma, and the Soviet, speaking for the striking workers and rebellious troops – became the *de facto* government of Russia. This was the beginning of what Lenin later called 'the dual authority', an uneasy alliance that was to last until October. On 28 February, the Soviet published the first edition of its newspaper *Izvestiya* (the News) in which it declared its determination 'to wipe out the old system completely' and to summon a constituent assembly, elected by universal suffrage.

The remaining ministers in the tsar's cabinet were not prepared to face the growing storm. They used the pretext of an electricity failure in their government offices to abandon their responsibilities and to

slip out of the capital. Rodzyanko, who up to this point had struggled to remain loyal to the official government, then advised the tsar that his personal abdication was necessary if the Russian monarchy was to be saved. On 28 February, Nicholas decided to return to Petrograd, apparently in the belief that his personal presence would have a calming effect on the capital. However, the royal train was intercepted on its journey by mutinous troops who forced it to divert to Pskov, a depot 100 miles from Petrograd.

It was at Pskov that a group of generals from *stavka* (the army high command) together with representatives of the old duma met the tsar to inform him that the seriousness of the situation in Petrograd made his return both futile and dangerous. They, too, advised abdication. Nicholas lamely accepted the advice. His only concern was whether he should also renounce the throne on behalf of his son, Alexei. This he eventually decided to do. The decree of abdication that Nicholas signed on 2 March nominated his brother, the Grand Duke Michael, as the new tsar. However, Michael, unwilling to take up the poisoned chalice, refused the title on the pretext that it had not been offered to him by a Russian constituent assembly. Thus it was that the house of Romanov, which only four years earlier had celebrated its tricentenary as a divinely-appointed dynasty, came to an end not with a bang but a whimper.

By default the Provisional Committee, which had renamed itself the Provisional Government, thus found itself responsible for governing Russia. On the following day, 3 March, the new government officially informed the rest of the world of the revolution that had taken place.

## b) the significance of the February Revolution

It is difficult to see the events of 18 February to 3 March as an overthrow of the Russian monarchy. What does stand out is the lack of direction and leadership at the top and the unwillingness at the moment of crisis of the tsarist generals and politicians to fight to save the system. Tsardom collapsed from within. Revolutionary pressure from outside had no direct effect. What is notable is that the Bolsheviks, absent from the 1905 Revolution, were also absent when the February Revolution took place. Practically all the Bolshevik leaders were in exile. Lenin, who was himself in Switzerland at the time, had not been in Russia for over a decade. With so many of the leading Bolsheviks out of the country for so long before 1917, and given the difficulties of communication created by the war, their knowledge of the situation in Petrograd in 1917 was second-hand and fragmentary. It is small wonder, therefore, that the events of February took them by surprise. Strong evidence of this is provided in a statement by Lenin to a group of students in Zurich in December 1916, only two months before the February Revolution. He told his audi-



ence of youthful Bolshevik sympathisers that although they might live to see the proletarian revolution, he, at the age of forty-six, did not expect to do so.

One remarkable feature of the Revolution was that it had been overwhelmingly the affair of one city, Petrograd. Another was the willingness of the rest of Russia to accept it. Trotsky observed:

- 1 It would be no exaggeration to say that Petrograd achieved the February Revolution. The rest of the country adhered to it. There was no struggle anywhere except in Petrograd. There was not to be found anywhere in the country any groups of the population, any parties, institutions, or military units which were ready to put up a fight for the old regime. Neither at the front nor at the rear was there a brigade or regiment prepared to do battle for Nicholas II.<sup>1</sup>

The February Revolution was not quite the bloodless affair that some of the liberal newspapers in Petrograd claimed. Modern estimates suggest that between 1,500 and 2,000 people were killed or wounded in the disturbances. But by the scale of the casualties regularly suffered by Russian armies in the war this figure was small, which further supported Trotsky's contention that the nation was unwilling to fight to save the old regime.

It should be re-emphasised that it was among tsardom's hitherto most committed supporters that the earliest rejection of the tsar occurred. It was the highest-ranking officers who first intimated to Nicholas that he should stand down. It was the aristocratic members of the *duma* who took the lead in refusing to disband on the tsar's orders. It was when the army and the police told Nicholas that they were unable to carry out his command to keep the populace in order that his position became finally hopeless. The strikes and demonstrations in Petrograd in February 1917 did not in themselves cause the Revolution. It was the defection of the tsar's previous supporters at the moment of crisis, compounded by Nicholas II's own failure to resist, that brought about the fall of the Romanov dynasty. Lenin once observed that a true revolution can occur only when certain preconditions exist; one essential is that the ruling power loses the will to survive. Some time before he formally abdicated, Nicholas had given up the fight. It was not the fact but the speed and completeness of the collapse of tsardom in February 1917 that was so remarkable.

What destroyed tsardom was the length of the war. A short war, even if unsuccessful, might have been bearable, as Russia's defeat by Japan twelve years earlier had shown. But the cumulative effect of a prolonged struggle proved overwhelming. Deaths and casualties by the million, soaring inflation, a dislocated communications system, hunger and deprivation, all presided over by a series of increasingly bewildered and ineffectual ministries under an incompetent tsar: these were the lot of the Russian people between 1914 and 1917. The consequence was a loss of morale and a sense of hopelessness that

fatally undermined the once-potent myth of the tsar's God-given authority. By 1917 the tsarist system had forfeited its claim to the loyalty of the Russian people.

Many historians now interpret the February Revolution as the climax of an 'institutional crisis' in Russia. What they mean by this is that it was not economic difficulty or military failure that brought down tsardom. These were important but they were the symptoms rather than the cause. What produced the 1917 crisis in Russia was the failure of its institutions to cope with the problems it faced. Norman Stone writes:

- 1 Russia was not advanced enough to stand the strain of war, and the effort to do so plunged her economy into chaos. But economic backwardness did not alone make for revolution. The economic chaos came more from a contest between the old and the new in the Russian economy. There was a crisis, not of decline and relapse into subsistence, but rather of growth.<sup>2</sup>

Richard Pipes describes Russia in 1917 as:

- 1 a power that, however dazzling its external glitter, was internally weak and quite unable to cope effectively with the strains – political, economic, and psychological – which the war brought in its wake ... the principal causes of the downfall in 1917 were political, and not economic or social.<sup>3</sup>

It is an axiom of modern history that a major war puts immense pressures on the nations involved. The war which Russia entered in 1914 had the effect of intensifying all the problems from which it had traditionally suffered. Russia's institutional crisis showed up the tsarist system as being politically as well as economically bankrupt.

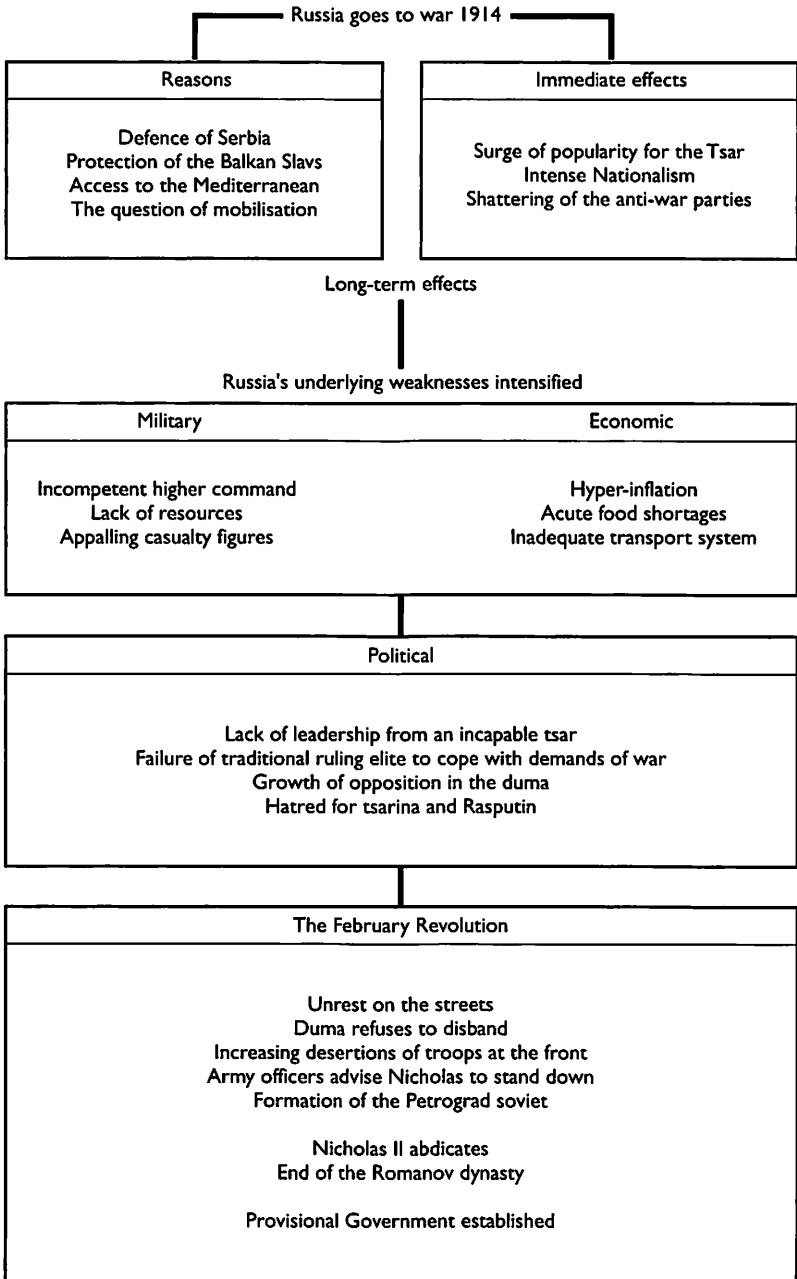
## References

- 1 Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution* (Gollancz, 1985) p.899
- 2 Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front, 1914–1917* (Penguin, 1998) p.304
- 3 Richard Pipes, *Three Whys of the Russian Revolution* (Pimlico, 1998) p.30

## Working on Chapter 4

Your aim in studying this chapter should be to gain an understanding of the causes of the February Revolution in 1917. The chapter was so shaped as to give the main sequence of developments from the outbreak of war in 1914 to the abdication of the tsar in 1917. You are recommended to follow this pattern when structuring your own understanding of the connection between war and revolution in Russia.

## Summary Diagram War and Revolution 1914–17



### Answering structured and essay questions on Chapter 4

The following questions relate to each of the five main sections of this chapter.

1.
  - a) Describe the stages by which Russia was drawn into war with Germany and Austria–Hungary in 1914.
  - b) Explain the part played by the respective German and Russian mobilisation plans in bringing the two countries into war with each other in 1914.
2.
  - a) Describe the difficulties faced by the Russian authorities after 1914 in trying to maintain adequate food supplies for the civilian population
  - b) In what respects did Russia's war against Germany and Austria prepare the way for the February Revolution of 1917?
3.
  - a) Examine the contribution of the Duma to the Russian war effort between 1914 and 1917.
  - b) How far do you agree that the Progressive Bloc represented 'the last hope of the tsarist system'?
4.
  - a) Examine the view that the February Revolution of 1917 was 'not an overthrow from without, but a collapse from within'.
  - b) Why was so little effort made to save tsardom in February 1917?
5.
  - a) Explain why Nicholas II's decision in 1915 to become commander-in-chief of the imperial army proved such a fateful one.
  - b) How far was Nicholas II the author of his own misfortunes in 1917?

Consider Question 4a. Do not be deterred by the type of question that requires you to consider a challenging statement, such as the one quoted here. Indeed, rather than being discouraged, you should regard the quotation as a bonus, for what the examiners have done is to provide you with a very direct guide to the response they want from you. Think about how best to interpret the quotation. Be prepared to take time over this; it will be time well spent. In this instance, the quotation could be interpreted more simply as, 'Did tsardom fall or was it pushed?'. What you are being asked is whether Nicholas was toppled by anti-tsarist forces or whether it was his own weakness that obliged him to abdicate. From the notes you have made draw up two lists, one giving the opposition elements, the other containing the tsar's weaknesses. The main part of your answer should consist of these details arranged in such an order as to indicate which were of greater influence in bringing about the February Revolution. An important distinction to be drawn – and you are advised to devote a paragraph to this – is between the tsar's weakness as an individual and the weakness of tsardom as a system of government. It is reasonable to suppose that a stronger individual than Nicholas II as tsar might well have prevented the situation from deteriorating to the point of collapse. Another significant point to stress is that it was the traditional supporters of tsardom, the officer class and the Duma, who began the

open resistance to the tsar. It was their defection, not the crowds on the streets of Petrograd, that led Nicholas to regard things as hopeless.

Another point that examiners would expect you to make is that the debate on this issue has been considerably influenced by the wish of Bolshevik writers to present 1917 as a proletarian revolution made up of two phases, the first occurring in February. In their view, the overthrow of tsardom was part of the revolutionary process. You do not have to accept or reject this viewpoint, but let the examiner know that you are aware of it and balance it by saying that most disinterested historians emphasise that the absent Bolsheviks played no direct part in the events of February.

### Source-based questions on Chapter 4

#### 1. *Russia enters the war in 1914*

Study Sazonov's analysis on page 60, and the French ambassador's description on page 61. Answer the following questions:

- According to Sazonov, what was the traditional aim of Russian foreign policy towards Turkey and the Balkans? (4 marks)
- Using your own knowledge and the evidence in the French ambassador's account, explain why Russia's choice between full and partial mobilisation was so important in 1914. (5 marks)
- From your own knowledge and your reading of these sources, how would you distinguish between the long-term and the immediate causes of Russia's entering the war in 1914? (6 marks)

#### 2. *The Causes of the February Revolution*

Study Rodzyanko's report on page 66, the British ambassador's description on page 69, and the *Okhrana* agent's report on page 72. Answer the following questions:

- In what ways does Rodzyanko's report reveal the disorganisation within the Russian army in 1916? (5 marks)
- How appropriately might the account of Sturmer's character by the ambassador be applied as a general description of the quality of the tsar's wartime ministers? (10 marks)
- How valuable to the historian are these sources as evidence of the tensions created by the tsarist government's handling of the war? (10 marks)

# 5 1917: The October Revolution

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## POINTS TO CONSIDER

The important point to stress about the Bolshevik Revolution in October 1917 is that it was quite distinct in character and objective from the revolution that had preceded it eight months earlier. The February Revolution had been essentially the collapse of tsardom from within. The October Revolution was a seizure of power by the Bolshevik Party from the Provisional Government, which had replaced the tsar but had proved no more capable of successfully leading Russia in wartime than he had. To understand how this second revolution came about it is necessary to chart the principal developments that occurred in Russia in the period from February to October 1917.

## KEY DATES IN 1917

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- 3 March** New Provisional Government publicly declared.
- 4 March** Formal declaration of Romanov abdication issued.
- 14 March** Petrograd Soviet issued its *Address to the people of the whole world*.
- 3 April** Lenin returned to Petrograd after completing his journey across Europe in a sealed train under German protection.
- 4 April** Lenin issued his *April Theses*, rejecting Bolshevik support for the Provisional Government.
- 26 June** Major Russian offensive launched against Austro-German armies on the south-western front.
- 3–6 July** Failure of 'July Days' Bolshevik uprising against the Provisional Government.
- 6 July** Lenin fled from Petrograd.
- 8 July** Kerensky became prime minister.
- 18 July** Kornilov became commander-in-chief.
- August** German advance threatened Petrograd.
- 26 Aug**
- 1 Sep** Resistance of the Petrograd workers forced Kornilov to abandon his march on the city.
- 25 Sep** Bolsheviks gained a majority in Petrograd Soviet and elected Trotsky as chairman.
- 7 Oct** Lenin slipped back into Petrograd.
- 10 Oct** Bolshevik Central Committee committed itself to armed insurrection.
- 12 Oct** Petrograd Soviet set up Military Revolutionary Committee.
- 23 Oct** Kerensky moved against the Bolsheviks by attempting to close down *Pravda* and *Izvestiya*.