

What Part did the War Play in the Tsar's Downfall?

The three-hundred year Tsarist dynasty collapsed during the Russian Revolution of February 1917, following Tsar Nicholas II's abdication on the 2nd March (Longley, 2000, p. 79). However, whilst the Revolution spurred this on, short and long-term causes were influential. Most important was Russia's involvement in the First World War, in which they suffered around two million losses compared to the British Empire's one million (DeGroot, 1997, p. 281), and suffered embarrassing defeats. Historians suggest that victory in the war depended on a nation's military effectiveness, economic strength, administration, and political stability (Acton, 1995, p. 142); all challenges which the tsarist regime failed to meet and led to the tsar's downfall. Debate centres around the factors that contributed to this downfall, which is the focus of this essay.

The argument that the First World War led to the downfall of tsardom is supported by the military unreadiness of the Russian army; including the poor conditions that soldiers fought in, shortages and low morale. Russian soldiers particularly experienced atrocious conditions at war, including armaments shortages. Despite having the largest army of all the countries who fought in the war, Russia did not send many men in proportion to its entire population to the war- which proved to be a mistake as the army was not as strong as it could have been. As well as this, up until 1915, a quarter of those men sent to the front were unarmed and were instructed to simply pick up what they could from the dead to use as weapons (Riasanovsky & Steinberg, 2005, p. 392). This highlights the poor conditions for Russian soldiers in two ways; firstly weapons shortages, and secondly the dead bodies laying rotting uncollected in the Russian trenches. Because of these conditions that Russian soldiers endured, disease began to spread. Cholera and typhus in particular hit the Russian army, pressurising medical reserves, with hospitals only built for a capacity of two-hundred men and with just four doctors present (Figes 1996, p. 263). Moreover, some soldiers were even forced to fight barefooted in all weather due to poorly distributed clothing and weak administration from above (Black, J. 2001, p. 87). Soldiers therefore began to retaliate against their superiors, such as the military commanders, who in turn questioned their loyalty to the tsar; an important factor that influenced Nicholas' abdication (Rendle, 2008, p. 922). The poor conditions and defeats suffered by soldiers have even been attributed to the Tsar, who felt compelled to personally direct the army (Ulam, 1998, p. 317), which pressurised the Russian autocracy to the extent that it could no longer cope. This meant that Tsardom collapsed as it did not have the support of either soldiers or war commanders due to the poor treatment of Russian soldiers at war because of a lack of preparation.

Another way that the war contributed to the tsar's downfall was the food shortages experienced by civilians due to a failure by his regime to prepare for war. These shortages resulted from a transport breakdown during the war, with the new Trans-Siberian railway focused towards transporting war materials to the front as opposed to domestic goods, including food. By 1916 Petrograd and Moscow received only a third of their food and fuel requirements, with Petrograd especially hit because of its isolation from agricultural regions and its large population (Lynch, 2000, p. 64). Consequently, shortages and the cost of the war meant that food prices quadrupled, although wages remained at their pre-war level (Acton, 1995, p. 144). It is these shortages which sparked off the February Revolution in which tsardom collapsed, with women protesting on International Women's Day in 1917 over bread supplies, showing the impact of the shortages on the reputation and downfall of the tsar. Figures also show that the Russian government spent more than twenty-million US dollars in the years 1914-17 on the war campaign (Barnett, 2009, p. 800), with this money raised through taxes and higher prices of domestic goods. The extent of this unpopular inflation led people to revolt

against the government, meaning the tsar's unpopularity increased, and ultimately leading to his downfall.

The shortages suffered by soldiers and civilians are explained by the military unreadiness of the tsarist regime. It has been claimed that Russia was only prepared for a short-war lasting around six months, and that Russia could have emerged from such a war unscathed (Lieven, 1993, p. 205). Whilst other nations too believed the war would be short, they had the flexibility to adapt to the modern warfare of the First World War, whereas Russia stuck to its outdated war tactics (Figes, 1996, p. 260). It was this inadaptability that led to Russia's military defeats and thus the downfall of the Tsar. Also because of this underestimation of the war's length, it was not until 1916 that Russia embarked on process of reforming its military intelligence structure and war effort (Marshall, 2001, p. 406), by which time considerable damage to the Russian army had occurred. This failure to adequately prepare or adapt tactics led to Russia's numerous defeats in the war and an unhappy civilian population faced with shortages of essential goods. In turn, this led to revolts against the tsarist regime that culminated in February 1917 when tsardom collapsed.

The poor conditions that soldiers were made to live and fight in also weakened morale, which caused the soldiers to become a 'revolutionary mob' by 1917 (Figes, 1996, p. 263). As soldiers' supplies began to dwindle, morale likewise declined due to military defeats. Russia suffered constant defeats during the early stages of the war, and any progress made was outweighed by the next loss. Morale especially weakened following a German four-hour bombardment of Russian trenches on the 2nd May 1915. The attack destroyed the trenches and when the German army visited the scene to kill any remaining Russian soldiers, they found a few shell-shocked survivors; the rest were dead or had fled the scene in horror (Figes 1996, p. 266). This acutely struck the morale of the Russian army as their trenches being destroyed left them exposed, and they could not retaliate because Russian military supplies were also exhausted- bar the bayonets on soldiers' rifles. Additionally, it has been claimed that Russian Prisoners of War showed little desire to escape (Acton, 1995, p. 143), showing how glad they were to flee the Russian army and a lack of motivation to fight for the tsar because of low morale. Consequently, Russian soldiers failed to support the tsar as they saw no purpose to the war and were demoralised due to a lack of success coupled with heavy losses. This pressurised the Tsarist regime, leading to its downfall, as a country as large as Russia could not cope with an unsupportive military.

Other factors apart from the war influenced the downfall of the tsar in 1917. This included Nicholas II's poor political leadership, and the fact that he was always considered a weak tsar more suited to the role of a ceremonial figurehead. Ironically he would have been ideal as a constitutional monarch, but was adamant against the idea. Nicholas' personality was also unsuited to the demands of his position as ruler of Russia. He was badly educated and isolated from Russian society at large (Kennan, 1973, p. 205). This can partly be attributed to the fact that he was preoccupied with caring for his haemophilic son, spending many hours a day praying instead of focusing on his tsarist duties as people wished he would. Some even see the decision to abdicate as an indication of his weakness as tsar as he could not meet the challenges facing Russia, although it can also be seen as a positive. This is because Nicholas realised that after spending his whole life trying, he could not maintain Russian autocracy and hence resigned (Figes, 1996, p. 340), showing his intentions to act in Russia's interests. Nonetheless, Tsar Nicholas' own lack of leadership skills and his personality meant that he was unpopular as tsar, because he was unsuited to his role. This led to dissatisfaction and his downfall, with loyalty to the tsar even said to have declined following the 1905 Russian Revolution when he was blamed for the massacre of workers during 'Bloody Sunday'- despite his absence from the events (Riasanovsky & Steinberg, 2005, p. 380).

As well as this, rumours of an extra-marital affair between Tsarina Alexandra and Grigory Rasputin emerged during Nicholas' time at the front lines, which alienated his

advisors from him. Although this can be related to the impact of the war on the tsar's downfall, it can be considered a separate factor as it is not directly related to Russia's involvement in the war. The Tsarina believed that Rasputin was a holy man who had been sent from God to heal the haemophilic heir to the throne- Alexei- and guide her husband (Riasanovsky & Steinberg, p. 395). However Rasputin was notorious for his reputation as an alcoholic and a womanizer (Westwood, 2002, p. 215), and propaganda emerged suggesting an affair between the two. This was undoubtedly damaging to the reputation of the tsar, and people began to mock the tsarist regime at a time when it was already under immense pressure. The accusations also led to bureaucratic and military aides of the tsar refusing to defend him (Kennan, 1973 p. 207), leaving him isolated at a time when he needed their guidance, hence his downfall and decision to abdicate.

Another reason for the downfall of the tsar is his failure to adapt the government and modernise Russia to compete in European affairs, alienating society at large from the tsarist regime. One long-term problem of the regime was its inability to industrialise Russia in economic, technological, and educational terms, which can be contrasted to Gorbachev's realisation of the need for modernisation in order for Soviet Russia to survive in the 1980s. Thus where Gorbachev succeeded, Nicholas II failed in modernising to preserve his regime. Although Russia had a growth rate of 6% between 1906-1914 (Kennan, 1973, p. 193), the Russian people sought a level of advancement impossible to deliver during war and a time of governmental troubles. Likewise, the tsar retained Russia's traditional governmental structure instead of modernising it (Chubarov, (a) 2001, p. 175), which simply preserved the interests of his close aides. Following the 1905 revolution the Russian people desired a democracy, as was common in most contemporary European states (Ulam, 1998, p. 217), but this was not delivered. As the public felt disassociated from tsardom and felt that it was ignoring their demands they began to rebel against it, even calling for Russia's defeat in the war. This further demonstrates the unpopularity of the tsarist regime, as it was beginning to turn people against their own nation, and the tsarist tradition collapsed as a result.

Finally, the role of revolutionaries in the February 1917 Revolution and the distribution of their literature must not be underestimated. Evidence shows the publication of Revolutionary *skazki* in the years between 1905 and 1917. These were underground pamphlets containing folklore stories of revolutionary conditions, and later criticising the tsar. The authors were generally populists although more Social Democrats joined the phenomenon after 1905 (Hemenway, 2001, p. 186). Because they could be rapidly produced and were written in simple language, they were accessible to a mass readership and their ideas influenced a revolutionary culture. As well as this, the Russian Liberal Party attempted to weaken the tsarist regime by spreading doubts about its ability to win the war, hoping that this would gain them governmental influence. The Bolsheviks on the other hand grew in unpopularity during the first months of the war, due to their anti-war mind-set (Westwood, 2002, p. 231), but their popularity rose as the war continued. At the outbreak of the February Revolution most Bolshevik leaders were exiled and it was not until October that the party asserted its force to seize power of Russia, showing the tsar's downfall was not influenced by them. The role of revolutionaries in overthrowing the tsar is debatable as the Bolsheviks played no real role during the war or in February 1917, yet revolutionary literature influenced the masses to revolt against the autocracy, including works by Lenin. The production of anti-tsarist literature written by revolutionaries is an important factor in the tsar's downfall as it influenced Russian workers to rebel during the February revolution and incited anti-tsarist sentiment, showing the alienation of the Russian people from tsardom.

The First World War was hugely significant in causing the downfall of tsardom. The poor conditions that soldiers fought and lived in, and national food shortages due to a lack of preparation by the regime made the war unpopular. This was reflected through the unpopularity of the tsar himself and the rebellion of citizens during the February 1917

revolution. However, although the war was the major factor in the downfall of the tsar, other factors such as Nicholas II's poor leadership and his failure to adapt the government were also important as this alienated the Russian people. Had the Tsar been a stronger leader and had Russia modernised to the extent desired by the people, there is a chance that the regime could have survived the war- even if only for another generation. Political groups such as the Bolsheviks played a minor role in overthrowing the Tsar through their literature, but succeeded in gaining support after February 1917 through their anti-war stance and their promises of "peace, bread and land"; appealing to every peasant in Russia. Therefore whilst the First World War was pivotal to the tsar's downfall and ending the Romanov dynasty, the emergence of Lenin's Bolshevik Party resulted, who in October 1917 began a lengthy rule of Soviet Russia.

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