



Photo of one of 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 steppes, 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 haemophiliac 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 tamely 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.¹

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.²

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.³

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

