

Germany under wilhelm ii and russia under nicholas ii



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Was the Russian state under Nicholas II more or less stable than the German Reich under Wilhelm II?

Seen from their end-points — for Russia, from the November 1917 Revolution, the abdication and execution of the Tsar, the bloodshed of millions; for Germany, from defeat and the humiliation of the Versailles Treaty — it is tempting to reply to the present question that Nicholas II and Wilhelm II left their countries in near equal depths of chaos, destruction, and disorder. Russia in 1918 witnessed the overthrow of a centuries-old monarchy, class-system and way of life, and found it replaced with a Bolshevik revolution, a wholly different power structure and system of governance — and thus it is hard to imagine a more tumultuous reign than that presided over by Nicholas II. At the outset of his reign in 1894 he was undoubtedly confronted with the immense problem of effecting the vast reforms promised to ordinary Russians following the emancipation of the serfs, and it is likely that this awesome task would have resulted in tremendous instability for Russia no matter who she was ruled by. Nonetheless, Nicholas II and the various dumas he worked beside, undoubtedly exasperated and intensified the wave of potentially destabilizing forces facing Russia in these years. Nicholas II's own temper and impatience led to the dissolution of two dumas and thus to prolonged political uncertainty for the country; the intransigence of certain conservative elements as well as the perceived weakness of several of his prime ministers further compounded this uncertainty. From 1900 onwards the various central institutions of Russian life — Church, monarchy, parliament — were eroded and exposed to ever greater change and danger — culminating in the carnage and collapse of 1917. In Germany there was no

such perception of a gradual erosion of institutions and gathering crisis; rather she was shaken into disarray by the final four calamitous years of the Great War. Upon taking the throne in 1888, Wilhelm II found Germany in better condition than Nicholas' Russia; the euphoria and pride arising from national unification in 1870 flowed around Germany right until 1914 and 1915; her institutions were thought to be strong, stable and even *invulnerable*. Still, within four years of 1914, she had been visited by an equal if not greater destruction and instability than Russia. Russia was destitute in 1918, but at least she was victorious and could hope for some continuation of her cultural way of life. Germany however had been defeated and so was in 1918 the thrall of the victorious powers and so could be shaped and moulded by them as they pleased.

The general levels of stability of Germany under Wilhelm II and Russia under Nicholas II can be partially measured by comparing the stability of their political institutions. In both instances (Nicholas' relationship with the Duma and Wilhelm's with the Reichstag), the story is one of the deterioration of the authority of the monarchy and its ceding of power to political or military bodies (1). Nicholas' relationship with the dumas was antagonistic from the beginning of his reign in 1884. The First Duma, following the emancipation of the serfs in the 1870s, was composed of a majority of Kadets, and this composition necessarily led to a hostile reaction between the Kadets and the Tsar — something clearly leading to national internal instability (2). Nicholas II found his Prime Minister Sergei Witte competent and able and this relationship promised a dilution of the dispute between the Tsar and the Duma; nonetheless, this relationship began to wane when Nicholas' wife,

Alexandra, showed distrust of Witte, thus precipitating Nicholas' dissolution of the First Duma (3).

This dissolution was outwardly characterized by a friction of personality between Witte and Alexandra; inwardly, it pointed to the immense problems the Russian Prime Minister faced in implementing the promised political and social reforms. The extreme nature and proportions of these reforms, overturning centuries of Russian aristocratic government, would shake the stability of any country; in Russia the problem was compounded by its vast population and geography. Tsar Nicholas' task of effecting political reform in Russia was thus in many ways more difficult than Wilhelm's: for instance, Russia was decades behind Germany in its development and this led to greater instability in its pursuit of equality.

Russians might have anticipated greater stability from the Second Duma; in reality it turned out to be as problem-plagued and ineffective as the First Duma — and eventually its ineffectiveness precipitated the great crisis and abdication of 1917 (4). The Prime Minister of the Second Duma, Pyotr Stolypin, perceiving these problems, dissolved the parliament, and sought to manipulate its electoral nature to possess a more conservative composition and thus for the new Duma to be controlled by the liberal-conservative Octobrist Party of Alexander Guchov (4). Despite his conservative leaning, Stolypin, like Witte before him, initially looked like he might effect some of the long-promised reforms; he planned, for instance, to provide loans to the lower classes to let them purchase land, and thus forge an agricultural class faithful to the Tsar (4). Had such plans succeeded then they would

undoubtedly brought greater stability to the Russian state; in the event the <https://assignbuster.com/germany-under-wilhelm-ii-and-russia-under-nicholas-ii/>

opposite came about: Stolypin's proposed reforms were opposed by ultra-conservatives close to the Tsar, and events reached a low when Stolypin was assassinated by Dmitry Bogov in Kiev in September 1911. All in all, the huge difficulties of effecting Russia's urgently needed reforms proved too great for successive Russian prime ministers; these failures in turn led to a deterioration of the relationship between the Tsar and the Duma, and thus to profound political and social instability for the Russian state.

The relationship between Wilhelm II and the Reichstag was similarly blighted, though this conflict and division was, in itself, less destabilizing than in Tsarist Russia (5). In Germany the Emperor's dispute with the Reichstag and the instability it precipitated was the result of clash of personality: between his own and that of his Chancellor, the formidable Otto von Bismarck. At Wilhelm's succession of the throne in June 1888 Germany was in a nervous euphoria about the unification that she had engendered in the previous decade; a great deal remained to be done, but Germany's reforms had always been those concerning the of unification of its various states, and not the reformation of social classes as in Russia (6). Wilhelm II had no intention of being a passive or nominal monarch: he wanted to 'rule as well as reign' as one historian has put it (6). This intention antagonised Chancellor Bismarck, who cared for no interference from the monarch. This dispute finally led to Wilhelm II dismissing Bismarck in 1890, and thus, due to the monarch's impatience and petulance, an abandonment of Bismarck's prudent and wise policies for the government of Germany. Wilhelm installed Leo Graf von Caprivi, Prince Chlodwig zu Hohenlohe-Schillingsfurst, Prince Bernhard von Bulow, and Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg as a series of

successors to Bismarck; each of them being polar opposites to the former chancellor — they were rather obsequious puppets to the Kaiser's will. Wilhelm's decision to remove Bismarck had thus weakened Germany significantly and increased its vulnerability and instability; not only had the hero of unification been cruelly deposed, but his prodigious powers of statesmanship and the order those skills brought to Germany, had been replaced by those of the Kaiser: a man whose character was irascible and volatile and thus of the worst possible kind to handle the inflammable events that would pinnacle in 1914.

The relative stability of Wilhelm's Germany and Nicholas' Russia may also be discussed in the context of their contribution to and handling of the Great War of 1914-1918. Anticipating somewhat the conclusion to this essay, the following may be said of the two monarchs respective attitudes to war and the instability these wrought: Nicholas II's reign is characterized by reluctance to enter the conflict, Wilhelm's by the precipitation of it. A historian might expect thus that Nicholas II, being more prudent and indisposed to war, might have thus secured greater internal stability for Russia than the bellicose Germany of Wilhelm, which one would have expected to suffer the vicissitudes and fluxes of war. Nonetheless, paradoxically, despite quite different attitudes to the conflict both Germany and Russia were to endure similar levels of turmoil and upheaval in its wake: Russia subjected to Revolution and anarchy and Germany the humiliation and disintegration of the Versailles Treaty.

Wilhelm's contribution to the instability of 1914-1918 can best be described in terms of his personal character: he did not avidly crave war — even once
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describing it as a '*most unimaginable thing*' (7) — but rather aided it by his injudicious foreign policy decisions, blunders, and errors. Wilhelm II lent his authority and power to the German generals and to others who ardently sought the conflict. His minor precipitative blunders included his support for Germany's massive increase in naval power, his telegram (8) that congratulated President Kruger for the success of the Jameson Raid against the British, and his July 1900 address encouraging German forces to support to Boxer Rebellion. Most disastrous and inflammatory of all was the Kaiser's involvement in the Daily Telegraph Affair of 1908 (9). In this interview the Kaiser's mistimed and inappropriate comments angered not only Britain, but also Japan, Russia, France and other countries also. In the years immediately preceding 1914 Bismarck conscientiously abandoned Bismarck's former successful foreign policy of ostracizing France from the other major international powers and instead invoked sympathy for France by appearing to challenge her rule in Morocco. All in all, Bismarck's personal leadership of Germany during the years 1900-1914, whether deliberately or unintentionally, did much to antagonise Germany's international neighbours and so to eventually precipitate the profound instability that arose from World War I and its aftermath. Wilhelm's naivety and impatience, coupled with the bellicosity of his generals, eroded many the positive reforms and strong institutions established by Bismarck during and after unification; this erosion left Germany improperly balanced and leaning precariously in the direction of crippling international warfare.

But the instability that arose for Russia during and after the Great War was due not to Russia's seeking such a conflict but from her fragmented and

dithering response to it. Nicholas II was a main source of this indecision and his inadequate leadership, compounded by the largely failed implementation of reforms in previous years, led to the collapse of the monarchy and abdication of the Tsar, and thus a deeply distressing and turbulent period for Russia. In the wake of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, by Gavrilo Princip of the Serbian Black Hand organization, Russia and the Tsar were forced into a very awkward position. Russia had for several years advocated support for the Pan-Slav movement and had signed treaties with Serbia guaranteeing her protection; on the other hand, as the Will & Nicky correspondence (10) shows, Nicholas II sought to avoid war at all costs — fearing the devastation it would bring to himself and to the nation. In the event, Russia was truly devastated by the war: her armies were destroyed en masse, the monarchy fell and millions of Russians died from fighting, disease, hunger and drought. The 1917 November Revolution led to civil war, further bloodshed, misery and suffering and to the installation of a wholly new political regime. A greater state of instability can hardly be imagined!

In the final analysis, the question as to which of Tsar Nicholas II's Russia and Wilhelm II's Germany knew greater stability depends upon whether a historian looks at these periods from their respective beginnings or their ends. The Germany that Wilhelm inherited in 1894 was certainly more stable than that received by Nicholas in 1884. But a powerful argument can be made to say that despite the turmoil of the Bolshevik Revolution, Russia was nonetheless possessed of greater stability than Germany. This argument is given strength if one looks at events after 1918: Communism gave Russia seventy years of stable government and administration — irregardless of

whether one endorses such a governance or not; Germany, on the other hand, was to endure the vicissitudes of Weimar, ten years of the Nazi regime and finally the ultimate instability of World War II.

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