

Downfall of tsar nicholas ii and ww1



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To what extent was the First World War responsible for the downfall of Tsar Nicholas II?

Jack Boag, Thursday, 26 January 2017

Shortly after Russia became the first member of the Entente to enter the First World War on the side of Serbia, Tsar Nicholas II, a devoutly religious man, prayed for hours on end in his private chapel, repeating the line from the Our Father, “ Thy Will Be Done”. Then, God appeared to him, and instructed him to take personal command of the armies and lead from the front. These events could be said to have led to the downfall of both the Tsar personally, and autocracy as a whole. However, from a moral standpoint, what he did was perhaps commendable. His desire to join his troops at the front rather than watch the oncoming slaughter from the Winter Palace increased his popularity and the popularity of the war. In addition to his devout religious beliefs, he felt that his duty was to serve, rather than rule over his subjects. In short, he did the wrong thing for the right reasons. To quote Dominic Lieven, “ Nicholas loved his country and served it loyally to the best of his ability. He had not sought power and he was not, by temperament or personality, well equipped to wield it.”

Possibly the most catastrophic mistake upon going to the front was leaving the nation under the governance of the Tsarina Alexandra (his wife) and the rather dubious holy man Grigori Rasputin. In the words of Orlando Figes “ This was autocracy without an autocrat”. Both Alexandra and Rasputin were incredibly unpopular, and the general populace were very suspicious of them. The fact that Alexandra was German made things worse, and false

accusations of her being a German spy were commonplace. Rasputin didn't help himself either, and his indulgences outside of his duties to the Imperial Family became Russia's worst kept secret. There was even (probably unfounded) rumours of the two having an affair. Cartoons of them in bed together were constantly going round all the major Russian newspapers. Both Alexandra and Rasputin valued loyalty over ability and this guided their choice of ministers – horrendous judgement on their part.

It is often said about the Western Front that reason for the mass slaughter was that it was a war conducted using 19th Century tactics, but with 20th Century weapons. However, the Russian Army was still stuck in the previous century. It had never seen victory against an adversary of a similar size in nearly 100 years. The Crimean War was a disaster, and defeat in the Manchurian War against Japan was an utter humiliation for Nicholas II. If the Russian Army could be defeated by the Japanese, how would it fare 10 years on against the Germans, who had modernised their army, while the Russian one had not changed since their defeat in Manchuria. The slaughter at the Battles of Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes was on such a scale that the Russian Generals, in order to spare their men more pain, opened fire on them. General Samsonov, in charge of the Russian Army at Tannenberg, committed suicide shortly afterwards in shame. 70, 000 Russian soldiers died at Tannenberg and 125, 000 Russians died at the Masurian Lakes. The following extract is a report from the front. “ The army had neither wagons nor horses nor first aid supplies. We visited the Warsaw station where there was about 17, 000 men wounded in battles. At the station we found a terrible scene: on the platform in dirt, rain and cold, in the rain on the ground even

without straw, wounded, who filled the air with heart-rending cries, dolefully asked: For God's sake, order them to dress our wounds, for five days we have not been attended to." More Russians were killed than any other nationality during the war (considering the Germans were fighting on two fronts, unlike the Russians). In terms of the Entente, Russians make up approx. 40% of the dead and 50% of the wounded (About 4 million Russians died and about 5 million were wounded).

However, the pre-existing conditions for an uprising were already there. Russia's view of the Tsar was mainly an outcome of Bloody Sunday in 1905, where the Imperial Guard opened fire on unarmed demonstrators. From that point forward, the writing was on the wall for autocracy in Russia, and for Nicholas. He came across as out of touch with the common man and incredibly oppressive. His concessions were not really concessions, as the Duma (Russia's Assembly that Nicholas reluctantly agreed to) had no real power. On the international stage, the war with Japan over colonial ambitions in Manchuria and Korea was a disaster. An unhappy people, and an unhappy military after that defeat. This meant the clock had been ticking for Nicholas II for 9 years prior to the war.

In conclusion, the war itself was a disaster for Russia. Their army was top-heavy and woefully ill-equipped, as was shown by the Manchurian debacle in 1905. Nicholas II going to the front with his men was commendable from a moral standpoint, but was political disaster for him. Tsarina Alexandra and Rasputin were unequal to the task of governing the nation and were heavily criticised in the popular press. However, the war itself was only a catalyst for

what was already set in stone after Bloody Sunday and the Russo-Japanese War.