

# The nature of russian society in the early 20th century



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Throughout the early 20th Century there seem to be many events which happened in Russia which built up tension and put pressure on the Tsarist Government. I personally think that the Russian revolution in 1917 was inevitable, no country could go on in the state that Russia was in without a revolution at some point. The revolution was going to happen sooner or later, and WW1 was the final straw, it sped up the reactions of people and made them realise that a revolution was needed due to the incompetence of the Tsar. Throughout this essay I shall look at events and aspects of Russia which I think helped cause the Russian Revolution. The revolution was the culmination of a long period of repression and unrest. From the time of Peter I (Peter the Great), the Tsardom increasingly became an autocratic bureaucracy that imposed its will on the people by force, with wanton disregard for human life and liberty.

The road to the Russian revolution began with the end of the Crimean war in 1855, it was one of the many disastrous military defeats that Russia was to see in her lifetime. Poor roads, antiquated weapons and low morale helped Russia lose, and defeat proved to the Tsarist autocracy that Russia was very far behind the rest of Europe. You would have thought that after losing a battle like the Crimean War the Tsar would try to reform Russia for its own good, however the poor reforms he made did not last long as he just wanted to relieve the momentary pressure that was on him.

The situation in Russia by 1897 showed that Russia was still lacking the reforms that it needed. With 118.4m people which consisted of 22 different nationalities the Tsar found it difficult to control all of the races, languages, religion and cultures in Russia over the 8m square miles that he ruled.

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Communication and transport was a huge problem. This did not make many people happy. Socially, politically and economically Russia was a mess. 82% of Russia's population belonged to the peasants and only 0.5% belonged to the Ruling class.

The industry was undeveloped, there was hardly a transport system which restricted industrial growth. Russia also had the absence of an effective banking system. Hardly any money was spent on reforms which were needed, and 45% of government expenditure was spent on the army and navy. Government officials who took care of law, civil administration, police and the militia used it for their own convenience. All of these things discouraged Russian people to support the Tsar and allowed them to believe that he was incompetent.

Throughout his reign of power Alexander II introduced some reforms, for example the Local Government Reform. This was a system of elected local governments, or "zemstvos" which arose to replace the old institutions of the landlord rule. Through taxation of all classes, the zemstvo built bridges, roads, hospitals, prisons and provided essential services such as healthcare and poverty relief. Other reforms that Alexander II introduced were the Education Reform, Military Reform, Judicial Reform and Expression Reform.

Industrialization concentrated people in urban centers, where the exploited working class was a receptive audience for radical ideas. A reactionary and often ignorant clergy kept religion static and persecuted religious dissenters. Pogroms were instituted against the Jews, which turned many radical Jews to Zionism. Non-Russian nationalities in the empire were repressed. The "

Emancipation of the serfs" was started in 1861. This allowed peasants to buy and sell land, the catch however was that land was very expensive and many peasants couldn't afford the land.

The government gave out loans to peasants, which sounded wonderful, but in reality it was a total "shambles" as it took peasants generations to pay off their debts, so in reality they still lived in poverty. The peasant's expectations were raised, however the Tsar could not deliver to them.

Alexander II made this reform to alleviate pressure from himself. The reform opened the way for industrial development. However, emancipation imposed harsh economic conditions on the peasants and did not satisfy their need for farmland.

However he stopped introducing his reforms as he thought it may cause him to compromise his power. His greater allowance of speech caused the development of intelligentsia who felt betrayed, despairing of Tsardom as a form of change they turned to Revolution. Teased by half-hearted reforms, dissatisfied peasants, intellectuals, professionals and even some liberal gentry sought greater freedom through revolutionary movements to overthrow the Tsarist Government.

A wide variety of political groups secretly developed in Russia during the 19th Century and Alexander II was assassinated on 1st March 1881. This already shows political discontent and an unstable society in Russia. When Alexander III came to power he made the monarchy very unpopular with the development of "Russification". People were discriminated against if their

mother tongue was not russian, and Jews faced many social, political and economic restrictions.

In 1905, Nicholas II decided to share his power with the people. He set up the first of four Dumas. This can be seen as an indication that in the relatively near future there could be a major reform. By setting up the Duma the Tsar had allowed people to believe that change for the good was coming, however when there was no change people started to become disenchanted. The Tsar's main reason for setting up the Duma was to relieve short term political pressure that had been built up, this showed he was not committed to sharing long term political power with his people. As soon as the political tension had settled the Tsar dissolved the Duma. In total there were four dumas:

- \* The first Duma, April - June 1906
- \* The Second Duma, Feb - June 1907
- \* The Third Duma, Nov 1907 - June 1912
- \* The Fourth Duma, Nov 1912 - Aug 1914

The Duma " era" showed Russian people that the Tsar was totally and utterly incompetent when it came to handling power because he believed in the 300 years of Monarchy.

The 1905 " so called" revolution was down to spontaneous demonstrations due to the mishandling of authorities. This " revolution" expressed political discontent questioning the regime and also caused pressure for change.

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Another very good reason why the Russian revolution was inevitable was because of the Tsar. Over a long period of time, former Tsars' and Nicholas II had allowed their people to lose faith in the Tsarist regime. For example, the 1881 assassination of the Tsar showed unhappiness with the regime at a very early age in history. The "Emancipation of the serfs" showed that the Tsar could not deliver his promises, and reforms that Alexander II stopped half way through his reign caused political and social discontent. The Russo-Japanese war in 1904 was another major event which caused lack of faith in the Tsar.

The Russo-Japanese war was cause for great concern in 1904, as it made many people properly question how well the Tsar could govern his country. He could not govern an army let alone anything else. The war bled Russia physically and economically. Money which was needed for economic development was wasted on a humiliating disaster in Japan. Not only did Russia lose face but the prestige of the Tsar suffered enormously. This war proved that Tsarist Russia was incompetently led, inadequately supplied, economically and physically pathetic .

The final event which "hit the nail on the head" so to speak was the First world war from 1914 to 1918. Russian commitment drained weak Russia and it's weak Tsarist system. WWI opened the eyes of many people, it showed them the inadequacy of the Russian military leadership and the state of Russian supplies. It showed how transport was absolutely awful and there was a huge distribution problem when it came to the distribution of food and supplies. Many soldiers fought without proper equipment and also fought on an empty stomach.

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However soldiers weren't the only people without food, in general there was mass starvation over Russia due to the poor distribution and inadequacy of food supplies. Once again general, political, economic and land reforms were stopped by the war which reflected very badly on the Government. Due to continued military failure political structures were weakened and undermined. The biggest mistake of WWI which I think caused the downfall of the Tsar was him taking a frontline role during the war. I think this because the failure of Russia and its performance in WWI was blamed on him. He also left a political vacuum at home, while he was away at the front the whole of Russia was governed by the Tsaritsa (who had German blood) and Rasputin, a very disliked monk.

In January 150, 000 workers went on strike, this was seen as a political and economic act. The lack of confidence in the government had spread to the people as a whole. Many people suspected the Tsaritsa felt sympathetic towards the German enemy and the influence of Rasputin was resented. Urban food shortages were the immediate cause of the February revolution, and Nicholas II who was away at the front was unconscious of serious people unrest. Throughout his time at the front lines a revolution began, known as the February Revolution, 1917.

Demonstrations began calling for the Duma, as well as higher wages. A 1/4m people were now on strike and by the 26th February, 40 demonstrators had been killed. This caused absolute mayhem. The Tsars' immediate response was to stop riots and strikes but by this time the corrosion of the Tsarist system was complete, many realised that he had to go, including senior generals and ministers. He finally abdicated in 1917.

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In conclusion, I believe that the Russian revolution was going to happen sooner or later, it was inevitable. Many things throughout the early 20th Century caused lack of faith with the Tsar and his government. Maybe if WWI had not occurred then I think that the revolution may have been delayed, but in all honesty I don't think that Russia could have gone on for much longer with the state it was in. She desperately needed economic, political and social reforms to help her survive, and that was not going to happen because the Tsarist government would not learn how to share power.