

The failures of the tsar and the revolution

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



Nikolay Alexandrovich Romanov, or Nicholas II, was crowned Tsar of Russia on the 26th of May 1894, with great enthusiasm from the majority of the Russian population. It would be the last time that such a ceremony would happen in Russia. This is because 23 years later, on the 15th of March 1917, he would be forced to abdicate and on the 17th of July 1918, while held prisoner by the Bolsheviks, he and the rest of his family were assassinated. During his years of reign, Nicholas firmly addressed his desire to maintain autocracy in Russia. As part his coronation speech, as an answer to the fact that peasants and workers from local towns' assemblies (zemstvos) had come to the Winter Palace to ask for constitutional reforms, he spoke the words: " I want everyone to know that I will devote all my strength to maintain, for the good of the whole nation, the principle of absolute autocracy, as firmly and as strongly as did my late lamented father". These astonished everyone present and were the first of many events that would reduce his popularity over the years. But what were these events? What happened so that in 23 years the Tsar went from being loved by most Russians to the point of being hated and forced to abdicate by those same people? In order to understand this, it is necessary to analyse the actions taken by Nicholas during his years at power and observe what were the wrong decisions taken by him.

Although he had his qualities, such as being loyal to his family, a hard worker and having attention to detail, Nicholas was different from his predecessors in that he was not able, forceful and imaginative, three essential qualities for a leader. He insisted in getting involved in the tiniest detail of government, something which could deviate his attention from more important matters.

Perhaps this was because he felt threatened by able and talented ministers. He did not administer the situation in his government very well, as he refused to chair the Council of Ministers because he disliked confrontation. Due to this, he would prefer to see ministers face-to-face and would encourage rivalry between them, creating chaos. Also, he avoided making important decisions and, although he had some talented ministers, did not delegate. This was a really big flaw when the sheer size of his Empire was considered. Furthermore, the Tsar had a tendency towards nepotism; that is, to put family members, who would often be corrupt, into important roles in the government. Due to this particularly ineffective government, there was a growing dissatisfaction in Russia at the start of the 20th century. There were some opposition groups, largely made up of the growing middle class, willing to make reforms in the country.

An event that certainly had a major impact on the political and economic situation of the country was the Russo-Japanese War. This had mainly been caused by the Russian desire to acquire more land in the Pacific region, especially the ice-free Port Arthur, of great strategic importance. Perhaps another possible reason was that the Tsar wanted to distract the public attention from the problems he was having at home by winning an easy war. Either way, the war was a disaster and starting it can be considered as the Tsar's first major mistake. The Russian navy had many defeats and the war caused food shortages and unemployment at home. The growing tensions inside the country finally came together on Sunday, the 22nd of January 1905, when a crowd of about 200, 000 protesters, led by the Priest Father Gapon, marched to the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg to hand a petition to

the Tsar. But instead of doing this, they were met by soldiers and Cossacks, who opened fire and killed an uncertain number of people, but which may have been up to 4, 000. This was Nicholas' second major error. Instead of demonstrating to his people, who had pacifically come up to him, that he cared about them, he preferred to isolate himself from them, losing the trust of his subjects.

But Bloody Sunday was just a spark for something much bigger which had erupted. Soon, a massive revolt arose all around the country and there was danger that the Tsar would lose control of Russia. His uncle was assassinated in Moscow, where workers put barricades in the streets. In March, April and May there were shameful defeats of the Russian army and navy in the war with Japan; in June, sailors aboard the battleship Potemkin mutinied; in September, a General Strike began and paralysed Russian industry. As an answer to these arousals, Nicholas issued the October Manifesto. In it, he allowed certain freedoms, such as freedom of speech and conscience, uncensored newspapers and rights to form political parties. Most importantly, it established a Duma (Parliament), which was to be elected by the people. With the October Manifesto, the Tsar was able to calm down the Revolution. In December, when the troops had arrived from Japan, they were put to kill revolutionaries. By May, when the Tsar was in control again, he issued the Fundamental Laws, in which he greatly limited the Duma's powers, so that it could do virtually nothing. This was another mistake. Instead of listening to the needs of his people and democratising his regime, he had decided to uphold the principles of autocracy with "unwavering firmness". Had he instead not issued the Fundamental Laws, he might have

had more support from his people and the situation could have been better for him.

On that same year, Nicholas II appointed Pyotr Stolypin as the new Prime Minister. Stolypin initiated a series of reforms and approached the problems of Russia in a “ carrot and stick” manner. On one hand, he was hard on revolutionaries; he hanged over 1, 000 and over 20, 000 were sent into exile. On the other hand, he knew that in order to stop revolt he would have decrease the amount of poverty, especially in the countryside. To do this, he wished to allow more productive peasants to buy up land from their neighbours, creating larger, more productive farms which would create a class of wealthy landowners, kulaks, and create peace. These efforts, however, could not continue, as Stolypin was murdered at the Kiev Opera in 1911, by a leftist radical and agent of the Okhrana. This didn’t make a difference, though, as there were rumours that the Tsar would remove him from his post anyway. Overall, Stolypin was very useful to the Tsar, as he helped stop many revolts, and can be considered to have been one of the last major statesmen of Imperial Russia with a clearly defined political programme and determination to undertake major reforms (according to the historians Ingrid Hardcaslte and Ashley Dick).

It was in 1914 that the next event of great relevance would occur in Russia. It was on that year that World War I broke out. Russia, as part of the Triple Entente, rushed to fight against its Triple Alliance enemies, and the Tsar used this war to raise the patriotic spirit across the country. This, however, lasted very little, due to a series of humiliating defeats of the Russian army.

Again, this war caused food shortages and problems in Russia. It was in this situation of eminent disaster that the Tsar made perhaps his greatest mistake. In September 1915, Nicholas assumed command of the armed forces. This did not make any difference in terms of war performance, as he was not a particularly able commander, but had the unpleasant side effect that now the blame for the army's defeats would be thrown upon his shoulders. The Tsar's popularity, which already was not high, started rapidly declining.

Another factor that contributed to this decline was the influence exerted on the royal family by Grigori Rasputin, which had been left with the Tsarina in Petrograd. Rasputin was a mysterious figure, who had been inserted in the court environment due to his apparently mystic healing powers, with which he was able to give successful treatment to the Tsarevich Alexei, who suffered from haemophilia. Born in a small village in Siberia, his reputation was extremely bad in St. Petrograd. He spent a lot of time in a state of drunkenness and took part in wild orgies. Many suspected that he had an affair with the Tsarina. With the Tsar away, Rasputin also exerted an influence on the decisions taken by his wife and appointed some of his friends, in return for bribes, to positions of power. Still, the royal family seemed to ignore these problems and were willing to keep him in their court. Alexandra would not send Rasputin away, despite the way the public opinion was viewing the situation. Maybe at that moment, Nicholas should have done this himself, so as not to further hurt the citizens' faith in him.

Most probably, however, this would not have mattered. By late 1916 the Council of the United Nobility was calling for the Tsar to step down. They were suspicious of Rasputin and the Tsarina and the fact that Alexandra was of German descent. They were so concerned that a group of leading aristocrats decided to murder Rasputin in December 1916. By March 1917 strikes and demonstrations had spread out, as workers wanted political changes as well as food and fuel. Even the army turned against the Tsar. There was nothing more that he could do. The Tsar abdicated on the 15th of March in favour of his brother Mikhail, who refused to substitute. Consequently, a Provisional Government assumed command and later this same government was overthrown by the Bolsheviks. The Romanov's destiny was by now sealed. They were moved to various locations as prisoners and on the 17th of July 1918 they were killed by the Bolsheviks.

Nicholas II certainly did make a great amount of mistakes on his way to being murdered. His on “unwavering firmness” to uphold the principles of autocracy was perhaps the bigger one. Maybe, if he had softened up the autocratic regime, things might have been different. Russia was the last absolute monarchy in Europe and there was a growing awareness inside it of the countries around and how all of them had become either constitutional monarchies or democracies. In order for Russia to modernise, as the Tsar wanted, there was a need to change the kind of government. There were many things that he could have done in order to delay the Revolution, but eventually it would have happened anyway. This kind of government could not go on well into the 20th century. The fall of the monarchy was predictable and what followed was destined to change the world for the rest

of the 20th century. The rise of the Bolsheviks and the establishment of the first communist state ended up by making an impact on many countries around the world and changing the face of the world up until today.

Politically, many Russians, as well as non-Russian subjects of the crown, had reason to be dissatisfied with the existing autocratic system. Nicholas II was a deeply conservative ruler. His criteria of virtue-orderliness, family, and duty-were viewed as both personal ideals for a moral individual and rules for society and politics. Individuals and society alike were expected to show self-restraint, devotion to community and hierarchy, and a spirit of duty to country and tradition. Religious faith helped bind all this together: as a source of comfort and reassurance in the face of contradictory conditions, as a source of insight into the divine will, as a source of state power and authority. Indeed, perhaps more than any other modern monarch, Nicholas II attached himself and the future of his dynasty to the myth of the ruler as saintly and blessed father to his people. This inspiring faith, many historians have argued, was blinding: unable to believe that his power was not from God and the true Russian people were not as devoted to him as he felt he was to them, he was unwilling to allow the democratic reforms that might have prevented revolution, and when, after the 1905 revolution, he allowed limited civil rights and democratic representation, he tried to limit these in every possible way, in order to preserve his autocratic authority.

At the same time, the desire for democratic participation was strong. Notwithstanding stereotypes about Russian political culture, Russia had a long tradition of democratic thought. Since the end of the eighteenth

century, a whole pantheon of Russian intellectuals promoted ideals about the dignity and rights of the individual and the ethical and practical necessity of civil rights and democratic representation. These ideas were reflected most obviously among Russia's liberals, though populists, Marxists, and anarchists also all claimed this democratic heritage as their own. A growing movement of opposition challenged the autocracy even before the crisis brought by World War I. Dissatisfaction with Russian autocracy culminated in the huge national upheaval that followed the Bloody Sunday massacre of January 1905, in which Russian workers saw their pleas for justice rejected as hundreds of unarmed protesters were shot by the Tsar's troops. The response to the massacre crippled the nation with strikes forcing Nicholas to offer his October Manifesto, which promised a democratic parliament (the State Duma). However, the Tsar undermined his promises of democracy with Article 87 of the 1906 Fundamental State Laws, and then subsequently dismissed the first two Dumas when they proved uncooperative. Unfulfilled hopes of democracy fueled revolutionary ideas and violence targeted at the Tsarist regime.

One of Nicholas' reasons for going to war in 1914 was his desire to restore the prestige that Russia had lost during the Russo-Japanese war. Nicholas also wanted to galvanize the diverse people in his empire under a single banner by directing military force at a common enemy, namely Germany and the Central Powers. A common assumption among his critics is that he believed that by doing so he could also distract the people from the ongoing issues of poverty, inequality, and poor working conditions that were sources of discontent. Instead of restoring Russia's political and military standing,

World War I would lead to horrifying military casualties on the Russian side and undermined it further.

The most that one can say is that a revolution in Russia was more likely than not, and this for several reasons. Of these, perhaps the most weighty was the steady decline of the prestige of tsardom in the eyes of a population accustomed to being ruled by an invincible authority – indeed, seeing in invincibility the criterion of legitimacy. After a century and a half of military victories and expansion from the middle of the nineteenth century until 1917, Russia suffered one humiliation after another at the hands of foreigners: the defeat, on her own soil, in the Crimean War; the loss at the Congress of Berlin of the fruits of victory over the Turks; the debacle in the war with Japan; and the drubbing at the hands of the Germans in World War I. Such a succession of reverses would have damaged the reputation of any government: in Russia it proved fatal. Tsarism's disgrace was compounded by the concurrent rise of a revolutionary movement which it was unable to quell despite resort to harsh repression. The half-hearted concessions made in 1905 to share power with society neither made tsarism more popular with the opposition nor raised its prestige in the eyes of the people at large, who simply could not understand how a ruler would allow himself to be abused from the forum of a government institution. The Confucian principle of T'ien-ming, or Mandate of Heaven, which in its original meaning linked the ruler's authority to righteous conduct, in Russia derived from forceful conduct: a weak ruler, a "loser", forfeited it. Nothing could be more misleading than to judge a Russian head of state by the standard of either morality or popularity: what mattered was that he inspired fear in friend and foe – that,

like Ivan IV, he deserve the sobriquet of “Awesome.” Nicholas II fell not because he was hated but because he was held in contempt.

Among the other factors making for revolution was the mentality of the Russian peasantry, a class never integrated into the political structure.

Peasants made up 80 percent of Russia’s population: and although they took hardly any active part in the conduct of state affairs, in a passive capacity, as an obstacle to change and, at the same time, a permanent threat to the status quo, they were a very unsettling element. It is commonplace to hear that under the old regime the Russian peasant was “oppressed,” but it is far from clear just who was oppressing him. On the eve of the Revolution, he enjoyed full civil and legal rights; he also owned, either outright or communally, nine-tenths of the country’s agricultural land and the same proportion of livestock. Poor by Western European or American standards, he was better off than his father, and freer than his grandfather, who more likely than not had been a serf. Cultivating allotments assigned to him by fellow peasants, he certainly enjoyed greater security than tenant farmer of Ireland, Spain or Italy.

The problem with Russian peasants was not oppression, but isolation. They were isolated from the country’s political, economic and cultural life, and therefore unaffected by the changes that had occurred since the time Peter the Great had set Russia on the course of Westernization. Many contemporaries observed that the peasantry remained steeped in Muscovite culture: culturally it had no more in common with the ruling elite or the intelligentsia than the native population of Britain’s African colonies had with

Victorian England. The majority of Russia's peasants descended from serfs, who were not even subjects, since the monarchy abandoned them to the whim of the landlord and bureaucrat. As a result, for Russia's rural population the state remained even after the emancipation an alien and malevolent force that took taxes and recruits but gave nothing in return. The peasant knew no loyalty outside his household and commune. He felt no patriotism and no attachment to the government save for a vague devotion to the distant Tsar from whom he expected to receive the land he coveted. An instinctive anarchist, he was never integrated into national life and felt as much estranged from the conservative establishment as from the radical opposition. He looked down on the city and on men without beards: Marquis de Custine heard it said as early as 1839 that someday Russia would see a revolt of the bearded against the shaven. The existence of this mass of alienated and potentially explosive peasants immobilized the government, which believed that it was docile only from fear and would interpret any political concessions as weakness and rebel.

The traditions of serfdom and the social institutions of rural Russia – the joint family household and the almost universal system of communal land-holding – prevented the peasantry from developing qualities required for modern citizenship. While serfdom was not slavery, the two institutions had this in common that like slaves, serfs had no legal rights and hence no sense of law. Michael Rostovtzeff, Russia's leading historian of classical antiquity and an eyewitness of 1917, concluded that serfdom may have been worse than slavery in that a serf had never known freedom, which prevented him from acquiring the qualities of a true citizen: in his opinion, it was a principal

cause of Bolshevism. To serfs, authority was by its very nature arbitrary: and to defend themselves from it they relied not on appeals to legal or moral rights, but on cunning. They could not conceive of government based on principle: life to them was a Hobbesian war of all against all. This attitude fostered despotism: for the absence of inner discipline and respect for law required order to be imposed from the outside. When despotism ceased to be viable, anarchy ensued; and once anarchy had run its course, it inevitably gave rise to a new despotism.

The peasant was revolutionary in one respect only: he did not acknowledge private ownership of land. Although on the eve of the Revolution he owned nine-tenths of the country's arable, he craved for the remaining 10 percent held by landlords, merchants and noncommunal peasants. No economic or legal arguments could change his mind: he felt he had a God-given right to that land and that someday it would be his. And by his he meant the commune's, which would allocate it justly to its members. The prevalence of communal landholding in European Russia was, along with the legacy of serfdom, a fundamental fact of Russian social history. It meant that along with a poorly developed sense for law, the peasant also had little respect for private property. Both tendencies were exploited and exacerbated by radical intellectuals for their own ends to incite the peasantry against the status quo.