

How far was military  
defeat responsible for  
the fall of the tsar in  
feb 1917



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

By 1917 Russia had been at War for three years and the strains on the both the army and the country itself were becoming more and more established as time went on and people were beginning to question the Tsar's rule.

Previous to 1917 the Tsar had suffered many setbacks as ruler of Russia. The most significant of these were the economic and political problems prevalent in Russia, the prominence of revolutionary groups and their activities and the gradual loss of support for the Tsar. Further factors were the industrialisation of Russia, the 1905 revolution and the October Manifesto and creation of the State Duma.

Some of these causes were long term, whilst others were fairly short term. However, it was the huge Military defeats suffered by Russia that set the 1917 Russian Revolution off. At the end of 1914 the Russian army had lost half a million men and they were running low on ammunition and arms. They also had problems with uniform and food.

Desertion became more and more frequent and some soldiers even deliberately inflicted injury upon themselves so they could avoid military service. Nobody could understand why the Russian leaders had engaged the country in such a pointless war. In the summer of 1915 the Russians lost 3, 400, 000 men, 300, 000 were killed and 1, 500, 000 were taken prisoner. The appalling numbers of death were yet another issue which affected the lower classes of Russia.

For a long time the peasants of the land had suffered poor living conditions and their living standards were falling constantly. Although they had been freed from Serfdom in 1861 they did not get the land they thought they were

entitled to and through a scheme of periodic redemption payments they were forced to buy land which they believed was owned by them anyway. Although in the half century following emancipation the peasant lived miserable, unsuccessful lives, there were no serious peasant disturbances until around 1900 when there were widespread riots. The workers had similar problems when the industrialisation of Russia in the late nineteenth century meant that they were working longer hours, in poorer conditions with less pay and no social services or insurance.

They had no outlet as Trade Unions were banned, therefore they couldn't organise to defend their interests. This led to rioting, striking and increased frustration towards the Tsar, which culminated with the 1905 revolution. On 20 January 1905, 150, 000 workers and their families and children marched to the Tsar's Winter Palace in St Petersburg to present with a petition, campaigning for freedom of the press, religious tolerance, equality before the law and an eight-hour working day. However, when they reached the Palace they were shot at by troops and police who were guarding the Palace and nearly 200 marchers died. This was known as Bloody Sunday and set off nation-wide strikes and protests and assassinations, particularly in the industrialised areas of Russia.

Many workers' organisations, soviets and trade unions began to appear and the government had no choice but to legalise them. The 1905 Revolution was another long term factor responsible for the fall of the Tsar and it led to the October Manifesto and the Duma. The October Manifesto followed a general strike led by the St Petersburg Soviet. The Tsar felt he had to make some allowances and attempted to meet some of his people's demands.

<https://assignbuster.com/how-far-was-military-defeat-responsible-for-the-fall-of-the-tsar-in-feb-1917/>

He introduced the October Manifesto which was to allow the population free speech, assembly and association. It allowed the State Duma to be elected by all classes of population. The Duma was a parliament, but the only power they had was to veto over all legislation. It was basically an opportunity for political parties to pass judgment on the government and appeal to the people of Russia in an attempt to build up support. The Duma was dissolved and reinstated a number of times and considering it was supposed to bring change and constitutional reform it was a failure.

The Tsar did not like the Duma because it “ symbolised his panicky surrender of the autocratic people”. Another important factor responsible for the fall of the Tsar was widespread public distrust in him, something made worse by Rasputin, a ‘ holy man’ who was visited the royal court regularly to treat the Tsar’s only son who suffered from haemophilia. Rasputin was able to stem the bleeding of the boy through semi-hypnotic techniques. However, the public were not told why Rasputin was visiting the court and they saw him as a drunken lecher who used his connections to gain a higher position in society. This caused the speaker of the Duma (and the leader of the Conservative Octobrist party), Alexander Guchoy publicly attacked the Tsar for allowing Rasputin to stay with them.

This was a surprise because the Russians had never seen the Tsar openly criticised and he began to seem less god-like and more weak and frail. When the war started in 1914 it affected the Russian people in many ways. First of all it created immediate patriotism: the German named St Petersburg was changed to Petrograd and the German embassy was burnt down. However, by 1915 things had changed again. The army suffered heavy defeats and <https://assignbuster.com/how-far-was-military-defeat-responsible-for-the-fall-of-the-tsar-in-feb-1917/>

shortages of labour on the land began to arise due to men and horses being called up for the front. Therefore, the food and goods that people needed for every day life could not be acquired.

Prices increased and in the city workers were forced to work long hours under hard conditions in order to maintain the war effort. Some of these things may have mattered less to the people if the war had gone well. The Tsar suspended the Duma and confidence was low. The shortage of supplies affected the Russian army as well, meaning that they were short of food, ammunition and arms and without sufficient clothing to protect them against the harsh winter weather. The war also caused problems for the transport system and without it it was impossible to get supplies out to the people who needed them most. Communications were also poor which did not help anything.

The continual defeats on the battlefield led to widespread unrest across Russia. This developed into a major crisis for the Tsar. In September 1915 Nicholas decided to take command of the forces and was seen as directly responsible for the army's performance. However, Nicholas did not have a lot of military skills and the officers he chose to help him had the same problem.

It was the same in the civilian government; favouritism existed and the Tsar allowed many inexperienced and incompetent people to hold office. He left his wife in charge in Russia to keep the balance between the ministers but she added to public distrust as she was German born and people questioned where her loyalties lay. It was also believed that Rasputin, who was still at the royal court, was very influential in some of the decisions that Tsarina

Alexandra had to make. Rasputin was murdered in 1916 but the Tsar and Tsarist rule was already seen as backwards and inept, in many areas of Russia.

During the war, a number of Duma members met illegally to determine the situation. There were many other people who had been against the Tsar for years, namely left wing political groups such as the Social Democrats and the Social Revolutionaries. They believed a socialist revolution was needed to bring about a classless society and it could not happen without getting rid of the Tsar, who lived in complete luxury compared to the peasants of the land who had barely enough money to live on. Marxists such as the Social Democrats believed that the widening gap between the rich and poor and the capital and labour was causing such a strain on the country that it would not be able to withhold much longer.

Many of the revolutionary groups began to foster armed uprising. The revolution finally happened in February 1917, set off by a series of short term factors. International Women's Day coincided with a baker's strike and the meeting turned into an anti-government riot when people realised there was only a three day supply of flour. The riot was enlarged by mutinous troops who had run away from the army because they were fed-up and annoyed at the awful conditions they were expected to live in, made worse because of lack of supplies. The government lost control and when two men from the Duma went to him at GHQ and suggested he abdicate none of his senior officers came to his support and Nicholas finally agreed and abdicated in favour of his brother, Michael.

However, Michael was not prepared to take up position of Tsar, not when things were as risky as they were so he declined the crown. Power fell into the hands of a provisional government. There were many causes of the Russian Revolution; some which had been rising for years, such as the poor living conditions of the peasants and some which were much more immediate, such as the military defeats in the war. All of these factors played a fairly big part in the fall of the Tsar and, on its own, the Military defeat would not have been a major problem for the Tsar. However, when added to the huge list of problems in Russia that the people blamed the Tsar for, it was yet another thing wrong with the Tsarist reign.

If the military had been successful, then it may well have raised morale in Russia, meaning people would be less annoyed with the struggle at home but they weren't. However, a lot of the reason for the army being unsuccessful was due to the problems at home, such as the poor working conditions of the workers, so they may not have been working to their best efforts, therefore not producing as many arms as possible. Also, the incompetence of the Tsar meant that the army had a Commander who did not know what he was doing. Most of the problems could be traced back to the Tsar and the people of Russia finally realised this after they suffered military defeats, despite having believed that the Tsar was chosen by God and giving him an extremely high status for years. Therefore, I think that the Military defeats were immediately responsible for the defeat of the Tsar because they could be seen as the 'straw that broke the camel's back'.

However, on their own they would not have caused nearly as much trouble as they did, but when put with the other factors they helped to increase the pressure on the Tsar, eventually causing him to abdicate.