

FOCUS ROUTE

The rest of this chapter and the Section I review concentrates on answering key questions about the downfall of tsarism. As you work through the section note the views of historians and use the guidance in the section review to develop your own interpretation.

G Could tsarism have survived?

There are many different interpretations of the Russian revolution of February 1917 and the factors that brought the tsarist regime down, especially the role of the First World War. The background of Western historians predisposed them to hope that Russia might be developing into a parliamentary democracy. Some have argued that the tsarist regime was making progress on the political and economic front and was beginning to stabilise before 1914 but the First World War produced strains that the tsarist state could not survive. Others have taken the line that the revolution of 1905 opened up possibilities for change and that for various reasons the tsarist regime, and particularly the Tsar, was unable or unwilling to seize them. George Kennan is an interesting bridge between the two views (see Source 3.22). He argues that the regime would have collapsed sooner or later, war or no war.

The Soviet view stressed the importance of the development of a genuine revolutionary Marxist party under Lenin confronting the tsarist regime with a challenge it could not withstand – the number of strikes had grown rapidly after the Lena Goldfields Massacre, were increasingly political in nature, and culminated in the St Petersburg general strike of July 1914. Soviet historians argue that the outbreak of the war merely delayed the onset of revolution.

Increasingly, revisionist historians have contended that tsarism could not have survived. They give more attention to social, economic and institutional factors. Most revisionist historians point to the underlying weaknesses in the structure of the tsarist regime – its administration, bureaucracy and political institutions. In their view, the autocratic regime could not cope with the problems resulting from industrialisation and modernisation. Although some in the ruling élite, like Witte and Stolypin, saw the need for reform, the Tsar and his most reactionary supporters were hostile to the political demands and social transformations that reforms entailed and obstinately stuck to an outdated vision of autocracy. The roots of revolution, therefore, can be found in the conflict between society becoming more educated, more urban and more complex and a fossilised autocracy that would not concede its political demands. The war was not responsible for the collapse of the regime though it revealed its inadequacies and hastened its collapse. Sheila Fitzpatrick argues that Russian society on the eve of the war was so deeply divided and the political and bureaucratic structure so fragile and overstrained that it was vulnerable to any kind of jolt, even without the war.

Dominic Lieven, Nicholas II's biographer, does not apportion so much personal blame to the Tsar. He feels that no Tsar, however strong and capable, would have been able to cope with the problems of modernising Russia within the framework of an autocracy. This reinforces the view that the real problem lay in the structural weaknesses and inflexibility of the autocratic state, which was not fit for the modern world. It was not only the Russian Empire that collapsed after the First World War, the German and Austrian Empires shared the same fate.

Richard Pipes is a conservative historian and often critical of revisionists but he too stresses the weaknesses of the regime in the face of the challenge of modernisation in a deeply divided country. The prevalence and intensity of hatred: ideological, ethnic, and social was such that sooner or later there would again be recourse to violence. He quotes the poet Alexander Blok, writing in 1908, who refers to a bomb ticking in the heart of Russia: 'In all of us sit sensations of malaise, fear catastrophe, explosion . . . We do not know yet precisely what events await us, but in our hearts the needle of the seismograph has already stirred.'

ACTIVITY

Would there have been a revolution if there had been no war? Read sources 3.23–3.28.

- 1 What position does each source take on how central the war was to bringing about the downfall of the tsarist regime?
- 2 What points do the sources make about how the war contributed to the revolution?

Christopher Read has written an article on whether tsarism might have successfully modernised itself (C. Read, *In Search of Liberal Tsarism: the historiography of autocratic decline*, *Historical Journal*, 45, 1 (2002), pp. 195–210). He argues that even those who think that Russia was developing rapidly saw little chance of the autocracy surviving the process. For Read the real question is not whether tsarism could have survived but what kind of revolution Russia faced: would it be a bourgeois revolution focused on institutional reform and led by what was still a weak middle class or a radical populist revolution, which would lead to widespread property redistribution and extensive social transformation? For Robert Service the war answered this question. As he says in Source 3.23, it made possible a radical upheaval. But elsewhere he argues that even before the war, as things stood, some kind of revolutionary clash was practically inevitable.

SOURCE 3.23 R. Service, *The Russian Revolution 1900–1927*, 4th edn, 2009, p. 16

The empire as it was developing by 1914 was a sensitive plant, but it was not doomed to undergo the root-and-branch revolution of 1917. What made that kind of revolution possible was the protracted, disruptive, exhausting conflict of the First World War. No First World War, no October Revolution. Lenin and his Bolsheviks were donated a revolutionary opportunity they would probably never have created for themselves.

SOURCE 3.24 P. Waldron, *The End of Imperial Russia, 1855–1917*, 1997, p. 37 and p. 164

All the problems that had accumulated over the previous half-century came into sharp focus during the war. Poor military performance engendered even greater scepticism about the political capabilities of tsarism. The unmodernised Russian economy was too weak to both supply the army and to maintain the standard of living of the peasantry and of working people. The government proved incapable of recognising the strains that a war economy placed upon the ordinary people of the empire and failed to understand that it needed actively to win their support to ensure the success of the war effort. By 1917 the Russian people had no will to support either the person of the monarch, nor the system which he represented.

SOURCE 3.25 G. Kennan, 1969, quoted by C. Read: *In Search of Liberal Tsarism: The historiography of autocratic decline*, *Historical Journal*, 45, 2002, p. 195–6

I was inclined to feel that, had the war not intervened, the chances for survival of the autocracy and for its gradual evolution into a constitutional monarchy would not have been bad. On reviewing once more the events of these last decades, I find myself obliged to question that opinion. Neither the tardiness in the granting of political reform, nor the excesses of an extravagant and foolish nationalism, nor the personal limitations of the imperial couple began with the war or were primarily responses to the existence of the war. None of the consequences of these deficiencies were in the process of any significant correction as the war approached.

SOURCE 3.26 M. Harrison, *The Second World War*, in R. W. Davies, M. Harrison and S. G. Wheatcroft (eds) *The Economic Transformation of the Soviet Union 1913–1945*, 1994, p. 266

Peasant farmers preferred own consumption of their food surpluses to sale of food in return for useless cash, given the prevailing shortage of industrial goods. Urban–rural trade broke down, and the countryside disintegrated into self-sufficient regions, withholding food surpluses from the food-deficit sectors of towns and industries. A weak transport system and administrative infrastructure made it more difficult for government to intervene, impose rationing and controls, and direct food resources where they were needed. When the full extent of consumer shortages were revealed, the ensuing crisis toppled the old regime.

SOURCE 3.27 S. Badcock, *Autocracy in Crisis: Nicholas the Last*, in I. D. Thatcher (ed.) *Late Imperial Russia: Problems and Perspectives*, 2005, p. 23

The breakdown of cordial relations between government and Duma, and the formation of the Progressive Bloc in August 1915 demonstrated the regime's inability to co-operate with society even in favourable conditions, and was testament to its increasingly incompetent handling of the war effort.

SOURCE 3.28 R. B. McKean, *The Russian Constitutional Monarchy, 1907–1917*, 1977, p. 30

From the point of view of the monarchy, the impact of the war upon the Imperial army was the most disastrous consequence of the three years' hostilities. Despite the defeats in the Far East, the efforts of the revolutionary parties to establish links with the troops and the attraction of looting the gentry estates, the peasant-soldiers had kept their oath in the revolution of 1905 and 1906 and suppressed all workers' and peasants' disturbances. In a variety of ways the Great War gradually broke the army's loyalty.

KEY POINTS FROM CHAPTER 3

Could tsarism have survived? 1906–1917

- 1 Peter Stolypin attempted to preserve the autocracy by bringing in reforms but he was attacked by left- and right-wing politicians, indicating the difficulty of modernising Russia within the framework of an autocracy.
- 2 Stolypin's reforms in agriculture attempted to create more productive independent peasants who would support the regime but the reforms had only limited success. Agricultural production grew, but despite some innovation, farming methods were still largely antiquated, using the strip system, and organised by rural communes. Some peasants prospered while others remained impoverished. A rootless and discontented class of landless peasants was growing, with many moving to the towns and cities.
- 3 Industrial production grew steadily over the period but Russian industry was uneven and unbalanced.
- 4 The working classes were becoming more radical after the Lena Goldfields Massacre in 1912. Militancy and strikes increased in 1912–14.
- 5 The revolutionary parties were not in a strong position in 1914 although support for the Bolsheviks had revived after 1912.
- 6 The First World War had a devastating impact on Russia with millions killed and wounded. Incompetent administration and the collapse of the distribution system resulted in a lack of supplies, weapons and medical services at the Front and shortages of food and fuel in major cities, especially Petrograd. Confidence in the government plummeted.
- 7 The professional classes and businessmen set up non-governmental organisations to improve supplies of war materials, which seemed to offer an alternative form of government.
- 8 The Tsar made several bad mistakes. He went to the Front, taking personal responsibility for the war. He would not work with the Progressive Bloc in the Duma or co-operate with the non-governmental organisations. He left the Tsarina and Rasputin in charge of government.
- 9 The Tsarina and Rasputin created instability by changing ministers continually and became a focus for criticism and antagonism towards the regime. The ruling élite lost confidence in the Tsar.
- 10 By the beginning of 1917 there was little support left for the Tsar and his government. A spontaneous eruption of discontent in February 1917 saw him swept from power when the army and its generals deserted him.

