

Section 1 Review: Why did the tsarist regime collapse in 1917?

Writing an essay about the revolution of February 1917

Often questions about the 1917 revolution take a particular line to which the essay writer has to respond. For example: the war was the main factor in bringing about the revolution, or, the Tsar was the main contributor to his own downfall.

Sometimes, a question asks 'how far' one of these factors (e.g. war, Tsar) caused the revolution. Usually the same information is required but the writer has to be able to organise or 'deploy' it in different ways. It can be helpful to think of the information as blocks that can be used flexibly. Here are some of the main blocks of information you might deploy in any essay looking at the cause of the February 1917 revolution. You would give more weight to some information than to others depending on the essay question.

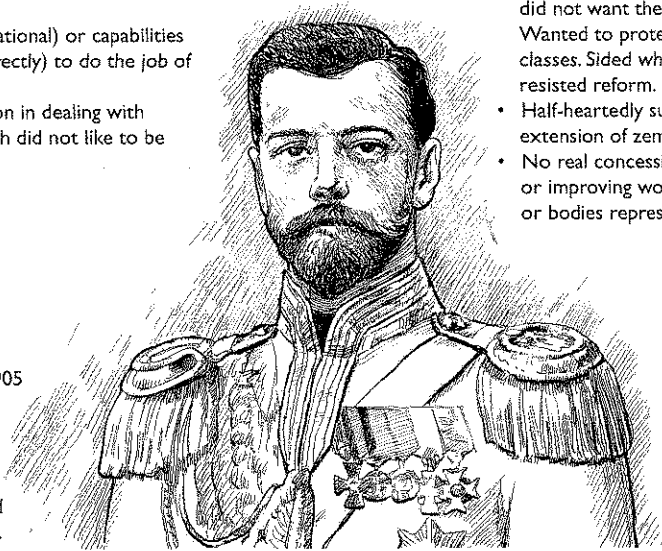
■ A How the Tsar contributed to his own downfall

Personality and leadership

- Personality – weak but obstinate, indecisive, lack of interest in world around him.
- Did not have the skills (e.g. organisational) or capabilities (e.g. unwilling to address people directly) to do the job of ruling Russia.
- Used repression as the main weapon in dealing with problems, relying on the army, which did not like to be used as a police force.

Attitude to political change

- Resisted all forms of change pre-1905 – confirmed believer in autocracy. Not keen on zemstva or allowing local self-government.
- October Manifesto wrenched out of him – never committed to it and subsequently reneged on promises. Missed opportunity to bring liberal intelligentsia onto his side.
- Did not really want the Duma or representative body in first place and in Fundamental Laws showed his unwillingness to share power.
- Would not co-operate with the dumas during 1906–14 or with Progressive Bloc during war.



Reform

- Never willingly supported Witte's or Stolypin's reforms: did not want the changes in society these would entail. Wanted to protect court power and power of landowning classes. Sided where he could with right-wing groups who resisted reform.
- Half-heartedly supported Stolypin's land reforms. Resisted extension of zemstva to western provinces.
- No real concessions to workers on limiting working day or improving working conditions. Rejected trade unions or bodies representing workers.

Misjudgements and mistakes

- Nicholas failed to realise seriousness of the situation building in 1904 and the need to respond to the demands of liberals and workers. Bloody Sunday 1905 resulted in massive loss of respect for Tsar.
 - Appointment of nonentities and incompetents to run government after Stolypin's death.
- His and Tsarina's support for Rasputin damaged the reputation of royal family.
- Going to the Front in 1915, taking on personal responsibility for war.
- Leaving government in hands of Tsarina and Rasputin.
- Rejected the proposals of the Progressive Bloc in 1916.
- February 1917 – still not really aware of the dangers to the regime and took no action until too late.

■ B The problems facing Russia that even the most gifted of tsars would have had difficulty coping with

Problems thrown up by industrialisation and modernisation

- The ruling élite knew that Russia needed to modernise to compete with other world powers and remain a major military power. But the majority were determined to resist any challenge to autocracy and the social transformation modernisation entailed.
- The growing professional middle class wanted a greater role in national government and felt they could do a better job than the autocracy.
- Rapid industrialisation generated a new strata of society – a working class extremely isolated and hostile to the existing situation and able to organise itself.

Political change

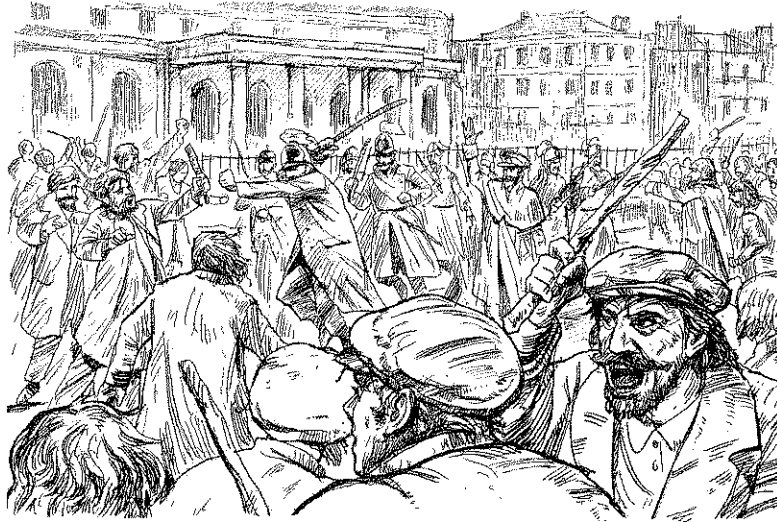
- Problems to do with constitutional change – relations between the Tsar, his ministers and the Duma.
- Problems of bringing in reforms. The hostility to Stolypin's reforms from all sides demonstrated the difficulty of taking a middle road.
- Attitudes of parties on right and left partly responsible for problems: 'a deadlocked political system, drifting helplessly toward destruction'.
- Possibilities opened up by Progressive Bloc in war.

Social and economic divisions and strains

- Lack of improvement in living and working conditions of the working classes.
- Strikes and militancy pre-1914 and during the war.
- Impact of Stolypin's reforms on peasants and attitudes of peasants pre-1914.

Opposition groups

- The development of the liberal parties pre-1914 and middle-class pressure for reform.
- The development of the revolutionary parties, their relative strength and importance pre-1914, the extent to which the Bolsheviks were articulating the interests and aspirations of the working classes.



Degree of support for the tsarist regime

- Contraction of the social bases of support for the regime.
- Developments after 1905–6 increased concerns about the reliability of the army in a crisis.

Impact of First World War

- Effect of defeats and losses on the army and its morale, the changing composition of the army.
- Effect of economic disruption and distribution problems on people back home.
- Effect on the confidence in government.
- The actions of opposition politicians in the Duma and the development of the War Industries Committees.

ACTIVITY

Essay writing: Beginning essays

The beginning of an essay is difficult but very important. In your first paragraph you need to make an impression on the reader. This will not happen if the first paragraph just sets the scene without reference to the question or merely re-states the question. The first paragraph should show that you understand the question and have an answer to it. It is worth developing your skills in this respect. You can consider how historians tackle the problem by studying articles in A level history journals.

Essay: How far did the Tsar contribute to his own downfall?

One way of meeting the challenge of starting the essay is by using quotations, particularly contemporary quotations. The example below shows, at the outset, the gap between the Tsar's perception of the situation and reality. It makes an arresting start and shows that you are addressing the question – which is very important. It would work very well if you wanted to argue that Nicholas was largely responsible for his own downfall, but it could still be used if you wanted to argue that other factors were more important.

In January 1917, two months before he was compelled to abdicate, the Tsar received the British Ambassador, Sir George Buchanan, who asked for and was granted permission to speak frankly: 'Your majesty, if I may be permitted to say so, has but one safe course open to you – namely to break down that barrier that separates you from your people and to regain their confidence.' Drawing himself up and looking hard at me, the Emperor asked: 'Do you mean that I am to regain the confidence of my people or that they are to regain my confidence?' This shows just how strongly Nicholas II believed in the autocracy and how out of touch he was with reality. He made important mistakes and misjudgements but the central problem he faced was how to modernise Russia within the framework of an autocracy. It will be argued that even the most gifted of tsars could not have done that successfully.

CLASS ACTIVITY

Each student should write their own first paragraph for this essay. Then in groups, compare what has been written and within each group decide which is the most effective paragraph and why. Share this with the rest of the class.