

cities, while those that remained behind would become small farmers in the western European sense, providing a haven of stability in the countryside without affecting the status of the landowners, who were not anxious to see their own position further eroded by concessions to the peasants [54]. Stolypin's policy came into law on 22 November 1907, at which time an individual peasant could request his share of land in a consolidated holding. The desire to break up the village communities in their entirety was reflected in a law of 10 July 1910, at which time a village community could dissolve itself by a majority vote of the male heads of household.

The Stolypin reform was a qualified success. By the outbreak of war in 1914, over one-third of peasant households had left the village community. A much smaller number had consolidated their holdings and become small farmers, however – perhaps 10 per cent in all of the European part of the Russian Empire. An analogous situation is seen in Russia today when, given the option of leaving the collective farm, many peasants choose to remain because of the security offered by a collective organization. The Stolypin reform required more initiative than the peasants were prepared to show in the period 1907–14. Within two years, the initial enthusiasm for the move had given way to doubts and a significant drop in the number of peasants choosing to leave the community. The assassination of Stolypin in 1911 and, more importantly, the outbreak of war in 1914 precluded in any case the possibility of bringing this reform to fruition. The Social Democrats were somewhat divided on the reform. On the one hand it threatened to bring capitalism to the village, thereby depriving the urban workers of an ally in the revolutionary struggle. On the other hand the onset of rural individual farming could be perceived as following the Marxist pattern of the growth of rural capitalism, that is a progressive move that signalled that Russia was moving in the same direction as the more advanced nations of Europe.

THE ROYAL FAMILY AND RASPUTIN

Nikolay II has received a mixed press from historians. Some perceive him as a good family man who ruled at a time of unprecedented problems, when the Russian Empire collapsed as a result of strains over which he had little control. Others portray him as incompetent, a ruler who presided over a sudden collapse, having inherited a stable state from his father, and a weak man who lacked the ability to follow one policy through to its conclusion. The latter view accords a similar role to his German-born wife, the Tsarina Aleksandra, who was a stronger personality than her husband but whose ideas usually made a situation worse than it had been. In 1913 the dynasty was to celebrate its third century in power with an ostentatious display in the capital. But the Russian Empire was in decline, a decline masked per-

haps by the more obvious decline of its counterparts in Turkey and Austria-Hungary. Nikolay II was committed to maintaining the authority with which he had been invested, as the 'tsar of all the Russias'. His was a fitting personality to preside over the collapse of the empire. When he finally departed from the scene in March 1917, the effect was no more than that of a lamp going out [Doc. 4].

The royal family was a cause of private concern to the tsar and tsarina. After the birth of four daughters, they had been rewarded with the birth of a son, Aleksey, in 1901, but he was a sickly child and suffered from haemophilia, a disease inherited from the maternal side of the family (ultimately from Queen Victoria) and carefully concealed from the Russian public. The superstitious tsarina tried out a number of dubious healers before the royal family was introduced to the wandering mystic Rasputin in the autumn of 1905. None were able to stop the potentially lethal bleeding when the tsarevich suffered a fall or bump. Rasputin was to fill this role, but he was more than just a 'family doctor', despite his remarkable powers of healing, which cannot be explained by contemporary medicine. Rasputin was perceived as an authentic man of the village with his long dark flowing hair and beard, a genuine representative of the Russian people and its natural goodness, a sinner who had repented and was now welcomed by the upper echelons of the Russian Orthodox Church [32].

Rasputin was a fascinating personality and captured the popular imagination at that time and subsequently. Because of his influence on the tsarina – she always referred to him as 'Our Friend' in her letters to the tsar – he has been accorded a major role in the eventual downfall of the monarchy. This claim has been enhanced by the fact that it was a member of the royal family who engineered his assassination by cyanide poisoning, shooting and finally flogging with chains before being dumped in a Petrograd canal in December 1916. One can respond to this assertion with two statements. First, Rasputin's influence cannot be perceived as totally harmful. In addition to healing Aleksey, he also exposed some of the hypocrisy in the Russian Orthodox Church, and he was one of the few people of influence in ruling circles to come out strongly against participation in the First World War.

Second, Rasputin came to wield political influence in Russia (as opposed to being a warm acquaintance of the royal family) relatively late, at the time of the outbreak of war, or for just three years out of 23 in the reign of Nikolay II. None of the problems that beset Russia can be attributed to Rasputin [28]. Rather he was a symbol of the rift that had developed between the monarch and his subjects. This rift began at the very beginning of Nikolay's reign, when some 1,500 of his subjects were crushed to death at an outdoor ceremony in honour of the royal company, after which Nikolay and Aleksandra attended a reception at the French Embassy

as if nothing had happened. The tsarina was never popular, and in August 1914, when Germany and Russia were in a state of war, she was widely regarded as a traitor. Nikolay II suffered further setbacks with the massacre of Bloody Sunday (described above) and the loss of prestige in the military defeat by Japan. The elevation of Rasputin did not bring down the monarchy; it was rather a reflection of the poor choice of counsellors in the latter part of the reign of the last Romanov.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The origins of the First World War are complex and involve the politics of all the countries of Europe. The Russian role was determined by two major factors: an alliance with France, and subsequently with Britain, which pitted Russia against Germany, a power that was seeking to play a greater role in world politics since its unification in 1871; and support for the claims of fellow Slavs, particularly the Serbs, within the Austro-Hungarian Empire and in Serbia itself. In turn, the Austrians were anxious to crush completely any manifestations of rebellion in their multi-national empire in the justifiable belief that it would have a domino effect on many other territories. Paradoxically most of the heads of the ruling monarchies – Germany, Britain, Russia – were closely related. It seemed inconceivable to Nikolay II that he could be at war with the country of his cousin, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany. Another cousin, George V of England, played a less influential role in politics.

Russian participation in the war owed much to Germany and German military thinking. This was based on the Schlieffen Plan, finalized in 1905, and modifications thereof. The Germans believed that if war broke out, it would be impossible for them to fight a war on two fronts against France and Russia. Since the Russians would take, it was believed, about six weeks to mobilize their cumbersome, though formidably large army, it would be necessary to strike a devastating blow at France before wheeling their armies to the Eastern Front against Russia. The war in western Europe, then, in the German view, had to be ended in six weeks. For the Russians the dilemma was similar. It was considered essential in the event of war that the Russians should mobilize their army before those of their adversaries, otherwise there was a conceivable danger of Russia being overrun before the country was properly prepared.

Because the war proved to be a decisive event in the collapse of the Romanov dynasty, its origins perhaps merit a closer observation. Unfortunately these reveal little in terms of Russian planning or foresight. The European alliance system was a case in point. In 1894 Russia had signed a secret military alliance with France, directed ostensibly against Britain, Russia's great rival in South Asia. But in 1904 Britain and France signed an

Entente Cordiale in order to divide up the spoils in North Africa. After the defeat by Japan in 1905, Russia no longer appeared a threat to the British, while the Russians were eager to add British investment to that of France and Germany in the developing Russian industrial complex. The two imperialist powers divided up Persia into spheres of respective influence (the Russians in the north, the British in the south), while Russia pulled her troops out of Afghanistan. The Triple Entente was now in place and was to prove both durable and a commitment from which it was exceptionally difficult for the Russians to break free when the course of war turned sour on them.

In October 1908, tension in the Balkans mounted when the Austro-Hungarian Empire annexed the province of Bosnia-Herzegovina from the Turks, a move that was widely perceived as affecting the interests of neighbouring Serbia. The Austrian action also had the approval of its German ally. Approximately 3 million Serbs lived in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia appealed for Russian aid. The Russians suggested to the British and French that an international conference be held to resolve the situation (a similar undertaking had resolved a crisis in Morocco in January 1906), but the French proved unwilling to take such a step in view of Germany's unequalled support of its Austrian allies. Russia had thus been humiliated in diplomatic terms and began to increase its military buildup. The situation in the Balkans was proving to be precarious since the old Ottoman Empire no longer had the power to keep the subject nations in check. In 1912, with Russian backing, Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro and Greece formed the Balkan League, which promptly declared war on Turkey.

The Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 resulted in the complete defeat of Turkey by the league and in British mediation at a peace treaty in London in May 1913, which divided up the Turks' former territories on the European continent. Though the war had been conducted successfully, the Treaty of London was also perceived in St Petersburg as disastrous. Serbia had insisted on its annexation of Albania, but the Germans – surprisingly supported by the British – agreed that Albania should become independent. On two occasions, then, Russia had appeared to let down its Serbian ally. A second Balkan war soon broke out between Bulgaria and Serbia over the spoils of the London treaty, however, and this time the Serbs did gain significant territory from Bulgaria and Macedonia. This consequence had the unfortunate repercussion of emboldening the Serbs to seek more gains, and to foment trouble among their compatriots in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This move occurred precisely at a time when the Russians were determined not to let down their Serbian ally when they were next put to the test diplomatically.

The spark for the First World War was the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, archduke and the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne as he

nephew of Emperor Franz-Josef, while on a visit to Sarajevo, Bosnia. The assassination was the work of a member of the Black Hand, a Serbian terrorist group, and not the Serbian government, although the latter was implicated indirectly. The decision to punish Serbia appears to have been made not by the emperor personally, but by his chief of staff, Konrad Von Hoerzendorf, who felt that a quick and victorious war would reverse the gains made recently by the Serbs and stabilize the situation in the empire. With the complete support of Germany, the Austrians sent the Serbs an ultimatum which basically undermined the entire concept of Serbian sovereignty on 23 July 1914. The Russians now faced a serious dilemma and on 25 July a preliminary mobilization of the army was ordered. At the same time, Nikolay II was sending telegrams to Kaiser Wilhelm II to try to find a way out of the impasse. Initially a ridiculous solution was proposed by the tsar, namely to order a mobilization against Austria-Hungary, but not against Germany. Only after the frantic persuasion of his generals did Nikolay order a full mobilization against the two powers.

Once Russia mobilized then the Germans were obliged, by their own thinking, to put the Schlieffen Plan into operation. In St Petersburg, though the tsar genuinely tried to avoid war, there was no premonition of disaster. On the contrary, as in the other European capitals, there was genuine enthusiasm for war, which was not anticipated to be a protracted affair. A war against Germany might even serve some interests of Russia as both Bulgaria and Turkey were falling increasingly under German influence. The role of Russia's old enemy, Turkey, was paramount. As long as Turkey remained outside the conflict and the Dardanelles remained open, the French and British navies had a passage to the Black Sea in order to bring supplies to Russia. In turn, the great value of Russia to its allies was manpower. The Russian army, by its sheer size, was a formidable force and it was getting stronger by the year. The Germans recognized this. From the German perspective a war against Russia was preferable in 1914 rather than in 1916.

War proved initially a great rallying cry for the government. Very few Duma deputies opposed it. The Trudoviki, for example, supported it, as did the Kadets and even prominent Marxists such as Georgii Plekhanov, who saw a greater danger in German militarism than in succumbing to the wishes of imperialist governments. Some socialists wanted a peace treaty without territorial changes or indemnities, but were prepared to begin war while such negotiations took place. Lenin, the Bolshevik leader, was living abroad, and few heeded his cry that an imperialist war should be transformed into a civil war, i.e. that it was in the revolutionaries' interest that Russia should suffer defeat. His views were eventually published in his polemic *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* in 1916. But what appears in retrospect to be gross naivety also occurred in other capitals. Lenin was horrified to learn that the German Social Democrats had also

given their support to the German war effort. In August 1914, the revolutionary movements of Europe appeared to be at a very low ebb. But appearances were misleading because war has always been the great catalyst of revolution and change. The First World War was a cataclysm like none before it.

Russian mobilization occurred much faster than predicted even by the most pessimistic of German military planners. Initially some 1.5 million troops were mobilized, with a further 5 million in reserve. The Russian army had use of 60 batteries of artillery and was divided into several fronts. The two main ones were the North-West, directed against the German territory of East Prussia; and the South-West, directed against Austria-Hungary through a territory composed mainly of ethnic minorities who might be expected to show some sympathy toward an invading Russian army. A third army was in the Caucasus guarding that territory against any possible Turkish encroachments (though Turkey was not yet in the war). A fourth was in the south of Ukraine, based at Odessa. A fifth was on the Baltic coast. It was the first two armies that were called to action quickly, as the desperate French appealed to their Russian ally for a diversionary action to take pressure off their troops in western Europe. The failure of the Schlieffen Plan was soon evident, and the Germans were obliged to respond to the Russian invasion of East Prussia.

The Russian army was not fully prepared for war in August 1914, though the situation was not as desperate as sometimes portrayed. Two great armies invaded East Prussia: the First Army under General Paul Rennenkampf on the Niemen; and the Second Army under General Aleksandr Samsonov, which moved northward from Poland. Though German forces were weak, the Russians were badly led. The two commanders barely communicated with each other. Samsonov had little idea where he was once he entered German territory, and the Russian commanders communicated by open radio, so that the Germans could ascertain their exact whereabouts. As a result, the Germans were able to keep the two great Russian armies separated and fight each in turn: Samsonov was overwhelmed at the battle of Tannenberg (27-30 August 1914) by General Von Francois, one of the greatest defeats in Russian military history. Samsonov suffered 125,000 casualties and committed suicide afterward. Rennenkampf, who had seemed extraordinarily reticent about engaging the Germans, promptly ordered a general retreat when he encountered Von Francois's army, despite the fact that it had just marched 120 kilometres in four days and might have been a weakened force. On 4 September the two armies clashed at Masurian Lakes, and about 45,000 Russian prisoners were taken. Rennenkampf at least managed to preserve the bulk of his army.

These two battles were probably the most decisive in Russia's war effort. They revealed the superiority of German military strategy, led by

Field Marshal Paul Von Hindenburg on the Eastern Front. The Russians were never able to penetrate German territory again in the war. In the south-west, matters were quite different because the army of the Austro-Hungarian Empire was both smaller and weaker than its Russian counterpart. By 3 September, the Russians had reached and captured the city of Lviv (Lvov, Lemberg). But on 31 October, Turkey entered the war. Its action and the control over the Baltic Sea by the German Fleet effectively cut Russia off from its allies in the west. For the remainder of the war, Russia fought alone, increasingly short of materiel and weapons, and with a faulty supply line that was never fully remedied. In the major cities there were long lines outside bread shops and rations were increasingly reduced. The long war began to take an acute toll on the Russian population.

The lack of success continued in 1915 after the Germans mounted a major attack on Russia's Polish territories in the spring. Most of Poland soon fell into German hands, and Russian casualties were enormous, around a million. It was necessary to step up recruitment and the Russian army became basically a peasant one, composed of raw recruits. It was not unusual for these peasants to go into battle without a rifle. The hope was that they would retrieve weapons from their adversaries during the course of a battle. The army took on the appearance of a swollen mass of new recruits, disillusioned by the constant defeats. The one success had been the respect of the army for its Commander-in-Chief, the Grand Duke Nikolay, uncle of the tsar, an imposing figure who inspired confidence by his very appearance. However, at the behest of his wife, the tsar decided to take personal command of his armies on 22 August 1915. Military headquarters by that time were in the Belarusian town of Mogilev.

The tsar thus left his capital at a critical juncture and henceforth the Russian government and appointments of key figures were in the hands of the unpopular and hapless tsarina, a woman who felt that the members of the Fourth Duma – led by a majority of deputies who had formed a Progressive Bloc – should be excluded entirely from a role in decision-making. Shortly thereafter most of the able (and more liberal) ministers in the government were removed by the tsarina, often at the behest of Rasputin. They included Prince N.B. Shecherbarov, Minister of the Interior, A.V. Krivoshein, Minister of Agriculture, General A.A. Polivanov, Minister of War, and Foreign Minister S.D. Sazonov, all in the period between January and June 1916. Prime Minister I.I. Goremykin, who had refused to add his name to those opposing Nikolay's leadership of the armies, was also dismissed in January 1916 and replaced by the bumbling and ineffectual Boris Sturmer [21]. Perhaps the single most unpopular figure was the new Minister of the Interior, Aleksandr Protopopov. The quality level of the Russian government was critically reduced therefore in the early months of 1916.

It should be noted that the First World War was very costly to all the great powers of Europe. Never before had so many men been sacrificed for so little territorial gain. Even powers that were eventually victorious, such as France, suffered mutinies in their armies. The trench warfare in western Europe was as catastrophic as the more mobile warfare on the Eastern Front. On the whole, however, the European armies proved to be more disciplined, particularly the Germans. In Russia, the mass conscription had also left vast areas of land uncultivated. Grain production had fallen by half by 1916. Even in the summer of 1915, strikes and food riots broke out in Moscow. A similarly tense situation arose in Petrograd (the Russian version of the name given to the capital at the outbreak of war with Germany: St Petersburg, a name of Dutch derivation, sounded too German to Russian ears).

The Russian government was in a critical dilemma. Committed to its alliance with France and Britain, it proved to be a demonstrably loyal ally but the country was not prepared for a long war, nor could it supply adequately the mass swollen army that was in the field by 1916. Against the Austrians alone, Russia might have been capable of success, but the Germans regularly came to the aid of their ally. The question that many asked was what was the aim of the war. By 1916 it had become unclear. In terms of casualties, Russians had made the greatest sacrifices. Poland was now wholly in the hands of the Germans and other territories of the European part of the empire were threatened. Nikolay II was an ineffectual and uninspiring leader-of-men. There was effectively no government in St Petersburg. The increasing economic hardship and the succession of military defeats deprived the government of any credibility it had maintained. At the same time the monarchy was woefully oblivious to the danger that had arisen. It had learned little from the experience of 1905 and proved unwilling to appoint a more representative Cabinet or to work with the Duma. The country was ripe for an upheaval.