The End of Tsarism

Peter Waldron

On 2 March 1917, Nicholas II signed an act of abdication that brought his 22-year reign to an end. He abdicated both on his own behalf and for his son, the hemophiliac Aleksei, passing the throne to his brother, Grand Duke Mikhail Aleksandrovich. The following day, the grand duke decided that, since his own safety could not be guaranteed if he became tsar, he was not prepared to accept the throne. More than 300 years of Romanov rule had come to an end, and the tsarist monarchy perished. Events moved very rapidly at the end of February 1917: crowds took to the streets in Petrograd on 23 February calling for bread, and these disturbances intensified over the next three days, the crowds stopping public transport and filling the streets of the city center.[1] The police and city garrison were initially able to contain the unrest, but on 27 February units of the garrison refused to leave their barracks to put down the demonstrations and joined the rebels in their uprising against the regime. "We have lost power," A. P. Balk, the Petrograd city governor wrote in his diary that day.[2] That evening the Petrograd Soviet was formed, and working people began to organize formally.[3] Full-scale mutiny erupted across the garrison during the next two days, and this convinced the army's high command that political change was vital.[4] Although the Duma had been prorogued on 26 February, a Duma committee established itself, and Rodzianko, its chairman, pressed General Alekseev, the chief of the General Staff, to persuade the

[1] See R. Sh. Ganelin, "Revoliutsiia v Petrograde: Den′ za dnem," in *Pervaia mirovaia voina i konets Rossiiskoi imperii*, 3: *Fevral′skaia revoliutsiia* (St. Petersburg: Liki Rossii, 2014), 72–158.

[2] "Gibel′ tsarskogo Petrograda: Fevral′skaia revoliutsiia glazami gradonachal′nika A. P. Balka," *Russkoe proshloe* 1 (1991): 45.

[3] Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *The February Revolution: Petrograd, 1917* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 337–47.

[4] A. B. Nikolaev, *Gosudarstvennaia duma v Fevral′skoi revoliutsii: Ocherki istorii* (Riazan′: P. A. Trubinskii, 2002), 39–53.

Russia's Home Front in War and Revolution, 1914–22, Book 3: National Disintegration. Christopher Read, Peter Waldron, and Adele Lindenmeyr, eds. Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 2018, 1–20.

tsar—who was at headquarters in Mogilev—to concede fundamental reform.[5] Nicholas was initially deeply reluctant to contemplate any form of political change, but pressure from the military—who feared that the mutiny would spread quickly to frontline troops—combined with the tsar's isolation from Petrograd and, especially, from the empress, wore down his resolve. Nicholas set off from Mogilev to return to Petrograd early on 28 February, but his train was prevented from reaching the capital, and instead the tsar arrived at Pskov, the headquarters of the Northern Front, during the evening of 1 March. Nicholas's determination to avoid change had been eroded by the events of the past few days, and he was now put under immense pressure not just to change the government but to abdicate the throne. By the afternoon of 2 March, the tsar crumpled under the demands for him to abdicate: "all around is treachery, cowardice and deceit," he wrote in his diary that evening.[6]

The process by which Nicholas II was persuaded to give up his throne during eight days in the winter of 1917 illuminates the wider reasons that account for the rapid disintegration of the Russian monarchy. The support of the military was crucial in maintaining Romanov power: during the revolutionary years of 1905 and 1906, the Russian army had played a vital role in putting down rebellion, often with great brutality, and the military had been instrumental in supporting the regime.[7] The tsarist state had consistently lavished very considerable financial resources on its army and navy, aware that military prestige and power were essential components of its overall authority and standing.[8] Military power defined the Romanov state: even though Russian troops had not distinguished themselves in the wars in the Crimea (1854–56) and against Japan (1904–05), the Russian defeat of Napoleon—the Patriotic War—remained central to the construction of Russian identity, while the part played by Russia's troops in the expansion of the Russian Empire during the 19th century gave the army great prestige. By 1914 Russia's army was by far the largest of all the European powers, and plans made during the last months of peacetime envisaged it increasing in size rapidly to gain

5 Nikolaev, *Gosudarstvennaia duma*, 31–36, 225–30.

6 *Dnevniki Nikolaia II i Imperatritsy Aleksandry Fedorovny 1917–1918* (Moscow: Vagrius, 2008), 1: 254.

7 See, for example, the actions of Cossack troops in the Baltic provinces during 1905. R. Sh. Ganelin, "Ob istoricheskikh realiiakh stikhotvoreniia Innokentiia Annenskogo 'Starye estonki,'" *Eesti Teaduste Akadeemia Toimetised: Humanitaar-ja sotsiaalteadused* 42 (1993): 104; and P. Ianson, *Karatel´nye ekspeditsii v Pribaltiiskom krae v 1905–1907 gg.* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1926), 38.

8 Peter Waldron, "State Finances," in *Cambridge History of Russia*, ed. Dominic Lieven (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2: 470–71.

nearly 40 percent more regular soldiers and more than 25 percent additional officers.[9] Successive monarchs identified themselves closely with the Russian armed forces, and the army was especially important for both Nicholas II and his father, Alexander III (1881–94). The army symbolized the power of the Russian state and its imperial authority, and the military provided both tsars with an environment in which they could escape from the political hothouse of St. Petersburg, which both men found uncomfortable. Nicholas II thoroughly enjoyed his time as a young man serving as an army officer, and he maintained very close ties with the military throughout his life, spending time each year inspecting his troops and observing manoeuvres.[10]

The scale and fearsome reputation of Russia's armed forces concealed, however, significant weaknesses. The tsarist military was deeply conservative: the composition of the army's officer corps had been changing during the later part of the 19th century as Miliutin's 1874 army reform sought to reduce the dominance of the nobility, but the old guard continued to hang on to high-ranking positions, and the Russian aristocracy regarded the military as their preserve, even as their influence was waning.[11] The military establishment had resisted the creation of a proper General Staff until the humiliation of defeat by Japan in 1905 had made the case for reform unanswerable. Alongside its weak General Staff, Russia had failed to modernize its military strategy to cope with the realities of 20th-century warfare. The Russian western frontier had been protected by a series of fortresses during the 1880s, but the rapid development of the capabilities of heavy artillery meant that these monumental constructions were obsolete by 1914, even though millions of rubles continued to be spent on them in an attempt to render them impregnable. Russia was slowly beginning to modernize its political system with the introduction of an elected Duma and cabinet government in 1905, but the Duma's power in military matters was severely circumscribed, and Nicholas II remained especially jealous of his prerogatives in this area, resisting any attempt by Russia's newly elected politicians to gain influence over the army and navy.[12] In common with the other European powers, Russia had poured huge resources into the development of its armed forces during the first years

[9] P. A. Zhilin, "Bol´shaia programma po usileniiu russkoi armii," *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal*, no. 7 (1974): 92–93.

[10] Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 2: 318–21.

[11] Forrest A. Miller, *Dmitrii Miliutin and the Reform Era in Russia* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), 182–230.

[12] V. S. Diakin, *Samoderzhavie, burzhuaziia i dvorianstvo v 1907–1911 gg.* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1978), 135–37.

of the 20th century. The navy was to gain new battleships and bases, while money was to be pumped into modernizing the army's weaponry.[13] But Russia's sclerotic political system meant that investment was not always well directed, while some areas of crucial importance to fighting a war—especially the railway network—remained woefully weak.

When war broke out in the summer of 1914, much of Russia rallied round in support of the conflict. "All the life of the country streamed straight into the war," observed Bernard Pares,[14] and a wave of patriotic enthusiasm gripped the empire, marked by the renaming of St. Petersburg as the Russian-sounding Petrograd and by the declaration of prohibition.[15] Not every part of Russian society, however, proved to be so enthusiastic about the war as men were conscripted into the army in their thousands.[16] The first months of the conflict proved deeply unsatisfactory for the Russians, and Russia's initial military advances met with a severe rebuff. Russian armies moved into East Prussia within three weeks of war being declared, intending to assist their French allies by drawing Germany into war on two fronts. But at the end of August, the Russian army commanded by Samsonov was encircled by the Germans at the battle of Tannenberg and routed. This was quickly followed by the further defeat of Russian troops at the Masurian Lakes, and the remnants of Russia's armies were driven out of East Prussia. Russia paid a very high price for its failed invasion of German territory, with more than a quarter of a million men killed, wounded, or taken prisoner and huge amounts of weaponry abandoned to the Germans on the battlefield. But Russia fared much better against the Austrians in Galicia, capturing the city of L′vov and inflicting heavy casualties on the Austrian armies.[17] The first months of the war gave Russia some apparent cause for comfort, but this was misplaced. Russian losses of both manpower and equipment were very severe. The Russian armaments industry was not prepared for the heavy demands placed upon it during 1914 and 1915 to manufacture munitions, and it was incapable of meeting the army's needs, so that during early 1915 deliveries of shells to

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[13] Peter Gatrell, *Government, Industry and Rearmament in Russia, 1900–1914: The Last Argument of Tsarism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 131–38.

[14] Bernard Pares, *Day by Day with the Russian Army 1914–1915* (London: Constable, 1915), 11.

[15] Melissa Kirschke Stockdale, *Mobilizing the Russian Nation: Patriotism and Citizenship in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 34–35.

[16] Josh Sanborn, "The Mobilization of 1914 and the Question of the Russian Nation: A Reexamination," *Slavic Review* 59, 2 (2000): 267–89.

[17] William C. Fuller, Jr., *The Foe Within: Fantasies of Treason and the End of Imperial Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 127.

the army ran at only one-fifth of what was needed.[18] The heavy casualties that Russia sustained during the first battles of the war meant that the troops that arrived at the frontline early in 1915 were often ill-trained and barely ready for combat.[19] This twin shortage of men and equipment proved fatal in the spring and summer of 1915, when the Germans and Austrians launched major offensives along the front from the Baltic to the Carpathians. Russia's armies were beaten back, driven out of L′vov in June, while Warsaw fell to the Germans at the end of July, and by the end of August German troops were outside Riga, one of the Russian Empire's greatest industrial port cities. The "Great Retreat" of 1915 was an unrelenting catastrophe for Russia, as its front line was pushed back nearly 500 km and more than one million soldiers were killed or wounded, with a further million captured by the enemy. By the autumn of 1915, 14 of Russia's provinces containing some 20 percent of the empire's population lay under enemy occupation. The military disasters of 1915 could not be hidden from the Russian population. As the battles raged in the west, trains filled with wounded men arrived in the cities of European Russia, while millions of refugees streamed east in the face of the advancing German and Austrian armies.[20]

The defeats suffered by Russia during 1914 and 1915 had a profound effect on Nicholas II. The tsar believed that it was his duty to take direct command of Russia's armed forces at such a time of crisis, a move described by Krivoshein, the minister of agriculture, as "in complete accord with his spiritual make-up and with his mystical conception of his Imperial calling."[21] The Council of Ministers was unanimously opposed to the tsar becoming commander in chief, with even Samarin, the conservative and short-lived procurator of the Holy Synod, declaring that "the entrance of His Majesty the Emperor upon the command of the army is not just a spark, but a whole candle thrown into a powder magazine … the news will be received as the greatest national disaster."[22] The tsar, however, defied the opinions of his government and took up the command of the military in August 1915, removing his cousin Grand Duke Nikolai Nikolaevich from the post. Nicholas II had never exercised military command before, and he showed no great abilities as a strategist while

[18] O. R. Airapetov, *Uchastie Rossiiskoi imperii v Pervoi mirovoi voine (1914–1917)*, 2: *1915 god: Apogei* (Moscow: Kuchkovo pole, 2014),

[19] Alfred Knox, *With the Russian Army, 1914–1917* (London: Hutchinson, 1921), 255.

[20] Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 211–15.

[21] Michael Cherniavsky, *Prologue to Revolution: Notes of A. N. Iakhontov on the Secret Meetings of the Council of Ministers, 1915* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 80.

[22] Ibid., 93–94.

his leadership qualities were not adequate to direct his oft-quarrelsome and divided generals. After August 1915, Nicholas spent long periods of time away from Petrograd at headquarters in Mogilev, where he found the atmosphere more congenial than in the pressured environment of the capital and where he could be surrounded by the military, whose company he enjoyed. The tsar became increasingly isolated from the national political mood, while Russia's armies did not succeed in reversing the defeats they had suffered in the first twelve months of the war. The Germans proved largely immune to attempts to push them back westwards during 1916, but Russia did enjoy some success against Austria-Hungary. General Brusilov launched an offensive in Galicia in June 1916, and was able to force the enemy into a limited retreat. This was almost the only bright spot in the Russian army's war: more than 700,000 Russian soldiers died on the battlefield during the war, while a further 2.6 million men were wounded, with nearly a million of them later dying from their injuries. Morale in the army quickly deteriorated from the elation that had greeted the declaration of war in August 1914, and the ill-equipped Russian troops quickly began to blame their officers for the defeats and for the poor conditions in which they were forced to exist. "We all appreciate that you all, the civilian population, are trying to save Russia and relieve the army, but alas, our superiors are acting in the exact opposite way," wrote one soldier.[23] It was not just the ordinary troops who lost faith in their commanders: the officer corps was not immune from feelings of despondency and mistrust at the high command. By assuming the leadership of the army, the tsar had taken personal responsibility for the fate of the war: as his ministers had warned in 1915, he became the focus for discontent when the war continued to go badly.

The political structures of the Russian Empire became increasingly fractured as the war progressed. The 74-year-old Ivan Goremykin had been brought out of retirement at the beginning of 1914 to replace Kokovtsov as prime minister, a move which puzzled even Goremykin himself. He told the outgoing Kokovtsov "I completely fail to understand why I was needed; I resemble an old racoon fur coat which was packed away in a trunk long ago and sprinkled with camphor.... Nevertheless, they will put the coat back in the trunk just as unexpectedly as they took it out."[24] Goremykin was deeply conservative and was reluctant to exercise leadership: he was unwilling to challenge Nicholas II's decision to take up the direct command of the army, and was not prepared to countenance any radical action in the face of Russian

[23] O. Chaadaeva, "Soldatskie pis′ma v gody pervoi mirovoi voiny (1915–1917)," *Krasnyi arkhiv* 65–66 (1934): 132.

[24] P. N. Miliukov, *Political Memoirs, 1905–1917*, trans. Carl Goldberg, ed. Arthur P. Mendel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967), 284.

defeats during 1914 and 1915.[25] The prime minister remained resolutely opposed to any form of engagement with Russian political society, believing that the Duma had no role to play in the wartime government of the empire and that its function was simply to provide support to the regime at appropriate times. The Duma had met for a single day on 26 July 1914 and had demonstrated unity in the face of the outbreak of war, but the government had no intention of allowing the Duma to play any more significant part in the war effort. The regime assumed exceptional powers at the start of the war, removing the authority to legislate from the Duma and State Council under Article 87 of the Fundamental Laws, and granting the Council of Ministers additional powers at times when the tsar was away from Petrograd at headquarters.[26] The government initially did not intend to let the Duma meet again until November 1915, and the most conservative ministers saw the war as a golden opportunity to reassert the authority of the regime and to crush opposition. Censorship was strengthened and press reporting of the work of the Council of Ministers was restricted, while the five Bolshevik members of the Duma were arrested and charged with treason for their opposition to the war.[27] The moderate Duma parties put up some resistance to the curtailment of their sittings, and under pressure the government did agree that its next session could take place not later than 1 February 1915. It held precisely to its word, allowing a Duma session to take place for three days at the end of January, and Duma parties dutifully expressed their strong support for the war, offering almost no criticism of the government and its handling of the war. It appeared to the regime as if the war had finally given the government the opportunity to stifle the Duma, effectively reducing it to a consultative assembly without any real power to influence events or even to express opinions.[28]

During the first part of 1915 there was, however, a fundamental shift in attitudes from the Duma political parties. Their near silence at the January sitting was only short-lived as the reality of the war began to bite and the initial popular enthusiasm for the conflict dissipated as the actual costs of war became clearer. The Russian army suffered very significant casualties in the first months of the war: more than 90,000 men were killed in battle during

[25] Cherniavsky, *Prologue*, 98–99.

[26] P. E. Shchegolev, ed., *Padenie tsarskogo rezhima* (Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel´stvo, 1925), 302–04, 311–12.

[27] A. S. Badaev, *The Bolsheviks in the Tsarist Duma* (London: Bookmarks, 1987), 218–19.

[28] K. A. Solov´ev, "Ispolnitel´naia vlast´ i predstavitel´nye uchrezhdeniia: Vzaimodeistvie i protivostoianie," in *Rossiia v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny: Ekonomicheskoe polozhenie, sotsial´nye protsessy, politicheskii krizis*, ed. Iu. A. Petrov (Moscow: Rosspen, 2014), 680–82.

1914, and a further 370,000 were wounded.[29] The real effects of military defeat were seen in Russian towns and cities as the trains carrying the wounded arrived: the medical care that was provided for the wounded was inadequate, and even the head of the General Staff's evacuation division had written in August 1914 that "[t]he internal evacuation organization is totally unprepared for the reception and allocation of the wounded and sick."[30] Discontent with the conduct of the war began to permeate Russian society more deeply as industrialists became frustrated with the reluctance of the government to involve them fully in the procurement of armaments and the whole range of equipment needed by Russia's armies. At the outbreak of war, the regime had turned first to its traditional foreign suppliers of armaments and only showed a willingness to use Russian businesses once French and British companies had proven themselves unable to satisfy Russia's needs for supplies. The problems of supply were shown most sharply in a severe ammunition shortage, so that Russian armies were unable to respond effectively to the great artillery bombardments unleashed by the Germans and Austrians.[31] Pares noted that "the Russian artillery was practically silent" in the spring of 1915 and how the Russians were faced with "an overwhelming mass of heavy and light artillery" concentrated against them.[32]

By the beginning of June 1915 the regime was prepared to sanction the establishment of a Special Council, including representatives from both the Duma and armaments manufacturers, to coordinate the supply of munitions and other military equipment.[33] The military disaster of the Great Retreat of 1915 intensified discontent with the handling of the war, provoking dissension inside the Council of Ministers and severe opposition from the majority of Duma political parties. Moderate ministers—led by Krivoshein—succeeded in forcing the removal of the deeply reactionary minister of the interior, N. A. Maklakov, and the discredited war minister, Sukhomlinov, along with the justice minister, Shcheglovitov, and the procurator of the Holy Synod, Sabler,

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[29] M. V. Os´kin, *Istoriia pervoi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow: Veche, 2014), 100–07.

[30] "Raport nachal´nika evakuatsionnogo upravleniia GUGSh i. d. nachal´nika GUGSh, 10 avgusta 1914 g.," in *Sanitarnaia sluzhba russkoi armii v voine 1914–1917 gg.: Sbornik dokumentov* (Kuibyshev: Voenno-meditsinskaia akademiia Krasnoi armii, 1942), 209.

[31] Airapetov, *Uchastie Rossiiskoi imperii v Pervoi mirovoi voine*, 2: 279–82.

[32] Bernard Pares, *The Fall of the Russian Monarchy* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1939), 230; Pares, *Day by Day*, 207.

[33] Lewis Siegelbaum, *The Politics of Industrial Mobilization in Russia, 1914–1917: A Study of the War-Industries Committees* (London: Macmillan, 1983), 37–38; A. L. Sidorov, "Bor´ba s krizisom vooruzheniia russkoi armii v 1915–1916 gg.," *Istoricheskii zhurnal*, no. 10–11 (1944): 40–42.

in July.[34] The empress, Aleksandra Fedorovna, was instrumental in protecting the position of "dear old Goremykin," as she referred to the prime minister,[35] and he survived the cull of ministers. Moderate political parties showed great enthusiasm for the new members of the government, especially the war minister, General Aleksei Polivanov, who was perceived as being competent and capable of reversing Russia's poor military performance.[36]

The atmosphere inside the government became much tenser after these ministerial changes as the balance of power shifted away from the most conservative members of the government, and the new ministers were able to compel Goremykin to agree to the convocation of the Duma, without—as the prime minister wished—extracting a guarantee of docility from the Duma parties in advance. When the Duma met in July 1915, the speeches by its members were filled with criticism and demands for change. The session voted to prosecute those responsible for the shortage of munitions and called for Sukhomlinov, the former war minister, to face proceedings for treason. Fearful that a full-blown attack on the government would simply lead to the immediate prorogation of the Duma, the leaders of the moderate Octobrist and Kadet parties steered their members away from outright confrontation, but it was very clear that there was wide support for a change of government to bring about a "responsible ministry," in other words, a government that enjoyed the confidence of the Duma.[37] Continued rumors that Goremykin was planning to end the Duma session cemented unity among nearly all the Duma parties, aided by discreet support from Aleksandr Krivoshein, the leading moderate in the cabinet. At the beginning of August, the Progressive Bloc was formed, issuing a program that rested upon the call for "the formation of a unified government of individuals who have the confidence of the country and are in agreement with the legislative institutions about the need for the rapid implementation of a definite program."[38] The Bloc was supported by some three-quarters of the Duma's membership, with only the Right faction setting its face against any change. The Progressive Bloc represented a full-scale assault on the policies and style of Nicholas II's government: it demanded "strict observation of the principles of legality in government" and presented a list of specific demands for reform. The Bloc carefully avoided making detailed

[34] Fuller, *Foe Within*, 192–93.

[35] J. T. Furhmann, ed., *The Complete Wartime Correspondence of Tsar Nicholas II and the Empress Alexandra: April 1914–March 1917* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 141.

[36] Serge Sazonov, *Fateful Years, 1909–1916* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928), 287–88.

[37] Raymond Pearson, *The Russian Moderates and the Crisis of Tsarism 1914–1917* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 48.

[38] "Progressivnyi blok v 1915–1917 gg.," *Krasnyi arkhiv* 50–51 (1932): 133.

proposals that related to the conduct of the war, well aware that this would be seen by the tsar and his conservative ministers as provocative and could be portrayed as unpatriotic, and instead concentrated on demanding basic reforms to enhance civil rights and modernize Russia.[39]

Nicholas II and the empress continued to treat the Duma with disdain: on 29 August Aleksandra wrote to her husband, "I hope you will clear out the Duma," and the tsar and his advisers continued to resist all calls for a change in the direction and composition of the government.[40] Goremykin set out for headquarters at Mogilev on the same day as Aleksandra's letter to Nicholas, with his ministerial colleagues believing that he was going to argue for compromise with the Duma and the Progressive Bloc. But his real intentions were quite different and, rather than making any form of concessions to the Bloc's demands, he agreed with the tsar that the Duma must be prorogued. These political manoeuvrings were taking place at the same time as the change in military leadership: the tsar had assumed the post of commander in chief on 23 August, and the crisis that this had engendered served to intensify the political polarization between regime and Duma. Goremykin returned to Petrograd with a decree to prorogue the Duma, and its session ended on 3 September.[41]

Russia's politics were in deep crisis as the summer of 1915 drew to its close. The government itself was deeply divided, and the regime had explicitly rejected the Duma's proposals for reform, demonstrating that it saw no need to change course. Nicholas II was continuing the path he had followed since 1906 of keeping the Duma at arm's length and severely restricting the powers possessed by Russia's elected parliament. But while this policy had proved successful in maintaining the power of the tsarist state during peacetime, the military disasters that had overtaken Russia during 1914 and 1915 made the regime's position much more precarious. The tsar's decision to assume direct command of the army had prompted the great majority of the cabinet to write formally to Nicholas on 21 August, declaring that his action "threatens Russia, Yourself, and Your dynasty with evil consequences." The ministers who signed the letter effectively offered their resignations: "in these circumstances, we lose faith in the possibility of being of service to You and

[39] F. A. Gaida, *Liberal´naia oppozitsiia na putiakh k vlasti (1914–vesna 1917 g.)* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2003), 101–55.

[40] Fuhrmann, *Correspondence*, 192.

[41] R. Sh. Ganelin and M. F. Florinskii, "Ot I. L. Goremykina k B. V. Shtiurmeru: Verkhovnaia vlast´ i sovet ministrov (sentiabr´ 1915–ianvar´ 1916 g.)," in *Rossiia i pervaia mirovaia voina*, ed. N. N. Smirnov (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 1999), 38–39.

the country."[42] This attempt to pressure the tsar into changing his mind was wholly ineffective. The eight ministers were summoned to headquarters at Mogilev, admonished by Nicholas, and gradually removed from office during the following year. Liberal opinion and the Progressive Bloc had been defeated. Its ministerial inspiration, Krivoshein, was dismissed from his post in October 1915.

The political crisis of summer 1915 produced no resolution to Russia's problems, and the stalemate between regime and Duma became entrenched. The tsar had been able to refuse to make concessions to the Duma, and he could exclude his critics from government, but he was unable to silence them completely, while the moderate political parties were unable to make any headway in advancing their cause. Neither were public organizations able to press the case for reform effectively: the tsarist regime grudgingly accepted that it could not sustain the war effort without the formal involvement of bodies that drew on wide economic and social resources, but it sought to closely define their involvement in the wider war effort. Russian local government had been quick to offer its support in caring for wounded soldiers and had formed the Union of Zemstvos and the Union of Towns to coordinate relief efforts.[43] The regime was extremely wary about allowing the establishment of organizations that united the institutions of local government, and before 1914 it had consistently prevented such bodies from coming into being, but the exigencies of war meant that the government had to overcome its scruples and accept the offers of assistance that local government made.[44] The government also had to accept the growing involvement of Russian industry in the work of supplying its troops. As Russian troops were being pushed eastwards in the summer of 1915, the Association of Trade and Industry resolved to establish War Industries Committees to bring together Russian industry to supply the war effort effectively.[45] These organizations acted to coordinate the work of industry both locally and nationally to try to ensure that domestic Russian industry could provide the munitions and equipment needed by the army and thus improve military performance. The committees attempted to extend society's participation in the war effort, but the government remained

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[42] V. P. Semmenikov, *Politika Romanovykh nakanune revoliutsii: Ot Antanty k Germanii. Po novym dokumentam* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel´stvo, 1926), 87–88.

[43] A. S. Tumanova, *Obshchestvennye organizatsii Rossii v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny (1914–fevral´ 1917 g.)* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2014), 92–117.

[44] "Po zapiske Ministra Vnutrennikh Del ot 18 noiabria 1914 o zemskom i gorodskom soiuzakh pomoshchi bol´nym i ranenym voinam," in *Osobye zhurnaly Soveta ministrov Rossiiskoi imperii: 1914 god* (Moscow: Rosspen, 2006), 551.

[45] Siegelbaum, *Politics of Industrial Mobilization,* 46–48.

deeply suspicious of their motives, believing that their real intention was to gain political influence. The assistant minister of war noted "the extremely liberal understanding of its rights and obligations" held by the Central War Industries Committee,[46] and the mutual distrust between government and industry intensified during 1915 and 1916.[47] Russia's political and social elites were deeply frustrated by the reluctance of the regime to allow them any real participation in the war effort when it was evident that Russian troops were performing poorly. Some saw the government's attitude as being a sign of its weakness: at the end of July 1915 Petr Riabushinksii, the chairman of the Central War Industries Committee, bemoaned the lack of direction from the regime: "[W]e really do want a strong authority, but at the same time we do not feel it. We are thus perplexed. Who rules Russia at the present time? If a serious answer could be given to this question it would have to be: we do not know."[48]

The regime implicitly recognized its own inability to control events by attempting to create a civilian "dictator" in parallel with the military command exercised by the tsar. "Power must be concentrated in the hands of a single all-powerful figure, who might well be called the Supreme Minister for State Defense," wrote General Alekseev, the chief of the General Staff, in June 1916, and Nicholas appointed Boris Sturmer, who had become prime minister in January when the elderly Goremykin finally retired, to the post.[49] Sturmer, however, proved unable to concentrate power in himself: the other ministers had no intention of ceding their own authority to him, while Sturmer himself lacked the personality or drive to impose his will on others. By the end of the summer of 1916, the military situation had improved a little with the success of the Brusilov offensive, but there was no sign that Russia's armies were in any fit state to begin to reverse the German advances of 1915. The Russian government remained weak: it lacked the political will to impose an authoritarian regime, but it could not accept any compromise with the Duma. The Duma met again at the beginning of November 1916, and the session reflected the frustration felt by moderate political parties at the stalemate that had been reached. The mood was encapsulated by Pavel Miliukov, the leader of the Kadet Party, who addressed the Duma at the beginning of its session.

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[46] Ibid., 78.

[47] V. S. Diakin, *Russkaia burzhuaziia i tsarizm v gody pervoi mirovoi voiny, 1914–1917 gg.* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1967), 184–87.

[48] *Trudy s″ezda predstavitelei voenno-promyshlennykh komitetov, 25–27 iiulia 1915 g.* (Petrograd: Tipografiia P. P. Gershunina, 1915), 68–70.

[49] S. V. Kulikov, *Biurokraticheskaia elita Rossiiskoi imperii nakanune padeniia starogo poriadka, 1914–1917* (Riazan′: P. A. Tribunskii, 2004), 219–32.

He rehearsed the ways in which the government had rebuffed the Duma, declaring that "we now see and know that we can no more legislate with this government than we can lead Russia to victory with it," and then moved to abandon all the caution that the Duma parties had shown in their dealings with the regime by suggesting that the government was not committed to a Russian victory in the war. The regime's reluctance to accept assistance from society, Miliukov suggested, meant that it had consciously chosen chaos and disorganization. He excoriated the government for its "incompetence and evil intentions," repeatedly asking if the regime was motivated by "stupidity or treason?"[50] Miliukov's speech was incendiary, and represented the final breakdown of relations between government and moderate politicians. But it had no real impact beyond confirming the dislocation of Russian politics: the regime had no intention of responding to Miliukov's words, while the Duma politicians could only rant in impotent rage at the attitudes of the government. The unity that had been displayed across the political spectrum in the summer of 1914 had vanished completely by the end of 1916.

Miliukov's reference to treason in his November speech was especially significant, since it came as close as a public figure could to referring to the widespread rumors surrounding the imperial family and its behavior during the war. The empress, Aleksandra Fedorovna, had been born into a German family as Alix of Hesse, only moving to Russia in 1894 on her marriage to Nicholas (an event which took place less than a month after the death of Alexander III and Nicholas's accession to the throne). Her knowledge of the Russian language took time to perfect, and she continued to correspond with Nicholas in English when they were apart right up until the collapse of the monarchy in 1917. The imperial couple maintained their distance from St. Petersburg society, preferring to live in the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoe Selo and surrounding themselves with a small group of intimates. The couple's five children occupied much of their time, especially after the birth of their only son, Aleksei, in 1904. It quickly became clear that Aleksei—the heir to the throne—suffered from hemophilia, and his health was very precarious. It was the imperial couple's deep concern about their son's health that initially drew them close to Rasputin, a Siberian peasant who had become a mystic and professed to be a holy man.[51] The empress in particular came to depend on Rasputin since he appeared to be able to ease Aleksei's hemophiliac attacks. Rasputin was clever enough to exploit his supposed healing skill to ingratiate himself with the imperial couple, and Nicholas's increasing absences

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[50] *Gosudarstvennaia Duma. Stenograficheskie otchety*, IV Duma, session 5 (Petrograd: Gosudarstvennaia tipografiia, 1917), 47–48.

[51] A. A. Mosolov, *Pri dvore poslednego imperatora* (St. Petersburg: Nauka, 1992), 5–6.

from Tsarskoe Selo during the war gave him the opportunity to strengthen his relationship with the empress. She referred to him as "Our Friend" in her letters to her husband, and Rasputin offered her advice on political topics, proposing candidates for ministerial posts and attempting to influence her opinions on a wide range of topics.[52] The closeness of Rasputin to the imperial couple became a matter of public knowledge and gave rise to scurrilous rumors suggesting that he was having a sexual relationship with Aleksandra. Pamphlets and leaflets circulated widely suggesting that Rasputin was exerting huge and improper influence over the imperial couple, and the derision that this generated among the population as a whole was intensified by persistent rumors that the German-born empress was bent upon securing a German victory in the war.[53] Miliukov's reference to "treason" in his November 1916 speech acquired a far greater significance than the word itself suggested: he was reflecting the popular references to the "German woman" and making an unmistakeable attack on the tsar and his wife.

The imperial family did attempt to counter these rumors by portraying themselves as deeply patriotic and devoted to the cause of Russian victory. The empress and her elder daughters took up nursing and were frequently pictured in uniform caring for wounded soldiers, while they lent their name and patronage to a variety of charitable organizations devoted to providing relief for the troops and their families.[54] The tsar was regularly photographed alongside Russian troops and was increasingly accompanied by his son Aleksei during his time at headquarters. But the denigration of the tsar and, especially, the empress continued to build during 1916. The imperial couple became more and more isolated, even from their immediate family, and this only served to increase the cloud of rumors that surrounded them.[55] By the autumn of 1916, members of the Russian aristocracy were plotting to remove Rasputin from the scene by killing him, and on 16 December he was murdered in the basement of Prince Iusupov's palace in the center of Petrograd. "I cannot and won't believe that He has been killed… Such utter anguish," wrote Alexandra to her husband the following day, and Nicholas replied that he was "horrified and shaken,"[56] but Rasputin's removal from the scene did

[52] Fuhrmann, *Correspondence*, 574.

[53] B. I. Kolonitskii, *Tragicheskaia erotika: Obrazy imperatorskoi sem´i v gody Pervoi mirovoi voiny* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2010), 320–24, 293–313.

[54] N. L. Matveeva, *Blagotvoritelnost´ i imperatorskaia sem´ia v gody pervoi mirovoi voin*y (Moscow: Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi otkrytyi universitet, 2004), 34.

[55] E. E. Petrova and K. O. Bitiukov, *Velikokniazheskaia oppozitsiia v Rossii 1915–1917 gg.* (St. Petersburg: Asterion, 2009), 88–95.

[56] Fuhrmann, *Correspondence*, 684, 686.

nothing to change the situation. Aleksandra made regular visits to Rasputin's grave, and his assassination, if anything, merely served to propel the imperial couple even further into isolation. The Russian monarchy had failed to forge real ties with the people as the war advanced, and the apparent displays of public approbation that had been evident during the celebration of the Romanov tercentenary in 1913 and on the outbreak of war proved not to survive Russia's weak performance during the war.[57] The attempts to forge a "sacred union" that reached right across Russian society during the war did engender novel social connections, and the war shaped Russians' consciousness of their national identity in new ways.[58] But the Romanovs themselves were unable to benefit from this wartime sense of purpose and, instead, the imperial family acted as a source of disunity, polarizing opinion and effectively absenting itself from the national effort to defeat Germany.

The politics of wartime Russia were increasingly disconnected from society as a whole. Elections to the Duma had last taken place in 1912 on a franchise that had been manipulated in 1907 by the government to exclude a substantial percentage of the population from full participation in the elections. The Left was almost wholly unrepresented in the Fourth Duma, which sat from November 1912: only 25 of the more than 430 deputies came from the Bolshevik or Trudovik parties. The overwhelming majority of Duma deputies came from centrist or conservative political groupings, and their connection to the great majority of the Russian population was tenuous at best.[59] In November 1914 the minister of the interior had ordered the arrest of the Bolshevik deputies to the Duma on a charge of treason, and the Trudovik Party decided to stand aloof from the Kadets, their nearest political neighbors.[60] As the political situation became tenser, the parties on the Left were increasingly outspoken and assertive, although they counted for fewer than 20 Duma deputies. When Sturmer was replaced as prime minister by Aleksandr Trepov in November 1916, the Trudovik and Menshevik deputies created such a furor in the Duma chamber that the new prime minister was prevented from speaking. The two groups of deputies were removed from the chamber and prohibited from attending the Duma for its next eight sessions.[61]

The "ministerial leapfrog" that took place during 1916 merely served to demonstrate the instability of the government: Sturmer had occupied the

57 Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, 2: 510–11.

58 Stockdale, *Mobilizing the Russian Nation*, 250–55.

59 A. V. Avrekh, *Tsarizm i IV Duma* (Moscow: Nauka, 1981), 25.

60 Badaev, *Bolsheviks in the Tsarist Duma*, 214–21.

61 Pearson, *Russian Moderates*, 119.

prime ministerial chair for less than ten months, and his successor, Trepov, survived for only six weeks. The vital post of minister of internal affairs changed hands four times in the space of a year after September 1915, ending up in September 1916 in the hands of Aleksandr Protopopov, one of the empress's favorites, who soon gained a reputation as being mentally unstable. The key job of minister of foreign affairs, responsible for handling Russia's relations with its allies during the war, had been occupied by the respected Sergei Sazonov since 1910, but Sazonov became deeply disillusioned by the government's attitudes. He described the "gradual decay of Government and … appointments to chief posts in the Empire of men so incredibly unsuited that public opinion grew exasperated," and he himself was removed from office in July 1916.[62] The politics of the Russian state had deteriorated into a set of personal intrigues, with ministers coming and going in a whirlwind of appointments and dismissals during 1916.[63] The tsar and his confidants could see no other way to deal with the opposition and distrust they were encountering, while even moderate Russian politicians were conspiring to remove Nicholas from the throne.[64]

By the autumn of 1916 the Russian political crisis had become a symptom of much wider problems that were gripping Russian society. The urban population was expanding as refugees arrived from areas under German occupation, and the demand for industrial labor drew more men to work in the armaments and metal industries. Food supply was becoming an acute problem for Russian cities, especially in Petrograd and Moscow. While the 1916 harvest was not as fruitful as that of previous years, it was not an absolute lack of food that caused problems, but rather a breakdown in the supply mechanisms that brought food—especially grain—from the most productive agricultural regions to the cities in Russia's north and west.[65] Russia's creaking railway system was not up to the strains imposed upon it by war. The government proved unable to impose effective systems of regulation on food supply, with the Petrograd regime displaying a continuing reluctance to involve local organizations in purchasing grain, and prices continued to rise steeply during

[62] Sazonov, *Fateful Years*, 296–97.

[63] M. V. Rodzianko, *Krushenie imperii* (Moscow: Skify, 1992), 166.

[64] Semion Lyandres, *The Fall of Tsarism: Untold Stories of the February 1917 Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 272–78.

[65] Peter Gatrell, *Russia's First World War: A Social and Economic History* (Harlow, UK: Pearson, 2005), 95–96; Kimitaka Matsuzato, "Inter-Regional Conflicts and the Decline of Tsarism—the Real Reasons for the Food Crisis in Russia after the Autumn of 1916," in *Emerging Democracy in Late Imperial Russia*, ed. Mary Schaeffer Conroy (Boulder, CO: University Press of Colorado, 1998), 243–300.

1916.[66] Inflation had a severe effect on the supply of grain: as the police noted in a report in October 1916, "the peasants, having learnt by experience what are the prices for 'city goods' … do not want to sell their goods as they are frightened of selling them too cheap. As a result, prices are rising everywhere and goods are disappearing."[67] The paralysis of the government, combined with its innate reluctance to take dramatic measures, meant that Russia was unable to devise effective systems of rationing or price control for food.[68] During 1916 grain reserves were steadily depleted, so that by the end of the year they stood at only 20 percent of the level of December 1915.[69]

The hardships caused by rapid and severe inflation, together with shortages of basic food supplies, revived the strike movement that had subsided with the outbreak of war. As in so many other aspects of wartime life, the summer of 1915 marked a turning point in popular unrest. In July strikes broke out in many of Petrograd's largest factories, including the huge Putilov shipyard, prompting the authorities to issue warnings about the punishments that further strikes would attract.[70] The large Russian textile industry provided further evidence of working-class discontent: police opened fire on strikers and demonstrators at factories in Kostroma province and in Ivanovo-Vosnesensk, the heart of the Russian textile industry, killing dozens of workers. When news of the shootings reached the capital, workers came out on strike in protest, and the discontent was exacerbated by small numbers of people calling for better food supplies. An attempt was made to stage a general strike in September 1915, but it was short-lived due to concerns that it might derail the efforts of the Progressive Bloc to impress its program on the tsarist regime. By early 1916 workers were calling for substantial wage increases, as inflation ate away at their incomes. The anniversary of the 1905 massacre on Bloody Sunday was marked by substantial numbers of strikes, and popular unrest intensified as food supplies became more and more erratic and prices rose dramatically. The dangers that this situation presented were well understood by parts of the government: the police reported on the "exceptional heightening of opposition and bitterness of mood … amongst wide sections of the population of Petrograd" and noted that "a situation was created which

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66 Gatrell, *Russia's First World War*, 146.

67 "Politicheskoe polozhenie Rossii nakanune Fevral′skoi revoliutsii v zhandarmskom osveshchenii," *Krasnyi arkhiv* 17 (1926): 19.

68 Lars T. Lih, *Bread and Authority in Russia, 1914–1921* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 32–56.

69 Gatrell, *Russia's First World War,* 170.

70 Hasegawa, *February Revolution*, 93.

was highly favorable to any sort of revolutionary propaganda and actions."[71] The possibility of widespread revolt appeared so serious by autumn 1916 that the Petrograd city governor, A. P. Balk, drew up contingency plans for dealing with disturbances in the capital.[72]

Petrograd was especially susceptible to popular discontent: alongside the institutions of government of the empire, it contained hundreds of thousands of working men and women toiling in the shipyards and munitions factories on which Russia depended to supply its armies. Petrograd's population had grown very rapidly during the 1890s as workers flooded into the heavy industry that formed the base of the city's industrial power: the capital exemplified the great gulf that existed between the wealthy elite who ran the imperial government and the new working class that had come into existence in Russia since 1890 and Witte's dash for industrial growth.[73] Petrograd was very vulnerable to mass revolt: the city that Peter the Great had planned at the beginning of the 18th century with its broad, straight boulevards provided a perfect theater in which great crowds could mass and move quickly across the city. Petrograd contained within its bounds every aspect of the crises that were besetting the Russian state by the end of 1916, and it surprised very few of Russia's elite when serious disturbances broke out in the capital early in 1917.

The Romanov regime had proved capable of putting down serious threats to its authority during 1905 and 1906 when revolt had broken out across the empire. The brutal suppression of the Bloody Sunday demonstrations in St. Petersburg in January 1905 had provoked a wave of strikes and urban unrest in sympathy, while rebellion spread through the Russian countryside and non-Russian nationalities in Poland and the Baltic provinces rose up against their Russian masters. Parts of the military mutinied in the wake of Russia's humiliating defeat in the war with Japan, and by autumn 1905 the very survival of the tsarist regime was in doubt. The Romanov state was able to sustain itself by making concessions in October 1905, as the wily Sergei Witte was able to use the political capital he had gained by successfully negotiating peace with Japan to force a reluctant Nicholas II to agree to the establishment of a legislative Duma. The situation that faced Russia early in 1917 bore many superficial similarities to the events of 1905, as an unsuccessful war placed great strains on Russian society. But the political dynamics of 1917 were very different. The tsar deeply resented the way in which he believed he had been pushed into conceding some of his power in 1905, and he stood firm against

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[71] "Politicheskoe polozhenie Rossii," 6.

[72] "Gibel′ tsarskogo Petrograda," *Russkoe proshloe* 1 (1991): 12.

[73] R. B. McKean, *St. Petersburg between the Revolutions: Workers and Revolutionaries, June 1907–February 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 14–29.

attempts ten years later to make him agree to a "responsible ministry" as the Progressive Bloc demanded. At the same time, Russia lacked a political figure of Witte's stature and forcefulness who understood the gravity of the situation that the regime faced and who was able to provide any real leadership. Nicholas II disliked ministers who demonstrated independence of thought and were forceful in presenting their opinions: he had removed Witte from office in the spring of 1906 once Russia had become calmer, and he came to dislike the imposing figure of Petr Stolypin, who was prime minister from summer 1906 until his assassination in 1911.[74] The Romanov regime had staged a resurgence after 1905, confident after its apparent success in suppressing rebellion, and while there were many warnings of continuing danger from across the political spectrum, the tsar and his advisers believed that they had reconstructed the traditional ties between monarch and people which they thought had sustained the regime in power.[75]

The regime, however, collapsed very quickly in February 1917 in the face of popular discontent in Petrograd. Tsarism's hold on power was fragile and proved to be very vulnerable to revolt in the capital. The city had developed as a microcosm of Russian society and contained within its bounds the social and political elite of the empire, alongside a substantial working class and a garrison of peasant soldiers. When discontent erupted in February 1917, the monarchy was faced with potent yet inchoate opposition. The demonstrations that filled the streets of Petrograd were leaderless, but neither the Duma politicians nor the military elite were capable of identifying with the popular mood that had engulfed the capital. The absence of the tsar at headquarters, together with the weak system of communications that linked Mogilev and Pskov to Petrograd,[76] meant that the regime itself was fractured and was unable to mount any sustained defense of its position. When Nicholas II signed the act of abdication, he did not believe that this represented the end of the Russian monarchy: Nicholas abdicated in favor of his brother Mikhail without ascertaining whether Mikhail was prepared to accept the throne. Tsarism came to an end in a shambolic fashion: real discontent combined with confusion and uncertainty to bring the imperial regime to its knees. The following

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[74] Peter Waldron, *Between Two Revolutions: Stolypin and the Politics of Renewal in Russia 1906–1911* (London: UCL Press, 1998), 126–27.

[75] See Petr Durnovo's presentiment of catastrophe, "The Durnovo Memorandum," in *Documents of Russian History, 1914–1917*, ed. F. A. Golder (New York: Century, 1927), 12–23; and A. I. Guchkov, "The General Political Situation and the Octobrist Party," *Russian Review* 3, 1 (1914): 151–58.

[76] Hasegawa, *February Revolution*, 489.

months were to show the anarchy that was unleashed by this leaderless and formless revolution.