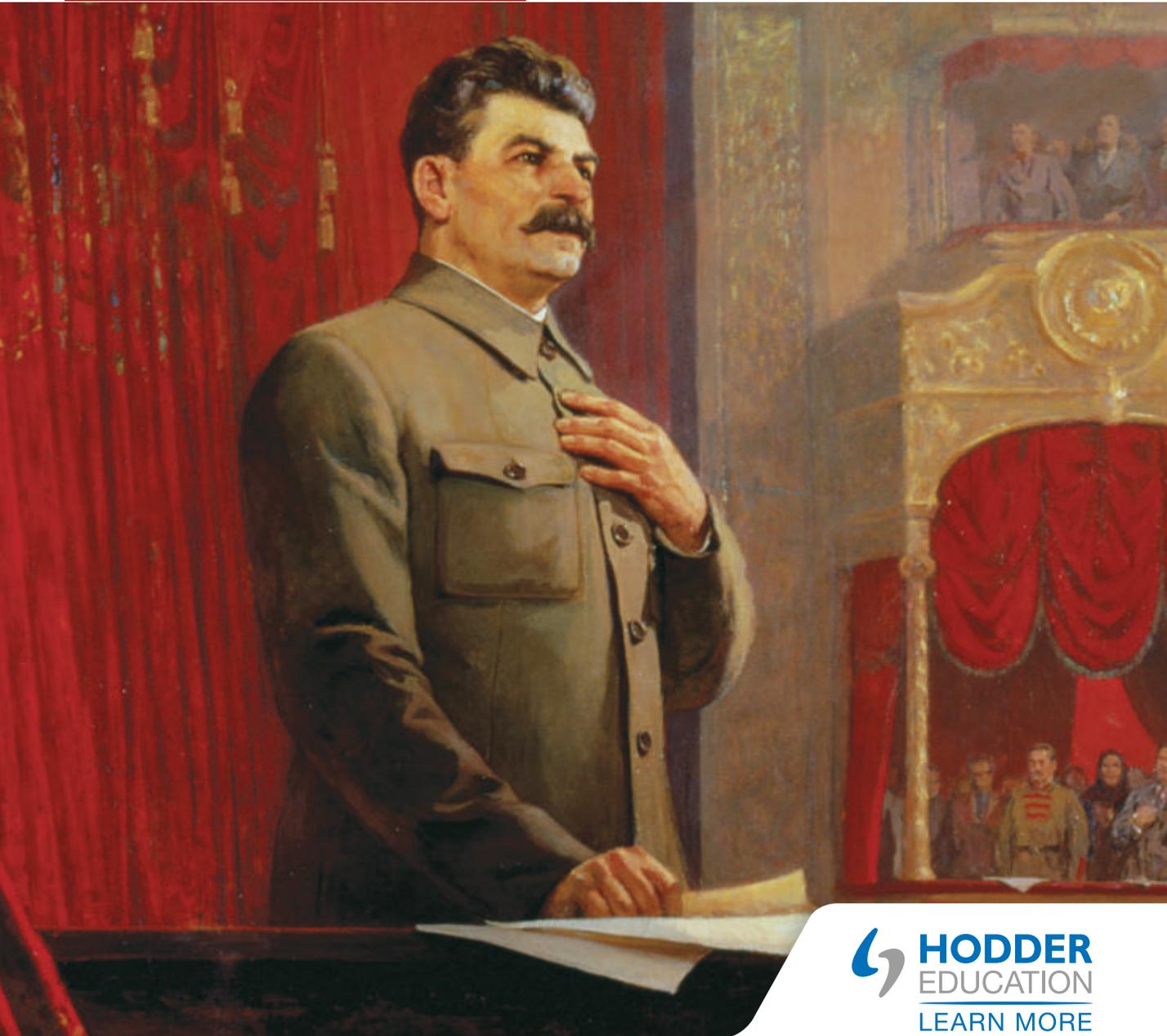


access to history

Bolshevik and Stalinist Russia 1917–64

MICHAEL LYNCH

FIFTH EDITION



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Dedication

Keith Randell (1943–2002)

The *Access to History* series was conceived and developed by Keith, who created a series to 'cater for students as they are, not as we might wish them to be'. He leaves a living legacy of a series that for over 20 years has provided a trusted, stimulating and well-loved accompaniment to post-16 study. Our aim with these new editions is to continue to offer students the best possible support for their studies.

Dissent and revolution 1917

Russia witnessed two revolutions in 1917. The February Revolution was essentially the collapse of tsardom from within, whereas the October Revolution was a seizure of power by Lenin's Bolshevik Party from the Provisional Government, which had replaced the tsar. This chapter considers these interlocking topics:

- ★ The structure of government 1917
- ★ Russia at war 1917
- ★ The February Revolution 1917
- ★ The Dual Authority and continued dissent
- ★ The October Revolution 1917

Key dates

| | | | |
|-------------------------------|--|----------------------|--|
| 1914–17 | Russia at war | 1917 | |
| 1915 August | Nicholas II took command of the Russian armies | April 4 | Lenin issued his April Theses |
| 1917 | | July 3–6 | 'July Days' uprising |
| February 18 to March 4 | February Revolution | September 1 | Kornilov's abortive march on Petrograd |
| February 28 | Provisional Government claimed authority | September 25 | Bolsheviks gained a majority in Petrograd soviet |
| March 1 | Petrograd soviet issued Order Number 1 | October 9 | Petrograd soviet set up the Military Revolutionary Committee |
| March 4 | Tsar's abdication proclaimed | October 24–25 | Bolshevik Rising |
| April 3 | Lenin returned to Petrograd | October 26 | Bolsheviks established <i>Sovmarkom</i> |
| | | October 27 | Bolsheviks took power under Lenin |

1 The structure of government 1917

► *What were the main features of the tsarist system of government?*

The following sections describe the main features of the tsarist system of government.

The tsar

The peoples of the Russian Empire were governed by one person: the tsar (emperor). In 1917, the reigning tsar was Nicholas II, who had come to the throne in 1894. By law and tradition, the tsar was an absolute ruler whose authority was exercised through three official bodies:

- the Imperial Council, a group of honorary advisers directly responsible to the tsar
- the Cabinet of Ministers, which ran the various government departments
- the Senate, which supervised the operation of the law.

These bodies were appointed, not elected, and they did not govern; their role was merely to give advice. They had no authority over the tsar, whose word was final in all governmental and legal matters. In practice, the tsar governed through the Cabinet of Ministers appointed by him. This concentration of power in the hands of a privileged élite was the reason why Russians who wanted their country to reform and modernise were unhappy with the tsarist system.

The *duma*

In 1906, Nicholas II had agreed to the creation of a *duma* (parliament). Although this was made up of two houses, an upper appointed chamber and a lower elected chamber, the *duma* had no real power, as had been made clear at the time of its creation when Nicholas had reasserted that he remained the final authority in all governmental and state matters. Nevertheless, although this had not been the tsar's intention, the *duma*, in which all the political parties were represented, provided a forum for criticism of government policies. This was particularly significant after 1915 when the *duma* members became increasingly hostile towards the government's handling of the war (see page 7).

Opposition parties

It was not until 1906 that political parties were legally permitted, and by 1917 a significant number of them had come into being. These belonged to one of two main categories: liberals, who wanted to reform the tsarist system, and revolutionaries, who wanted to overthrow it.

Liberal parties

Octobrists

The Octobrists were a party of moderates who urged the tsar to honour the October Manifesto that he had issued in 1906, promising a range of freedoms. They were basically loyal to the tsar and his government and believed that the tsarist system was capable of being improved by measured reform. They regarded the establishment of the *duma* as a major constitutional advance.

Kadets (Constitutional Democrats)

The Kadets, the largest of the liberal parties, wanted Russia to develop as a constitutional monarchy in which the powers of the tsar would be restricted by a democratically elected constituent (national) assembly. They believed that such a body, representative of the whole of Russia, would be able to settle the nation's outstanding social, political and economic problems.

Revolutionary parties

The Social Revolutionaries (SRs)

The Social Revolutionary Party began as a movement among the **Russian peasantry**, but also gained recruits from among the **urban workers**. It had two main wings, Left Social Revolutionaries, who claimed that only a policy of terrorism could bring necessary change to Russia, and Right Social Revolutionaries, who, while believing in revolution, were prepared to work with other parties for an immediate improvement in the conditions of the workers and peasants.

The Social Democrats (SDs)

The Social Democrats had come into being in 1898. Their aim was to achieve revolution in Russia by following the ideas of Karl Marx (1818–83), the German revolutionary, who had advanced the idea that human social development was shaped by **class struggle**, a process that operated throughout history. He referred to this process as the **dialectic**, whose final stage would be the violent overthrow of the **bourgeoisie** by the **proletariat**. In 1903, the SDs had split into two separate Marxist parties:

- the Mensheviks, who believed in a broad coalition of all the Russian progressive parties to work to bring down tsardom
- the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin (see page 17), held that only their dedicated party of Marxist believers had the necessary commitment and understanding to achieve genuine proletarian revolution. At the beginning of 1917, most of the leading Bolsheviks, including Lenin, were in exile because of their revolutionary activities.



KEY TERMS

Russian peasantry

Agricultural workers, who made up over 80 per cent of the population.

Urban workers

Factory workers who, while comprising only four per cent of the population, were economically and politically significant.

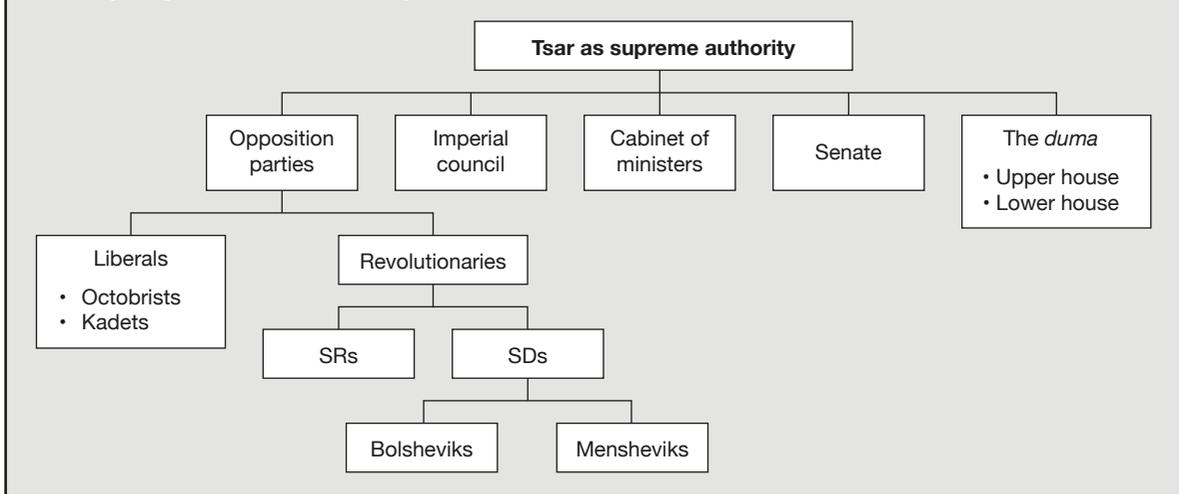
Class struggle

A continuing conflict at every stage of history between those who possessed economic and political power and those who did not, the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'.

Dialectic The dynamic force that drives the class struggle forward.

Bourgeoisie The owners of capital, the boss class, who exploited the workers but who would be overthrown by them in the revolution to come.

Proletariat The exploited industrial workers who would triumph in the last great class struggle.

Summary diagram: The structure of government 1917

2

Russia at war 1917

► *Why had widespread opposition to tsardom developed by February 1917?*

War is a time when the character and structure of a society are put to the test in a particularly intense way. The longer the war lasts, the greater the test. During the years 1914–17, the political, social and economic institutions of Russia proved ultimately incapable of meeting the demands that war placed on them.

When Russia went to war against Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1914, Tsar Nicholas II had become the symbol of the nation's resistance in its hour of trial. Had the war gone well, there is little doubt that the tsar's reputation and authority would have become unchallengeable. But the war did not go well. Military and economic failures led to mounting political crises which ultimately proved to be the undoing of tsardom. The impact of the war on Russia is best analysed in six main areas:

- inflation
- food supplies
- transport
- the army
- the role of the tsar
- the role of Rasputin.

Inflation

The war destroyed Russia's financial stability. Between 1914 and 1917 war costs meant that government spending increased from 4 million roubles to

30 million. Increased taxation at home and heavy borrowing from abroad were only partially successful in raising the capital Russia needed. The **gold standard** was abandoned, which allowed the government to put more banknotes into circulation. In the short term this enabled wages to be paid and trade to continue, but in the long term it made money practically worthless since the rouble no longer had a genuine value. The result was rapid **inflation**, which had become particularly severe by the beginning of 1917. Between 1914 and 1916 average earnings had doubled while the price of food and fuel had quadrupled (see Table 1.1).

Table 1.1 Wartime inflation 1914–17, expressed in terms of the price index (to a base of 100 in July 1914)

| | Price index | Banknotes in circulation |
|--------------|-------------|--------------------------|
| July 1914 | 100 | 100 |
| January 1915 | 130 | 146 |
| January 1916 | 141 | 199 |
| January 1917 | 398 | 336 |

Food supplies

As the war continued, peasants found it impossible to sustain agricultural output. One reason for this was the **requisitioning** of farm horses and fertilisers by the military. There was the additional problem that inflation made trading unprofitable and so the peasants stopped selling food and began hoarding their stocks instead.

What increased the problems for the ordinary Russian was that the army had first claim on the limited amount of food being produced. The military also had priority use of the transport system. It commandeered the railways and the roads, with the result that the food supplies that were available could not be distributed easily to civilian areas. Hunger bordering on famine was a constant reality for much of Russia after 1915. Shortages were at their worst in the towns and cities. **Petrograd** suffered particularly badly because of its remoteness from the food-producing regions and because of the large number of refugees who swelled its population and increased the demand on its dwindling resources. By early 1917, bread rationing meant that Petrograd's inhabitants were receiving less than a quarter of the amount that had been available to them in 1914.

Transport

It was the disruption of the transport system that intensified Russia's wartime shortages. The attempt to transport millions of troops and masses of supplies to the war fronts created unbearable pressures. The signalling system on which the railway network depended broke down; blocked lines and trains stranded by engine breakdown or lack of coal became commonplace. A graphic example of the confusion was provided by the northern port of Archangel. So great was the

KEY TERMS

Gold standard The rouble had a fixed gold content, giving it strength when exchanged with other currencies.

Inflation A decrease in the value and purchasing power of money.

Requisitioning State-authorized seizure of property or resources.

Petrograd For patriotic reasons, the German name for St Petersburg was changed to the Russian form soon after the war began.

pile-up of undistributed goods there that they sank into the ground beneath the weight of new supplies.

Elsewhere there were frequent reports of food rotting in railway trucks that could not be moved. One of the tsar's wartime prime ministers later admitted: 'There were so many trucks blocking the lines that we had to tip some of them down the embankments to move the ones that arrived later.' By the end of 1916, Petrograd and Moscow were receiving only a third of their food and fuel requirements. Before the war, Moscow had received an average of 2200 wagons of grain per month; by January 1917, this figure had dropped to below 700. The figures for Petrograd told a similar story; in February 1917 the capital received only 300 wagonloads of grain instead of the 1000 it needed.

The army

By 1917, the war was going badly for Russia. A critical factor was that the army was severely hampered by a lack of equipment. This was not because there had been underspending on the military. The problem was poor administration and liaison between the government departments responsible for supplies. Despite its takeover of the transport system, the military was as much a victim of the poor distribution as the civilian population. In the first two years of the war, the army managed to obtain its supply needs, but, from 1916, serious shortages began to occur. **Mikhail Rodzianko**, the president of the *duma*, having undertaken a special fact-finding study in 1916 of conditions in the army, reported to the *duma* on what he described as 'the great evil' of widespread disorganisation, which was costing the nation the lives of its soldiers and denying it ultimate victory.

The suffering that the food shortages and the dislocated transport system brought to both troops and civilians might have been bearable had the news from the war been encouraging or had there been inspired leadership from the top. There had been occasional military successes, such as those achieved on the south-western front in 1916 when a Russian offensive brought Austria-Hungary to the verge of collapse. But the gains made were not followed up and were never enough to justify the ever-lengthening lists of dead and wounded. The enthusiasm and high morale with which Russia had gone to war in 1914 had turned by 1917 into pessimism and defeatism. Ill-equipped and underfed, the 'peasants in uniform' who composed the Russian army began to desert in increasing numbers.

The role of the tsar

Central to Russia's military failures was Tsar Nicholas II himself. The strong central leadership that the war effort desperately needed was not being provided. This related directly to a critical decision that Nicholas had made in 1915 when he formally took direct command of Russia's armed services. The intention had been to rally the nation around him as the representative of the Russian



KEY FIGURE

Mikhail Rodzianko (1859–1924)

A tsarist loyalist who tried to persuade Nicholas to introduce essential reforms.

people, but it also made him a hostage to fortune. As commander-in-chief, Nicholas II was now personally responsible for Russia's performance in the war. If things went well, he would take the credit; if they went badly, he would be to blame. And things did go badly. Under his command, Russia sustained a series of military reverses that were seldom broken by a major victory. That the tsar still claimed to rule by divine right made his military failures seem even more glaring.

The growth of opposition

The result of the tsar's fateful decision in 1915 to take personal control of the army was clearly evident two years later. The majority of *duma* members and the high command by now shared the view that he was an inept political and military leader, incapable of providing the inspiration that the nation needed. It is significant that the first moves in the February Revolution in 1917, the event that led to the fall of tsardom, were not made by the revolutionary parties. Instead, the aristocracy and the army, and the civil servants, who, at the outbreak of the war in 1914, had been the tsar's strongest supporters, were, by the winter of 1916, too wearied by his incompetence to wish to save him or the system he represented.

The *duma* recalled

In August 1914, the *duma* had shown its total support for the tsar by voting for its own suspension for the duration of the war. But within a year, Russia's poor military showing had led the *duma* to demand that it be recalled. Nicholas II had bowed before the pressure and allowed the *duma* to reassemble in July 1915. From then on the *duma* became a platform for increasingly vocal critics of the tsar and his government for their mishandling of the war.

One major political mistake made by Nicholas and his ministers was their refusal to co-operate fully with the non-governmental organisations such as the **Union of *Zemstva*** and the **Union of Municipal Councils**, which at the beginning of the war had been willing to work with the government in the national war effort. These elected bodies formed a joint organisation, ***Zemgor***. The success of this organisation both highlighted the government's own failures and hinted that there might be a workable alternative to tsardom.

The 'Progressive Bloc'

A similar political blindness characterised the tsar's opposition to the *duma*'s urging that he replace his incompetent cabinet with 'a ministry of national confidence' with members drawn from the *duma*. Nicholas' rejection of this proposal destroyed the last opportunity he would have of retaining the support of the politically progressive parties. Milyukov, leader of the Kadets, complained that the tsar and his advisers had 'brushed aside the hand that was offered them'.

KEY TERMS

Union of *Zemstva* A set of patriotic rural local councils.

Union of Municipal Councils A set of patriotic urban local councils.

Zemgor The joint body which devoted itself to helping Russia's war wounded.

Profile: Nicholas II

- 1868 Born into the Romanov house
- 1894 Became tsar on the death of his father, Alexander III
Married Princess Alexandra, a German princess
- 1906 Opened the first *duma*
- 1913 Led the celebrations of 300 years of Romanov rule
- 1915 Took over personal command of the Russian armed forces
- 1917 Abdicated on behalf of the Romanov dynasty
- 1918 Murdered with his family in Yekaterinburg

The character of Nicholas II is important in any analysis of revolutionary Russia. The evidence suggests that, although he was far from being as unintelligent as his critics asserted, his limited political understanding prevented him from fully grasping the nature of the events in which he was involved. When he attempted to be strong, he simply appeared stubborn.

The tsar made a number of crucial errors in his handling of the war, the most significant being his decision in 1915 to take direct command of Russia's armed forces. This, in effect, tied the fate of the Romanov dynasty to the success or otherwise of Russia's armies.



In 1914 there had been a very genuine enthusiasm for the tsar as representative of the nation. Within three years that enthusiasm had wholly evaporated, even among dedicated tsarists. The fall of Nicholas was the result of weak leadership rather than of savage oppression. He was not helped by his wife's German nationality or by court scandals, of which Rasputin's was the most notorious. But these were minor affairs which by themselves would not have been sufficient to bring down a dynasty. What fatally undermined the tsarist system which he led was his alienation of those who should have been his natural supporters, the aristocratic members of the *duma*, the leaders of the army and the progressive but non-revolutionary parties. Their desertion of him was the beginning of the February Revolution.

Denied a direct voice in national policy, 236 of the 422 *duma* deputies formed themselves into a 'Progressive Bloc', which began criticising the government's handling of the war. Initially, the bloc did not directly challenge the tsar's authority, but instead tried to persuade him to make concessions. Nicholas, however, was not willing to listen to the bloc. The result was that, as he and his government showed themselves to be increasingly incapable of running the war, the bloc, from having been a supporter, became a focus of political resistance. It was another of tsardom's self-inflicted wounds.

The government continued to shuffle its ministers in the hope of finding a successful team. In the year 1915–16, there were four prime ministers, three foreign secretaries, three ministers of defence and six interior ministers. It was all to no avail. None of them was up to the task.

The role of Rasputin

Gregory Rasputin was the man on whom much of the hatred of the tsarist system came to be focused. This was because he appeared to represent the corruption that had overtaken the royal court and government. By any measure his rise to prominence in Russia was an extraordinary story, but its true significance lay in the light it shed on the nature of tsarist government.

KEY FIGURE

Gregory Rasputin (1872–1916)

A wandering monk believed by the credulous to have supernatural powers; by coincidence, 'rasputin' also means 'lecher' in Russian.

Rasputin was a self-ordained *starets* (holy man) from the Russian steppes, who was notorious for his sexual depravity which made him fascinating to certain women. His reluctance to wash himself or his clothes seemed to add to the attraction he had for them. Many fashionable ladies in St Petersburg, including the wives of courtiers, boasted that they had slept with him. Unsurprisingly, his behaviour made him bitterly hated at the imperial court to which he was officially invited. Outraged husbands and officials detested this upstart peasant. But, since he enjoyed royal favour, they could not get rid of him. As early as 1907 Rasputin had won himself an introduction to the tsar and his wife, Alexandra. The Empress Alexandra was desperate to cure her son, Alexei, the heir to the throne, of his **haemophilia**. Hearing that Rasputin had extraordinary gifts of healing, she invited him to court where he did, indeed, prove able to help Alexei, whose condition eased considerably when he was with him.

Rasputin did not, of course, have the miraculous powers that the more superstitious claimed for him, but he was a very good amateur psychologist. He realised that the pushing and prodding to which Alexei was subjected when being examined by his doctors only made the boy more anxious and feverish. Rasputin's way was to speak calmly to him, stroking his head and arms gently so that he relaxed. This lowered Alexei's temperature and eased his pain. It was not a cure, but it was the most successful treatment he had ever had. Alexandra, a deeply religious woman, believed it was the work of God and that Rasputin was his instrument. She made the 'mad monk', as his enemies called him, her confidant, someone in whom she placed a special trust.

Scandal inevitably followed. Alexandra's German nationality had made her suspect and unpopular since the outbreak of war, but she had tried to ride out the storm. She would hear no ill of 'our dear friend', as she called Rasputin in letters to Nicholas, and obliged the tsar to maintain him at court. Since Nicholas was away at military headquarters for long periods after 1915, Alexandra and Rasputin effectively became the government of Russia. Even the staunchest supporters of tsardom found it difficult to defend a system which allowed a nation in the hour of its greatest need to fall under the sway of the '**German woman**' and a debauched monk.

Alexandra was indeed German, having been born a princess in the house of Hesse. However, after marrying Nicholas, she had tried sincerely to make Russia her adopted country. She converted to the **Orthodox Church** and endeavoured to learn and apply Russian customs and conventions. This accounted for little after 1914, when, despite her undoubted commitment to the Russian cause, her enemies portrayed her as a German agent. Rodzianko, desperate to prevent Russia sliding into political chaos and military defeat, warned the tsar that Rasputin's presence at court and influence over the tsarina and the government threatened disaster. Rodzianko's warning was backed by a member of the royal family, Grand Duke Nicolai Mikhailovich, who wrote to the tsar (see Source A).

KEY TERMS

Haemophilia A genetic condition where blood fails to clot, leaving the sufferer with painful internal bleeding, which can be life threatening.

'German woman' The description used by anti-tsarists to suggest that Alexandra was spying for Germany.

Orthodox Church Russia's established state religion and traditionally one of the bulwarks of tsardom, supporting the idea that tsars ruled by divine right.

? Why is it significant that the letter in Source A was written by a member of the royal family?

SOURCE A

From an extract of a letter to Tsar Nicholas II of 1 November 1916 from Grand Duke Nicolai, quoted in Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution 1899–1919*, Collins Harvill, 1990, p. 256.

You trust Alexandra; that is quite natural. Still what she tells you is not the truth; she is only repeating what has been cleverly insinuated to her. If you are not able to remove this influence [Rasputin's] from her, at least protect yourself from constant systematic manoeuvres attempted through the intermediacy of the wife you love. Believe me, if I insist so much on your freeing yourself from the chains that have been forged I do so only in the hope of saving you and saving the throne of our dear country.

Such appeals went unheeded. Nicholas II's long absences from Petrograd after he became commander-in-chief allowed Rasputin to interfere with, if not direct, government policy. This had the result against which the tsar's supporters, such as Rodzianko and the grand duke, had warned. The tsar's reputation declined further and his government fell into increasing disrepute.

SOURCE B

? Why were so many people in Petrograd ready to believe the stories about Rasputin's scandalous behaviour, such as that depicted in this postcard?



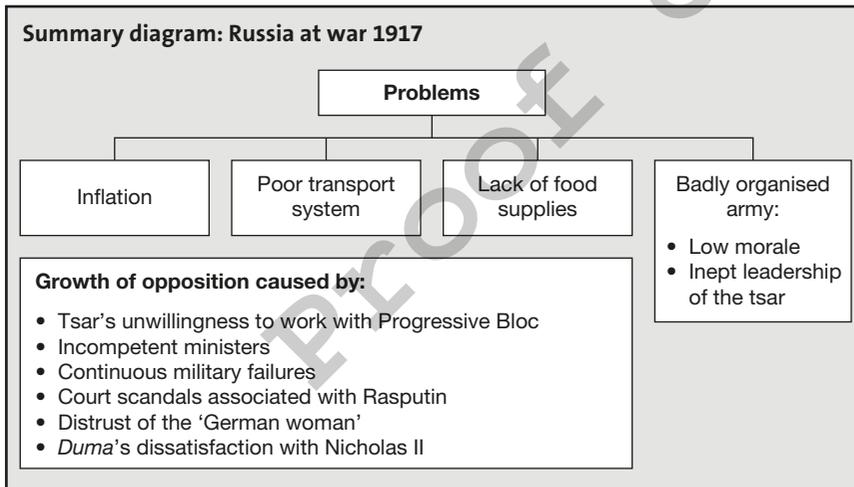
One of the many pornographic postcards that circulated in Petrograd in 1917. The Russian word on the card, *samoderzhavie*, means 'holding'. It is used here as a pun to suggest Rasputin's hold on Russia as well as his physical holding of the empress. Despite this cartoon and all the scurrilous things said about Rasputin and Alexandra, there is no reliable evidence that they were ever lovers in a sexual sense.

The murder of Rasputin

In December 1916, in a mixture of resentment and a genuine wish to save the monarchy, a group of aristocratic conspirators murdered Rasputin. His death was as bizarre as his life. Poisoned with arsenic, shot at point-blank range, battered over the head with a steel bar, he was still alive when he was thrown, trussed in a heavy curtain, into the River Neva. His post-mortem showed that he had water in his lungs, and so must have still been breathing when he was finally submerged under the icy waters.

Rasputin's importance

From time to time there have been various attempts to present Rasputin in a more sympathetic light, but any new evidence that appears seems to bear out the description of him as an essentially disruptive force. Where he does deserve credit is for his achievement in reorganising the army's medical supplies system. He showed the common sense and administrative skill that Russia so desperately needed and which his aristocratic superiors in government so obviously lacked. It was his marked competence that infuriated those who wanted him out of the way. Yet, no matter how much the reactionaries in the court and government might rejoice at the death of the upstart, the truth was that by the beginning of 1917 it was too late to save tsardom. Rasputin's extraordinary life at court and his murder by courtiers were but symptoms of the fatal disease affecting the tsarist system.



3 The February Revolution 1917

▶ Were the events of February 1917 a collapse at the top or a revolution from below?

KEY TERMS

Okhrana The tsarist secret police.

System of dating Until February 1918, Russia used the Julian calendar, which was thirteen days behind the Gregorian calendar, the one adopted in most Western countries by this time. This book uses the older dating for the events of 1917.

? What picture of the unrest in Petrograd at the start of 1917 emerges from the description in Source C?

Character of the revolution

The rising that came in February 1917 was not the first open move against the tsar or his government. During the preceding year there had been a number of challenges. The Octobrists in the *duma* had frequently demanded the removal of unwanted ministers and generals. What made February 1917 different was the range of the opposition to the government and the speed with which events turned from a protest into a revolution. Rumours of the likelihood of serious public disturbances breaking out in Petrograd had been widespread since the beginning of the year. An **Okhrana** report in January 1917 provides an illuminating summary of the situation (Source C).

SOURCE C

From an extract of an Okhrana report, January 1917, quoted in Ronald Hingley, *The Russian Secret Police*, Hutchinson, 1970, p. 74.

There is a marked increase in hostile feelings among the peasants, not only against the government but also against all other social groups. The proletariat of the capital is on the verge of despair. The mass of industrial workers are quite ready to let themselves go to the wildest excesses of a hunger riot. The prohibition of all labour meetings, the closing of trade unions, the prosecution of men taking an active part in the sick benefit funds, the suspension of labour newspapers, and so on, make the labour masses, led by the more advanced and already revolutionary-minded elements, assume an openly hostile attitude towards the Government and protest with all the means at their disposal against the continuation of the war.

On 14 February, Rodzianko, the *duma* president, in the first of a series of telegrams to the tsar, warned him that 'very serious outbreaks of unrest' were imminent. He added ominously, 'there is not one honest man left in your entourage; all the decent people have either been dismissed or left'. It was this desertion by those closest to the tsar that unwittingly set in motion what proved to be a revolution.

According to the **system of dating** in imperial Russia, the revolution occupied the period from 18 February to 4 March 1917. A full-scale strike was started on 18 February by the employees at the Putilov steel works, the largest and most politically active factory in Petrograd. During the next five days, the Putilov strikers were joined on the streets by growing numbers of workers, who had been angered by rumours of a further cut in bread supplies. It is now known that these were merely rumours and that there was still enough bread to meet

the capital's basic needs. However, in times of acute crisis, rumour often has the same power as fact.

The course of events

It also happened that 23 February was International Women's Day. Thousands of women came on to the streets to join the protesters in demanding food and an end to the war. By 25 February, Petrograd was paralysed by a city-wide strike which again began at the Putilov works. Factories were occupied and attempts by the authorities to disperse the workers were hampered by the growing sympathy among the police for the demonstrators. There was a great deal of confusion and little clear direction at the top. Events which were later seen as having had major political significance took place in an atmosphere in which political protests were indistinguishable from the general outcry against food shortages and the miseries brought by war.

SOURCE D



What do the slogans carried by the protesters suggest about the problems faced by women in Petrograd?

Some of the demonstrators at the 1917 International Women's Day. On the banner is written: 'As long as women are slaves, there will be no freedom. Long live equal rights for women.'

The breakdown of order

The tsar, at his military headquarters at Mogilev, 790 km (490 miles) from Petrograd, relied for news largely on the letters received from Empress Alexandra, who was still in the capital. When he learned from her about the disturbances, Nicholas ordered the commander of the Petrograd garrison, **General Khabalov**, to restore order. Khabalov cabled back that, with the various contingents of the police and militia either fighting each other or joining the demonstrators, and his own garrison troops disobeying orders, the situation was uncontrollable.

Khabalov had earlier begged the government to declare martial law in Petrograd, which would have given him the power to use unlimited force

KEY FIGURE

General Khabalov (1858–1924)

Arrested after the fall of the tsar on the grounds that he had tried to suppress the people, but later released without charge.

against the demonstrators. But the breakdown of ordinary life in the capital meant that the martial law proclamation could not even be printed, let alone enforced. More serious still, by 26 February all but a few thousand of the original 150,000 Petrograd garrison troops had deserted.

The *duma* provisional committee

Faced with this near-hopeless situation, Rodzianko, on behalf of the *duma*, informed the tsar that only a major concession on the government's part offered any hope of preserving the imperial power. Nicholas, again with that occasional stubbornness that he mistook for decisiveness, then ordered the *duma* to dissolve. It did so formally as an assembly, but a group of twelve members disobeyed the order and remained in session as a 'provisional committee'. This marked the first open constitutional defiance of the tsar. The twelve were made up of landowners, industrialists and lawyers who had been part of the Progressive Bloc. As well as Kadets and Octobrists, there were two SR members. It was one of the SRs, **Alexander Kerensky**, who then made the boldest move yet, when, speaking for the provisional committee, he called for the tsar to stand down as head of state or be deposed.

The Petrograd soviet

On that same day, 27 February, another event took place that was to prove as significant as the formation of the provisional committee. This was the first meeting of the 'Petrograd **Soviet** of Soldiers', Sailors' and Workers' Deputies', which gathered in the Tauride Palace, the same building that housed the provisional committee. The moving force behind the setting up of the soviet were the Mensheviks, who, under their local leader, Alexander Shlyapnikov, had grown in strength in Petrograd during the war.

These two self-appointed bodies – the provisional committee, representing the reformist elements of the old *duma*, and the soviet, speaking for the striking workers and rebellious troops – became the *de facto* government of Russia. This was the beginning of what became known as the **Dual Authority**, an uneasy alliance that was to last until October. On 28 February, the soviet published the first edition of its newspaper *Izvestiya* (*The News*) in which it declared its determination 'to wipe out the old system completely' and summon a constituent assembly, elected by **universal suffrage**.

The tsar abdicates

The remaining ministers in the tsar's cabinet were not prepared to face the growing storm. They used the pretext of an electricity failure in their government offices to abandon their responsibilities and to slip out of the capital. Rodzianko, who up to this point had struggled to remain loyal to the tsar's government, then advised Nicholas that only his personal abdication could save the Russian monarchy. On 28 February, Nicholas decided to return to Petrograd, apparently in the belief that his personal presence would have a

KEY FIGURE

Alexander Kerensky (1881–1970)

A leading SR member who as a lawyer became renowned for his spirited legal defence of anti-tsarist activists.

KEY TERMS

Soviet Originally the Russian word for a representative council. It was appropriated by the Bolsheviks to describe themselves and the cause they espoused.

De facto The real situation, as compared to what it should or might be in theory or in law.

Dual Authority The coexistence of the provisional committee and the Petrograd soviet.

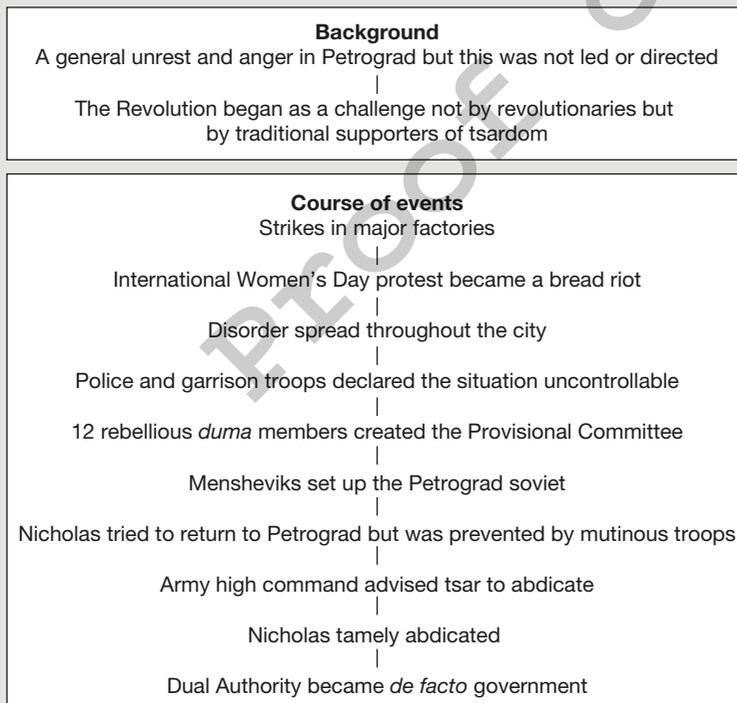
Universal suffrage All adults having the right to vote.

calming effect on the capital. However, the royal train was intercepted on its journey by mutinous troops who forced it to divert to Pskov, a city and important depot 290 km (180 miles) from Petrograd. It was at Pskov that a group of generals from *stavka*, the Russian army's high command, together with the representatives of the old *duma*, met the tsar to inform him that the seriousness of the situation in Petrograd made his return both futile and dangerous. They, too, advised abdication.

Nicholas tamely accepted the advice. His only concern was whether he should also renounce the throne on behalf of his son, Alexei. This he eventually decided to do. The decree of abdication that Nicholas signed on 2 March nominated his brother, Grand Duke Michael, as the new tsar. However, Michael, unwilling to take up the poisoned chalice, refused the title on the pretext that it had not been offered to him by a Russian constituent assembly.

By default, the provisional committee, which had renamed itself the Provisional Government, thus found itself responsible for governing Russia. On 3 March, the new government officially informed the outside world of the revolution that had taken place. On the following day, Nicholas II's formal abdication was publicly announced. Thus it was that the house of Romanov, which only four years earlier in 1913 had celebrated its tri-centenary as a divinely appointed dynasty, came to an inglorious end.

Summary diagram: The February Revolution 1917



4 The Dual Authority and continued dissent

▶ *What were the basic weaknesses of the Provisional Government?*

KEY FIGURE

Prince Lvov (1861–1925)

A prominent landowner and progressive reformer, he headed the Provisional Government from March to July 1917.

The Provisional Government, led by **Prince Lvov**, which picked up the reins of authority after the tsar's abdication, was really the old *duma* in a new form. From the beginning it suffered from the two characteristics that weakened it throughout the eight months of its existence:

- It was not an elected body, having come into being as a rebellious committee of the old *duma*, which had defied the tsar's order to disband. In consequence, it lacked legitimate authority and had no claim on the loyalty of the Russian people. Lacking this, it would be judged entirely on how well it dealt with the nation's problems.
- Its authority was limited by its unofficial partnership with the Petrograd soviet in the Dual Authority.

The Soviet did not set out to be an alternative government. Initially, it regarded its role as supervisory, checking that the interests of the soldiers and workers were understood by the new government. However, in the uncertain times that followed the February Revolution, the Provisional Government often seemed unsure of its own authority. This uncertainty tended to give the soviet greater prominence.

SOURCE E

? Why was the presence of the Bolsheviks in the soviet meetings so significant?

A packed meeting of the Petrograd Soviet in March 1917. Initially huge numbers of soldiers and workers, sometimes as many as 3000, attended the early meetings, but by the autumn this had dropped to a few hundred. However, the Bolsheviks kept up their numbers, which gave them a predominant influence in the soviet.



The ability of the Petrograd soviet to restrict the Provisional Government's authority was evident from the outset. In one of its first moves as an organisation, the soviet had issued its 'Order Number 1', which declared that, in military matters, the orders of the Provisional Government were to be obeyed 'only when they do not contradict the orders and decrees of the soviet'. What the order meant was that the decrees of the Provisional Government were not binding unless they were approved by the Petrograd soviet.

The Bolsheviks return

Once the Bolsheviks, most of whom had been in exile, learned of Nicholas II's abdication, they rushed back to Petrograd. Among the first to arrive were Josef Stalin and **Lev Kamenev**. These two prominent party spokesmen took the view that, in the aftermath of the February Revolution, the Bolsheviks should co-operate with the Provisional Government, and the other revolutionary and reforming parties. However, this accommodating approach would dramatically change once Lenin had returned.

Lenin's return in April 1917

Lenin arrived in Petrograd on 3 April. The manner of his return from exile in Switzerland was a remarkable story in itself. Lenin's wife, Krupskaya, recorded it (see Source F).

SOURCE F

From K.K. Krupskaya, *Reminiscences of Lenin*, Lawrence & Wishart, 1933, p. 336.

*The moment the news of the February Revolution was received, Ilyich [Lenin] was all eagerness to get back to Russia. As there were no legal ways of travelling, illegal ways would have to be used. But what ways? From the moment the news of the Revolution was received, Ilyich had no sleep. His nights were spent building the most improbable plans. Naturally the Germans gave us permission to travel through Germany in the belief that Revolution was a disaster to a country, and that by allowing **emigrant internationalists** to return to their country they were helping to spread the Revolution in Russia. The Bolsheviks, for their part, considered it their duty to bring about a victorious proletarian revolution. They did not care what the German bourgeois government thought about it.*

Krupskaya's account is instructive. In the hope that the tsar's fall would be the prelude to the collapse of the Russian armies, the German government arranged for Lenin to return to Russia in a sealed train across occupied Europe. Since the outbreak of war in 1914, the German foreign office had given regular financial support to Lenin and the Bolsheviks, in the hope that if they achieved their revolutionary aims they would pull Russia out of the war. It just so happened that, for quite different reasons, what Lenin wanted – the withdrawal of the Russian armies from the war – was precisely what the Germans wanted.

KEY FIGURE

Lev Kamenev (1883–1936)

Held various key positions under Lenin between 1917 and 1924.

According to Source F, why had the attitudes of the Bolsheviks and the Germans coincided at this point? 

KEY TERM

Emigrant internationalists Russian revolutionaries living in exile.

However, it made no difference to anti-Bolsheviks that the German reasons were military and Lenin's were political. They considered the German government and the Bolshevik Party to be co-operating in a common cause, the defeat of Russia.

There is no doubting the great significance of Lenin's return to Petrograd in April. Before then, the Bolsheviks, led by Kamenev and Stalin, had accepted the formation of the Dual Authority as part of a genuine revolution. They had been willing to work with the other reformist parties. Lenin changed all that. In his speech on his arrival at Petrograd's Finland Station on 3 April, he declared that the events of February, far from giving Russia political freedom, had created a **parliamentary-bourgeois republic**. He condemned the Provisional Government and called for its overthrow in a genuine revolution.

KEY TERM

Parliamentary-bourgeois republic A contemptuous term for the Provisional Government, which in Lenin's eyes had simply replaced the rule of the tsar with the rule of the reactionary *duma*.

The April Theses

The following day Lenin issued his April Theses, in which he spelt out future Bolshevik policy. To the bewilderment of those Bolsheviks who had expected to be praised for their efforts in working with the other revolutionary groups, Lenin condemned all that had happened since the fall of the tsar. He insisted that, since the Bolsheviks were the only truly revolutionary proletarian party, they must:

- abandon co-operation with all other parties
- work for a true revolution entirely by their own efforts
- overthrow the reactionary Provisional Government
- struggle, not to extend freedom to all classes, but to transfer power to the workers
- demand that authority pass to the soviets, which based on the Petrograd model, had been set in place by workers and soldiers in many other Russian cities and towns.

Lenin had ulterior motives in demanding that the soviets take over government. Although he rejected much of what the soviets had done, he saw them as a power base. Circumstances had made them an essential part of the structure of post-tsarist government. Lenin calculated that the soviets – the Petrograd soviet in particular – offered his small Bolshevik Party the means by which it could obtain power in the name of the proletariat. By infiltrating and dominating the soviets, the Bolshevik Party would be in a position to take over the state.

The essence of Lenin's argument was summed up in two provocative Bolshevik slogans that he coined: 'Peace, Bread and Land' and 'All Power to the Soviets'. But these were more than slogans. They were Lenin's way of presenting in simple, dramatic headings the basic problems confronting Russia:

- 'Peace' – the continuing war with Germany.
- 'Bread' – the chronic food shortages.
- 'Land' – the disruption in the countryside (see page 21).

Lenin asserted that as long as the Provisional Government stayed in power these problems could not be solved because the ministers governed only in the interests of their own class. They had no wish to end the war, which brought them profits, or supply food to the Russian people, whom they despised, or reform the land-holding system, which guaranteed their property rights and privileges. That is why Lenin demanded 'All Power to the Soviets'. The current ministers must be swept aside and replaced with a government of the soviets. Only then would the people's needs be addressed.

Lenin's analysis was shrewd and prophetic; the Provisional Government's failure to deal with the three principal issues he had identified would lead to its eventual downfall.

The Provisional Government and the war

From the outset, the Provisional Government was in a troubled position. The main problem was the war. For the Provisional Government after February 1917 there was no choice but to fight on. The reason was not idealistic but financial. Unless it did so, it would no longer receive the supplies and **war-credits** from the Western allies on which it had come to rely. Tsardom had left Russia virtually bankrupt. No Russian government could have carried on without large injections of capital from abroad. But the price Russia had to pay was not merely financial. To keep the Western loans coming, it had to guarantee to carry on the war. Making peace was not an option.

The strain that this obligation imposed on the Provisional Government eventually proved unsustainable. Its preoccupation with the war prevented the government from dealing with Russia's social and economic problems. It was a paradoxical situation: in order to survive, the Provisional Government had to keep Russia in the war, but in doing so it destroyed its own chances of survival.

Emergence of Kerensky

The Provisional Government represented the progressive landowners, industrialists and professional classes. They were all patriots, but some members had misgivings about continuing the war. However, at no time did the government as a body contemplate withdrawing from it. This would have mattered less had the Russian armies been successful, but the military situation continued to deteriorate, eroding the support the government had initially enjoyed. Lvov stayed as nominal head of the government but it was Kerensky who became the major influence. As war minister, he campaigned for Russia to embrace the conflict with Germany as a crusade to save the revolution. He toured the front, appealing passionately to the troops to be prepared to lay down their lives for Russia. 'Forward to the battle for freedom. I summon you not to a feast but death.'

The attempt to turn the war into a national crusade took no account of the real situation. The truth was that Russia had gone beyond the point where it could



KEY TERM

War-credits Money loaned on easy repayment terms, mainly by France and Britain, to Russia to finance its war effort.

 **KEY FIGURE**
**General Kornilov
(1870–1918)**

Distinguished by his bravery as a soldier, he was a fierce patriot who hated the Russian revolutionaries.

fight a successful war. Yet Kerensky persisted. In June, a major offensive was launched on the south-western front. It failed badly. The Russian forces were no match for the Austrians, who inflicted heavy losses. Whole Russian regiments mutinied or deserted. The commander on the south-western front, **General Kornilov**, called on the Provisional Government to halt the offensive and direct its energies to crushing the ‘political subversives’, his term for the Bolsheviks, at home. This appeal for a tougher policy was taken up by the government. Early in July, Lvov stood down as prime minister, to be replaced by Kerensky. Kornilov became commander-in-chief.

The government’s troubles were deepened by events on the island of Kronstadt – an island naval base 30 km (20 miles) west of Petrograd across the Bay of Finland – where sailors and workers defied the central authorities by setting up their own separate government. Such developments tempted a number of revolutionaries in Petrograd into thinking that the opportunity had come for them to bring down the Provisional Government. The attempt to do so became known as the ‘July Days’.

The July Days

By the summer of 1917, the government was no longer in full control of events. The most ominous signs were:

- the establishment of soviets throughout Russia
- worker control of factories
- widespread seizure of land by the peasants
- the creation of breakaway **national minority governments** – most notably in Ukraine.

In the first week of July, large-scale demonstrations occurred in Petrograd. Public protests were not uncommon; they had been almost a daily happening since February. But, in the atmosphere created by the news of the failure of the south-western offensive and the government’s mounting problems, the demonstrations of early July turned into a direct challenge to the Provisional Government. The rising itself was a confused, disorderly affair. In the course of three days the demonstrators fell out among themselves; those members of the soviet who seemed reluctant to make a real bid for power were physically attacked. The disunity made it relatively easy for the Provisional Government to crush the rising. Troops loyal to the government were rushed from the front. They duly scattered the demonstrators and restored order.

It is not entirely clear who started the rising of 3–6 July. A month before, at the first **All-Russian Congress of Soviets**, Lenin had declared that the Bolshevik Party was ready to take power, but the delegates had regarded this as a general intention rather than a specific plan. There were also a number of non-Bolshevik revolutionaries in the soviet who, for some time, had been demanding that the Petrograd soviet take over from the Provisional Government.

 **KEY TERMS**

National minority governments A number of Russia’s ethnic peoples exploited the Provisional Government’s difficulties by setting up their own governments and claiming independence.

All-Russian Congress of Soviets A gathering of representatives from all the soviets formed in Russia since February 1917.

Leon Trotsky later referred to the July Days as a ‘semi-insurrection’ and argued that it had not been begun by the Bolsheviks. In saying this, he was trying to absolve them from the blame of having started a rising that failed. The explanation offered afterwards by the Bolsheviks was that they had come heroically to the aid of the workers of Petrograd and the sailors of Kronstadt, who had risen spontaneously against the government.

The consequences of the uprising

While the true origins of the July Days may have been unclear, the results were not. The failed uprising revealed that the Bolsheviks were still far from being the dominant revolutionary party and that the Provisional Government still had sufficient strength to put down an armed insurrection. This last revelation did much to raise the spirits of the Provisional Government and brought particular credit to Kerensky as war minister. Two days after the uprising had been crushed, he became prime minister. He immediately turned on the Bolsheviks. *Pravda* was closed down and many of the Bolshevik leaders, including Trotsky and Kamenev, were arrested. Kerensky also launched a propaganda campaign in which Lenin and his party were branded as traitorous agents in the pay of Germany. Lenin fled to Finland. A fortnight after the July Days, the Bolshevik Party appeared to have been broken as a political force. What enabled the Bolsheviks to survive were the critical misjudgements made by the Provisional Government over the land question and the Kornilov affair.

The land question

Land shortage was a chronic problem in Russia. The February Revolution had led the peasants to believe that they would soon benefit from a major land redistribution, which the government would introduce after taking over the landowners’ estates. When the government made no such moves, the peasants in many parts of Russia took the law into their own hands and seized the property of local landlords. Disturbances in the countryside occurred daily throughout 1917 in what amounted to a national peasants’ revolt.

The Provisional Government had no real answer to the land problem. While it was true that it had set up a land commission with the supposed aim of redistributing land, this was a mere gesture. The reality was that the government’s heart was never in land reform. The majority of its members came from the landed classes who had little enthusiasm for a policy that threatened their own interests. While they were quite willing for the estates of the fallen monarchy to go to the peasants, they had no intention of losing their own possessions in a state land grab.

Lenin adroitly turned the government’s embarrassment over land to his advantage. Earlier, he had declared that it was pointless for the Bolsheviks, the party of the workers, to make an alliance with the backward peasantry. Now, however, faced with the fact of peasant land-seizures throughout Russia, he

KEY FIGURE

Leon Trotsky (1879–1940)

A leading Bolshevik who was later to become Stalin’s arch opponent (see page 71).

KEY TERM

Pravda The Russian word for truth; the chief Bolshevik newspaper, dating from 1912.

claimed that the special circumstances had produced a situation in which the peasants were a truly revolutionary force. He adopted the slogan, 'Land to the Peasants', indicating that the Bolsheviks recognised the peasant land-seizures as perfectly legitimate. As intended, this produced a considerable swing to the Bolsheviks in the countryside.

The Kornilov affair

In August, Kerensky's government became involved in a crisis that undermined the gains it had made from its handling of the July Days, and allowed the Bolsheviks to recover from their humiliation. By late August, the advance of German forces deeper into Russia began to threaten Petrograd itself. Large numbers of refugees and deserters flocked into the city, increasing the disorder there. General Kornilov, the new commander-in-chief, declared that Russia and the government stood in grave danger of a socialist-inspired insurrection.

Kornilov was an army officer who had never accepted the February Revolution. He believed that before Russia could fulfil its national duty of defeating Germany, it must first destroy the enemies within. 'It's time', he said, 'to hang the German supporters and spies, with Lenin at their head, and to disperse the Soviet.' He informed Kerensky that he intended to bring his loyal troops to Petrograd to save the Provisional Government from being overthrown.

Accounts tend to diverge at this point in their description of Kerensky's response. Those who believe that he was involved in a plot with Kornilov to destroy the soviet and set up a dictatorship argue that Kerensky had at first fully supported this move. It was only afterwards, when he realised that Kornilov also intended to remove the Provisional Government and impose military rule, that he turned against him. Other commentators, sympathetic to Kerensky, maintain that he had not plotted with Kornilov and that his actions had been wholly consistent. But, however the question of collusion is decided, it was certainly the case that Kerensky publicly condemned Kornilov's advance. He ordered him to surrender his post and placed Petrograd under martial law. Kornilov reacted by sending an open telegram (see Source G).

SOURCE G

From an extract of Kornilov's appeal, 26 August 1917, quoted by Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution*, Collins Harvill, 1990, p. 460.

People of Russia! Our great motherland is dying. The moment of death is near. I, General Kornilov declare that under pressure of the Bolshevik majority in the soviets, the Provisional Government is acting in complete accord with the plans of the German General Staff. It is destroying the army and is undermining the very foundations of the country.

? According to Kornilov in Source G, what role were the Bolsheviks currently playing in Russia?

Fearful that Kornilov would attack, Kerensky called on all loyal citizens to take up arms to defend the city. The Bolsheviks were released from prison or came out of hiding to collect the weapons issued by the Provisional Government to all who were willing to fight. By this strange twist in the story of 1917, the Bolsheviks found themselves being armed by the very government they were pledged to overthrow. In the event, the weapons were not needed against Kornilov. The railway workers refused to operate the trains to bring Kornilov's army to Petrograd. When he learned of this and of a mass workers' militia formed to oppose him, Kornilov abandoned the advance and allowed himself to be arrested.

Bolshevik gains

It was the Bolsheviks who benefited most from the failure of the attempted coup. They had been able to present themselves as defenders of Petrograd and the revolution, thereby diverting attention away from their failure in the July Days. What further boosted the Bolsheviks was that, despite the obvious readiness of the people of Petrograd to defend their city, this could not be read as a sign of their belief in the Provisional Government. Indeed, the episode had damaged the Provisional Government by revealing its political weakness and showing how vulnerable it was to military threat. Kerensky later admitted that the Kornilov affair had been 'the prelude to the October Revolution'.

Summary diagram: The Dual Authority and continued dissent



5 The October Revolution 1917

► *What developments put the Bolsheviks in a position to seize power in October 1917?*

The political shift in Petrograd

So considerable were the Bolsheviks' gains from the Kornilov affair that by the middle of September they had a majority in both the Petrograd and Moscow soviets. However, this should be seen not as indicating a large swing of opinion in their favour, but rather as a reflection of the changing character of the soviets. In the first few months after the February Revolution the meetings of the soviets had been fully attended. Over 3000 deputies had packed into the Petrograd soviet at the Tauride Palace. But as the months passed enthusiasm waned. By the autumn of 1917 attendance was often down to a few hundred. This worked to the Bolsheviks' advantage. Their political dedication meant that they continued to turn up in force while the members of other parties attended only occasionally. The result was that the Bolshevik Party exerted an influence out of proportion to its numbers, most notably in its over-representation on the various soviet subcommittees.

Broadly, what happened in Petrograd following the Kornilov affair was that the Petrograd soviet moved to the political left while the Provisional Government shifted to the political right. This made some form of clash between the two bodies increasingly likely. Lenin put it as a matter of stark choice: 'Either a soviet government or Kornilovism. There is no middle course.'

Lenin's strategy

From his exile in Finland, Lenin constantly appealed to his party to prepare for the immediate overthrow of Kerensky's government. He claimed that the Provisional Government, incapable of ending the war or solving the land issue, was becoming increasingly reactionary. This meant that the Bolsheviks could not wait long; they must seize the moment while the government was at its most vulnerable. In a sentence that was to become part of Bolshevik legend, Lenin wrote on 12 September: 'History will not forgive us if we do not assume power.' Lenin's sense of urgency arose from his concern over two events that were due to take place in the autumn, and which he calculated would seriously limit the Bolsheviks' freedom of action:

- the meeting of the All-Russian Congress of Soviets in late October
- the election for the Constituent Assembly in November.

Lenin was convinced that the Bolsheviks would have to take power before these events occurred. If, under the banner 'All Power to the Soviets', the Bolsheviks could topple the Provisional Government before the Congress of Soviets met,

they could then present their new authority as a *fait accompli* which the congress would have no reason to reject.

The elections to the Constituent Assembly presented a different problem. The assembly was the body on which all progressives and reformers had set their hopes. Once it came into being, its moral authority would be difficult to challenge. Lenin told his party that since it was impossible to forecast how successfully the Bolsheviks would perform in the elections, they would have to be in power before the results were announced. This would provide them with the authority to undermine the results should they go against them.

Despite the intense conviction with which Lenin put his arguments to his colleagues, there were Bolsheviks on the **Central Committee** of the party who doubted the wisdom of striking against the Provisional Government at this point. To convince the doubters, Lenin slipped back into Petrograd on 7 October. His personal presence stiffened Bolshevik resolve, but did not produce total unity. During the next two weeks he spent exhausting hours at a series of Central Committee meetings trying to convince the waverers. On 10 October, the Central Committee committed itself to an armed insurrection, but failed to agree on a specific date. In the end, by another quirk of fate, it was Kerensky and the government, not the Bolsheviks, who initiated the actual rising.

Kerensky makes the first move

Rumours of an imminent Bolshevik coup had been circulating in Petrograd for some weeks, but it was not until an article, written by two members of the Bolshevik Central Committee, appeared in a journal, that the authorities felt they had sure proof. The writers of the article, **Grigor Zinoviev** and Lev Kamenev, argued that it would be a mistake to attempt to overthrow the government in the current circumstances. Kerensky interpreted this as a sure sign that a date had already been set. Rather than wait to be caught off-guard, he ordered a pre-emptive attack on the Bolsheviks. On 23 October, the offices of *Pravda* were occupied by government troops and a round-up of the leading Bolsheviks began. The Bolsheviks no longer had a choice; Lenin ordered the planned insurrection to begin.

Trotsky's role

That the Bolsheviks had a plan at all was the work not of Lenin but of Trotsky. While it was Lenin who was undoubtedly the great influence behind the October Revolution, it was Trotsky who actually organised it. The key to Trotsky's success in this was his chairmanship of the Petrograd soviet, to which he had been elected in September. On 9 October, the soviet set up the Military Revolutionary Committee (MRC) to organise the defence of Petrograd against a possible German attack or another Kornilov-type assault from within Russia. It proved a critical decision. Realising that if the Bolsheviks could control the MRC they would control Petrograd, Trotsky used his influence to have himself

KEY TERMS

Fait accompli An established situation that cannot be changed.

Central Committee The decision-making body of the Bolshevik Party.

KEY FIGURE

Grigor Zinoviev (1883–1936)

A close colleague of Lenin since the formation of the Bolshevik Party in 1903.

KEY TERMS

Troika A three-man team.

Red Guards Despite the Bolshevik legend that these were the crack forces of the revolution, the Red Guards, some 10,000 in number, were largely made up of elderly factory workers.

Cossacks The remnants of the élite cavalry regiment of the tsars.

Amazons A special corps of female soldiers recruited by Kerensky.

appointed as one of the **troika** to run the MRC. This meant he had at his disposal the only effective military force in Petrograd. He was now in a position to draft the plans for the overthrow of the Provisional Government. When Lenin gave the order for the uprising to begin, it was Trotsky who directed the **Red Guards** in their seizure of the key vantage points in Petrograd, such as the bridges and the telegraph offices.

The collapse of the Provisional Government

In the three days (25–27 October) that it took for the city to fall under Bolshevik control there was remarkably little fighting. There were only six deaths during the whole episode and these were all Red Guards, most probably accidentally shot by their own side. The simple fact was that the Provisional Government had hardly any military forces on which to call. The Petrograd garrison which had turned out to defend the government on previous occasions did not come to its aid now. The truth was that desertions had reduced the garrison to a few loyal officer-cadets, a small group of **Cossacks** and a unit known as the **Amazons**.

When the Red Guards approached the Winter Palace, which housed the Provisional Government, they expected stiff resistance, but there was none. The Bolshevik forces did not need to storm the gates; there was nobody defending them. The Winter Palace was a vast building, many times larger than London's Buckingham Palace. The Red Guards simply walked in through the back doors. This was enough to make the defenders give up. The Cossacks walked off when confronted by the Red Guards. After that, it did not take much pressure to persuade the cadets and the Amazons that it was better for them to lay down their arms and go home rather than die in a futile struggle.

The sounding of its guns in a pre-arranged signal by the pro-Soviet crew of the cruiser, *Aurora*, moored in the River Neva, convinced the remaining members of the government that their position was hopeless. As many as could, escaped unnoticed out of the building. Kerensky, having earlier left the city in a vain effort to raise loyal troops, fled to the US embassy. He later slipped out of Petrograd, disguised as a female nurse, and made his way to the USA, where he eventually became a professor of history.

The Bolsheviks take power

The Bolsheviks did not seize power; it fell into their hands. The speed and ease with which it had happened surprised even Lenin. In the early hours of 27 October, he said to Trotsky, 'from being on the run to supreme power makes one dizzy'. He then rolled himself up in a large fur coat, lay down on the floor, and went to sleep.

SOURCE H



A contingent of Amazons being trained in 1917. Kerensky had specifically recruited these female soldiers, also known as the 'Women's Battalion of Death', as an example of the fighting spirit of Russia's women.

On the following evening, the All-Russian Congress of Soviets began its first session. The opening formalities had been barely completed when the chairman, who happened to be Lev Kamenev, informed the delegates that they were now the supreme authority in Russia; the Petrograd soviet had seized power in their name and had formed a new government. Kamenev then read out to the bewildered delegates the list of fourteen names of the new government they had supposedly just appointed. The fourteen were all Bolsheviks or their sympathisers. At the head of the list of **commissars** who made up the new **Sovnarkom** was the name of the chief minister: Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

The SRs and the Mensheviks walked out, protesting that it was not a taking of power by the soviets but a Bolshevik coup. Trotsky jeered after them that they and their kind had 'consigned themselves to the garbage heap of history'. Lenin then announced to the Bolshevik and the Left SR delegates who had remained that they would now proceed 'to construct the towering edifice of socialist society'.

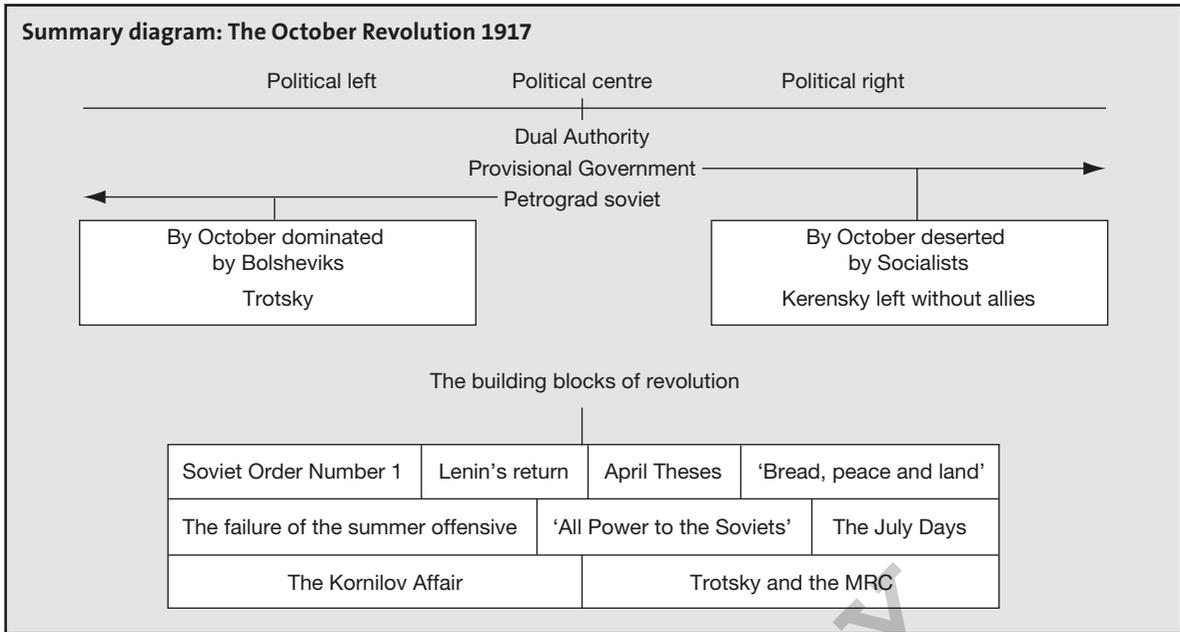
From where would the Amazon recruits shown in Source H have most likely been drawn?



KEY TERMS

Commissars Russian for ministers: Lenin chose the word because he said it 'reeked of blood'.

Sovnarkom Russian for government or cabinet.



Chapter summary

In February 1917, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated, a victim of scandal, desertion by his former supporters and his own incompetence. The February Revolution was followed by the establishment of a dual authority, which saw initial co-operation between the provisional committee and the Petrograd soviet. This harmony had broken down by the summer months and, prompted by Lenin, who had returned in April to demand the end of the Bolsheviks' co-operation with the Provisional Government, his party began to consider seizing power. An attempt to do so in July proved premature and brought

the Bolsheviks close to destruction. They were saved only by the government's mishandling of the Kornilov affair, which enabled them to act as defenders of Petrograd against tsarist reaction.

Unable to deal with the major problems facing Russia – disastrous war losses, food shortages and a rebellious, land-seizing peasantry – Kerensky's government by the autumn had forfeited popular support. Although often absent from Petrograd, Lenin exerted such an influence that by late October he had persuaded his followers to strike against the government. Trotsky, in the name of the soviet, whose chairman and military chief he had become, organised the October Revolution, which overthrew a barely resistant government.

Refresher questions

Use these questions to remind yourself of the key material covered in this chapter.

- 1 How did Russia respond to the demands of war?
- 2 How was Russia's financial position damaged by the war?
- 3 How did the war disrupt the supply of food?
- 4 Why did the Russian transport system prove inadequate in wartime?
- 5 How well did the organisation of the Russian army adapt to the needs of war?
- 6 How did Nicholas respond to the war?
- 7 Why did Rasputin prove such an influential figure in the build-up to revolution?
- 8 Were the events of February 1917 a collapse at the top or a revolution from below?
- 9 Why was there so little initial political conflict between the Provisional Government and the Petrograd soviet?
- 10 What was the essential argument in Lenin's April Theses?
- 11 Why did the Provisional Government continue the war against Germany?
- 12 How were the Bolsheviks able to survive their failure in the July Days?
- 13 How real a threat was the Kornilov affair to the Provisional Government?
- 14 Why was the Provisional Government unable to cope with the problems it faced between March and October 1917?
- 15 What role did Lenin and Trotsky play in the October Revolution?

Question practice

ESSAY QUESTIONS

- 1 'The main reason for dissatisfaction with the tsarist government in Russia by February 1917 was the suffering caused by defeats in the First World War.' Explain why you agree or disagree with this view.
- 2 How important was the return of Lenin to Petrograd in April 1917?
- 3 How far was the recovery of the Bolsheviks from their failure in the July Days due to the Kornilov affair?
- 4 To what extent was the success of the Bolshevik Rising in October 1917 due to the weakness of the Provisional Government?

SOURCE ANALYSIS QUESTIONS

- 1 With reference to Sources A and B and your understanding of the historical context, which of these two sources is more valuable in explaining why the February Revolution broke out?
- 2 With reference to Sources A, B and C, and your understanding of the historical context, assess the value of these sources to a historian studying the reasons for the collapse of the tsarist system in February 1917.

SOURCE A

From an extract of an *Okhrana* report, January 1917, quoted in Ronald Hingley, *The Russian Secret Police*, Hutchinson, 1970, p. 74.

There is a marked increase in hostile feelings among the peasants, not only against the government but also against all other social groups. The proletariat of the capital is on the verge of despair. The mass of

industrial workers are quite ready to let themselves go to the wildest excesses of a hunger riot. The prohibition of all labour meetings, the closing of trade unions, the prosecution of men taking an active part in the sick benefit funds, the suspension of labour newspapers, and so on, make the labour masses, led by the more advanced and already revolutionary-minded elements, assume an openly hostile attitude towards the Government and protest with all the means at their disposal against the continuation of the war.

SOURCE B

From a speech made by Paul Milyukov, leader of the liberal Kadet Party, to the *duma* on 1 November 1916.

Today we are aware that with this government we cannot legislate, and we cannot, with this government, lead Russia to victory. We are telling this government, as the declaration of the Progressive Bloc stated: We shall fight you, we shall fight you with all legitimate means until you go.

When the Duma declares again and again that the home front must be organised for a successful war and the government continues to insist that to organise the country means to organise a revolution, and consciously chooses chaos and disorganisation – is this stupidity or treason? We have many reasons for being discontented with the government. But all these reasons boil down to one general one: the incompetence and evil intentions of the present government. Cabinet members must agree unanimously as to the most urgent tasks. They must agree and be prepared to implement the programme of the Duma majority. They must rely on this majority, not just in the implementation of this programme, but in all their actions.

SOURCE C

From Nicolai Sukhanov, a Menshevik eyewitness, describing the situation in Petrograd in February 1917.

February 21st – I was sitting in my office. Behind a partition two typists were gossiping about food difficulties, arguments in the shopping queues, unrest among the women, an attempt to smash into a warehouse, ‘Do you know,’ declared one of these young ladies, ‘if you ask me, it’s the beginning of the Revolution.’

February 22nd and 23rd – the movements in the streets became clearly defined, going beyond the limits of the usual factory meetings.

February 24th – the movement swept over St Petersburg like a great flood. Many squares in the centre were crowded with workers. Fugitive meetings were held in the main streets and were dispersed by the Cossacks but without energy or zeal and after lengthy delays.

On 25th St Petersburg seethed in an atmosphere of extraordinary events from the morning on. The entire civil population felt itself to be in one camp against the enemy – the police and the military.