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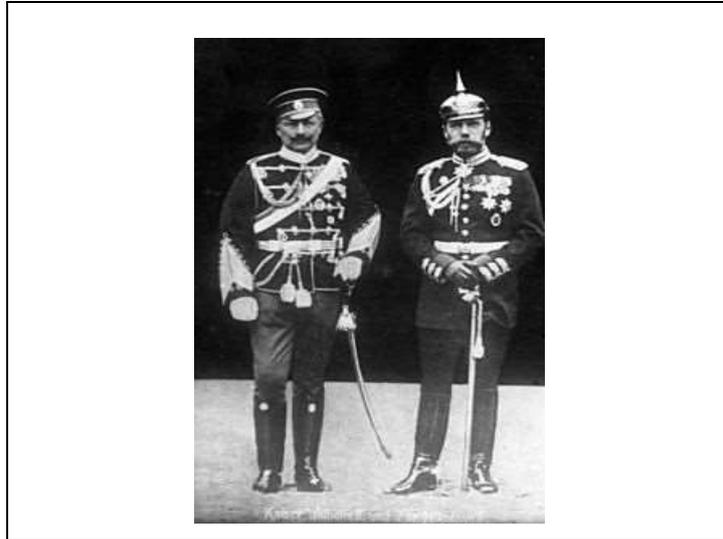
Russia In World War One

A Nutshell Version

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Notes

Tsar Nicholas II (Right) with Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany in 1905.

Nicholas is wearing a German Army uniform, while Wilhelm wears that of a Russian Hussar. Because Tsar Nicholas and the German Kaiser Wilhelm were first cousins, and because in the decade before the outbreak of the War they had become reasonably good friends, evidenced by the fact that they addressed each other as 'Nicky' and 'Willy' in their regular communications, even as late as July 1914 Nicholas believed their family connection would prevent any serious chance of a war between the two empires.

Nicholas thought it highly unlikely that the Kaiser would declare war on the kingdom of his own relative. However the two cousins had not appreciated that the forces of war that had been building in Europe for more than ten years.

The alliance system that had been established across the European continent demanded that nations support their allies if one was attacked.

Geopolitically this placed Russia in a critical perilous position between the Balkan nation of Serbia – a nation with close political, ethnic and religious ties to Russia – and Austria-Hungary and Germany.

When the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand was shot dead in Sarajevo in June 1914, it triggered a wave of threats, ultimatums and troop mobilisations. By August, Serbia had been invaded by Austria-Hungary and Russia had declared war in response.

This in turn prompted the German Kaiser, in support of Austria-Hungary to declare war on his Russian cousin.

In addition to this international crisis, Nicholas was also facing serious domestic problems.

Anti-government sentiment and unrest had been building since 1912, after tsarist troops slaughtered hundreds of striking miners at Lena River.

By mid-1914 the number and intensity of industrial strikes was approaching 1905 levels.

This culminated in a widespread general strike in July 1914, (just weeks before the declaration of war) which paralysed more than four-fifths of St Petersburg's industrial, manufacturing and commercial plants.

Clearly, the Russian nation on the eve of war was experiencing considerable social and economic turbulence.

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August 1914 - Enthusiastic crowd greeting the Tsar outside the Winter Palace

The outbreak of war in August 1914 was accompanied by a widespread sense of national patriotism which served to quell the social unrest being experienced throughout Russia, at least for a short period of time.

Days after the Russian declaration of war, Nicholas II and his wife Alexandra – ironically of German birth herself – appeared on the balcony of the Winter Palace, to be greeted by thousands of people on bended knees.

When conscription orders were delivered throughout St Petersburg, a high proportion of conscripts reported willingly for duty.

The tsar too was changed by the events of August 1914. In the months prior he had shown little interest in the affairs of state, but both the war and the revival of public affection reinvigorated Nicholas, who threw himself into his duties.

August 1914 - Enthusiastic crowd greeting the Tsar outside the Winter Palace

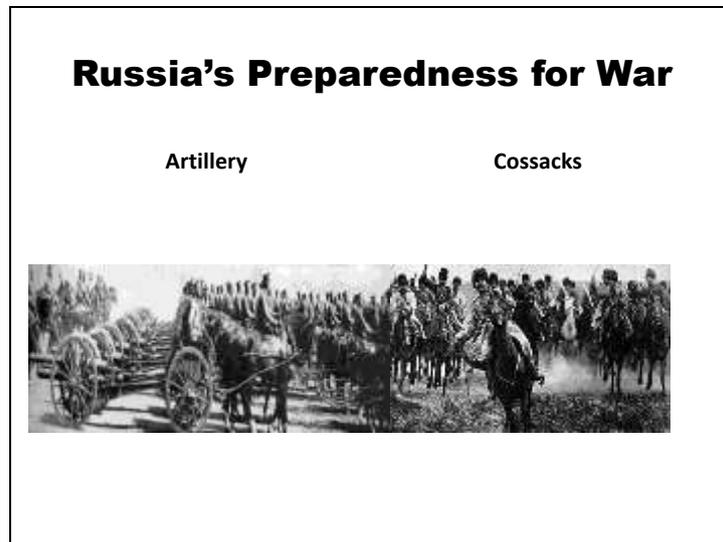
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Nicholas's renewed good fortunes did not last long, however, as Russia's war effort began poorly and soon exposed critical problems about how the Russian Army was being commanded, organised and equipped.

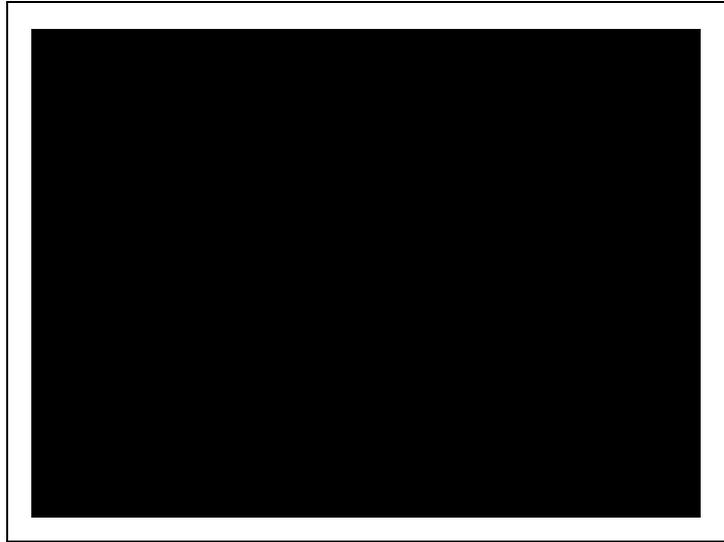
While Russia was successful in quickly mobilizing millions of its reserve troops, many of the soldiers were not adequately trained or equipped.

Thousands of Russian infantrymen left for the front without critical equipment, including weapons, ammunition, boots or bedding.

Some historical accounts suggest that as many as one-third of Russian soldiers were not issued with a rifle - their standing orders were to pick one up from a dead colleague when the opportunity presented.

In late 1914 Russia's general headquarters reported that 100,000 new rifles were needed each month, but that Russian factories were capable of producing less than half this number.

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Youtube – Orthodox priest blessing Russian infantry (30 seconds)

Soldiers were better armed with prayers as Russian Orthodox bishops and priests worked busily to bless those about to go into battle.

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General Alexei Brusilov



While the German Army had the Schlieffen Plan and the French Army their Plan XVII, it appears that the Russian Army in 1914 had no plan of what to do.

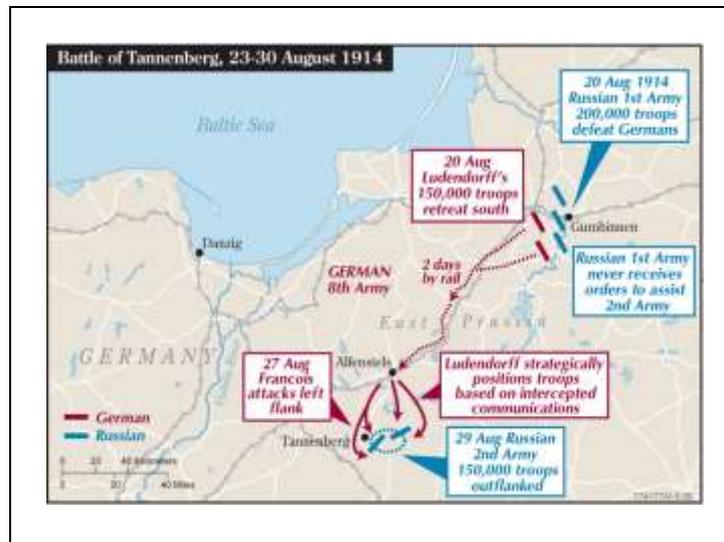
General Alexei Brusilov, Russia's most competent Army Commander in the Great War, had this to say about his country's pre-planning for the War:

"Right from the beginning of hostilities I have never been able to find out anything about our general plan of campaign.

[Years before] I was acquainted with the general plan in event of war with Germany and Austro-Hungary.

It was strictly **defensive**, and in my opinion ill-conceived from many points of view, but it was not put into execution because the circumstances forced us into an **offensive** campaign for which ***we had no preparations.***"

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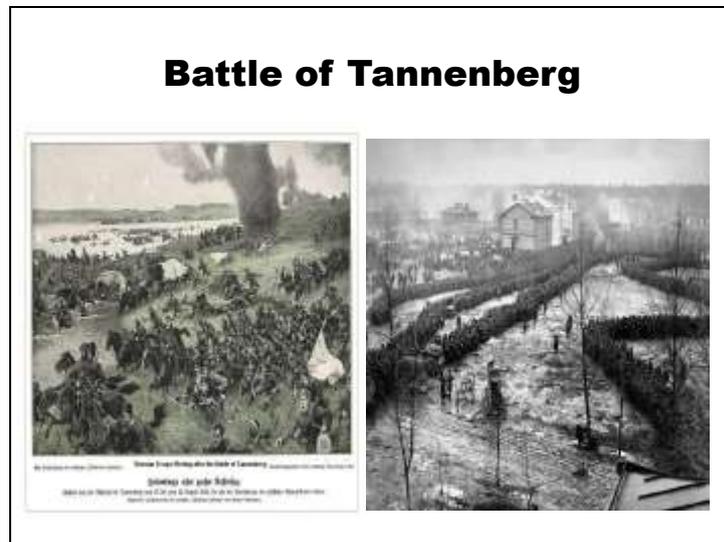
In keeping its promise to support its Balkan ally Serbia against Austria-Hungary, Russia entered World War I in August 1914, by launching an offensive into German East Prussia.

Although it had not been pre-planned the Russian Second Army, under General Samsanov, and the Russian First Army under General Paul von Rennenkampf invaded German East Prussia in what was intended to be a pincer movement to surround and defeat the German army.

In the initial phase, because of their superior numbers, the Russians made some advances. However once the German 8th Army under Generals Hindenburg and Ludendorff regrouped and pushed back, they quickly surrounded Samsonov's army (the top of the pincer) and in turn cut it off.

In the subsequent Battle of Tannenberg, which lasted for six days, the retreating Russian's suffered casualties in excess of 30,000 and some 100,000 were captured.

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The Russian army's shortfall of equipment was compounded by poor leadership from its generals and officers.

The Russian's Tannenberg Campaign exhibited a number of tactical blunders.

Firstly, the Russian generals leading the offensive, Samsonov and von Rennenkampf despised each other, and initially refused to communicate.

Then, when they did communicate, they did so via an exchange of uncoded messages over the radio, which were intercepted by the Germans, and acted upon.

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Then in February 1915 the Russians suffered even heavier losses (170,000 casualties) at the Battle of the Masurian Lakes, which forced them to retreat from German territory.

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General staff of the German 8th Army during the battle.

Russian offensives against the weaker Austro-Hungarians were more successful, allowing them to push across the Carpathians and into Galicia – however the arrival of German reinforcements in May 1915 again forced the Russians to retreat.

By Christmas of 1915 some 800,000 Russian soldiers had died, and yet the Russian army had failed to gain any significant territory.

Public morale and support for the war was dwindling and ordinary Russians became more receptive to anti-war rhetoric and propaganda, much of it disseminated by the growing **Bolshevik** movement.

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Tsar on horseback blessing Russian troops



After the Russians had been forced to retreat from Galicia and Poland, in September 1915 an angry Tsar Nicholas made a politically significant blunder by removing his army commander-in-chief,(and cousin) Nicholas Nicholaevich, and taking overall command of the Russian army himself.

Nicholas' generals and several of his civilian advisors tried to dissuade him from making this move, reminding him that his military experience was confined to cavalry training and that he had no practical experience of strategic warfare or commanding large numbers of infantry and artillery in combat.

But the Tsar, bolstered by encouragement from his wife, proceeded to the front. Nicholas' decision to take command of the military did not have a significant effect on Russia's war effort as he rarely intervened or countermanded the decisions of his battlefield generals. However what it would do was to link the Tsar with battle field results, and thereby make him responsible for every subsequent military failure.



General Alexei Brusilov, Russia's most competent Army Commander in the Great War employed a very different offensive tactic in the summer of 1916.

Instead of making a concentrated attack on a narrow front, Brusilov launched simultaneous assaults with all his armies along a broad section of the Austro-Hungarian front. The Tsar and some of his generals opposed Brusilov's plan, arguing for the traditional approach of concentrating Russia's limited resources on a narrow front.

Brusilov deliberately avoided employing the concentrated, sustained artillery bombardment that had hitherto always preceded offensive attacks and instead, on 4th June 1916 he ordered his Russian artillery to mounted an intense but and accurate 'hurricane' bombardment of the Austro-Hungarian defences.

Because the artillery bombardment forced the Austro-Hungarian infantry to shelter in their deep bunkers, they had insufficient time to regain their defensive positions before the Russian infantry had overrun them.



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The result was that by the end of the first day the Russians had created a gap in the Austro-Hungarian line measuring some 8 kilometres deep along a thirty kilometre front.

Brusilov had achieved a breakthrough that had been unprecedented to that point in the First World War. As there were no substantial defences behind the first Austro-Hungarian front line, the Russians were able to advance very quickly during the next three days, and in the process captured some 200,000 enemy soldiers.

However the perennial problem that then confronted Brusilov was that he lacked the fresh trained reserve soldiers and the necessary supplies of food and ammunition that would have been required to exploit the break through.

At that time logistics within the Russian Army remained obsolete as it continued to rely on horse-drawn transport, and the crumbling Russian infrastructure simply could not deliver the necessary flow of fresh men and munitions that would have been needed to support an on-going advance.

In response, the Austro-Hungarian Chief of Staff was forced to close down an offensive on its Italian front and moved divisions back to Galicia, while also undergoing the galling experience of having to again seek German assistance.

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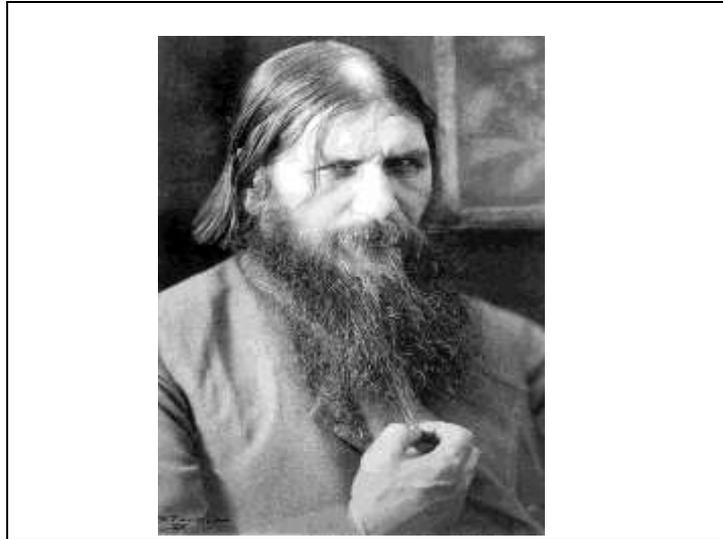


Historian *Richard W. Harrison* asserts that the failure of the Brusilov offensive to achieve a decisive strategic result had especially tragic consequences for Russia. Its losses in 1916 totalled more than 2 million dead and wounded and 344,000 captured, with 1.2 million casualties and 212,000 prisoners in the summer campaign alone.

On the home front an initial patriotic upswing prompted by the initial successes gave way to bitter disappointment over the high command's bungling, in turn undermining what little faith the country's educated elite retained in the czarist system.

As for the peasant masses, they had grown increasingly weary of dying for a cause they did not understand. Dissent spread, the desertion rate climbed, and as early as autumn 1916 there were reports of soldiers refusing to attack. All of this presaged the collapse of the imperial army in early 1917 and the country's descent into revolution, military defeat and civil war.

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There are two background aspects that are relevant to this cameo in history. First, we need to recognise that in early 20th century, Russian culture was dominated by religion and infected by spiritualism and superstition, and that in this relatively backward society strange men like Rasputin often commanded enormous interest and respect.

The second relevant background aspect is based on the fact that Alexei, the only son of Tsar Nicholas II and the Tsarina Alexandra, was born with haemophilia, and prone to frequent bleeding episodes in an era when medical practitioners of the day were unable to provide an effective remedy.

Grigori Rasputin was a Siberian faith healer who arrived in St Petersburg around 1904 and it seems that his ministrations had a beneficial effect on the ailing Alexei.

The Tsarina was convinced that Rasputin's presence reduced the frequency and intensity of Alexei's haemophiliac episodes.

Whether this was truly the case – and if so, how it was done – remains a matter of historical debate. Some have claimed that Rasputin hypnotised the boy or simply put him at ease; either might have benefited his condition.

Rasputin also pushed away several doctors, whose interference may have been worsening Alexei's haemophilia rather than improving it. Whatever the reality, the Tsarina came to associate Rasputin's presence with her son's health and happiness.

The Tsar was somewhat more sceptical about Rasputin but he was not inclined to question or challenge a religious figure. There was also the impact on his wife to consider (“better one Rasputin than ten fits of hysterics a day”, Nicholas once said in private).

The outcome was that this strange monk became a regular fixture in the Romanov court and an important friend and spiritual advisor to the Romanov royal family.

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Rasputin and some of his admirers from Russian high society.



When not with the royal family Rasputin provided spiritual advice – and sometimes sexual services – to at least two dozen upper-class women.

By day he was a spiritual advisor to royals and aristocrats, at night he crawled the streets of the city, guzzling cheap wine and seeking out sexual conquests. That such a creature could work his way into the palaces of the Romanovs was remarkable and worrying.

The situation worsened in September 1915, when Tsar Nicholas left to take command of the army, and he asked the Tsarina Alexandra to manage Russia's domestic and political affairs in his absence.

The German-born tsarina was already the target of scurrilous rumours that questioned her loyalty to Russia. She was variously accused of selling Petrograd's food supplies to the Germans through an intermediary; and of having a radio transmitter under her bed so she could communicate with Berlin.

Though there is no evidence of treachery, clearly Alexandra was a political incompetent who was spellbound by a strange monk and prepared to do anything he proposed.

Rasputin's most visible impact on the government was to demand the replacement of ministers, usually to curry favour with his benefactors and drinking partners.

Between September 1915 and February 1917 Russia went through four prime ministers, three war ministers and five interior ministers – most of them replaced at Rasputin's behest. This ministerial leapfrogging destabilised an already foundering government.

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Rasputin was a godsend for socialists and reformists, who pointed to his political interference and lurid nocturnal activities as evidence that tsarism was rotten to the core. Articles and cartoons depicted the tsar under Rasputin's spell or dancing to his music; coarser examples played on the possibility of a sexual relationship between Rasputin and the tsarina, as is illustrated in the above slide.

Rasputin's connections to the royal family were no secret, in fact he openly boasted that the tsarina and the throne were in his hands.

This information was fodder for the city's scandal sheets and socialist propagandists. Rumours of a sexual relationship between Alexandra and Rasputin worsened in 1912, when one of her letters was leaked to the press. "I kiss your hands and lay my head upon your blessed shoulders", Alexandra wrote to Rasputin. "All I want is to sleep, sleep forever on your shoulder, in your embrace".

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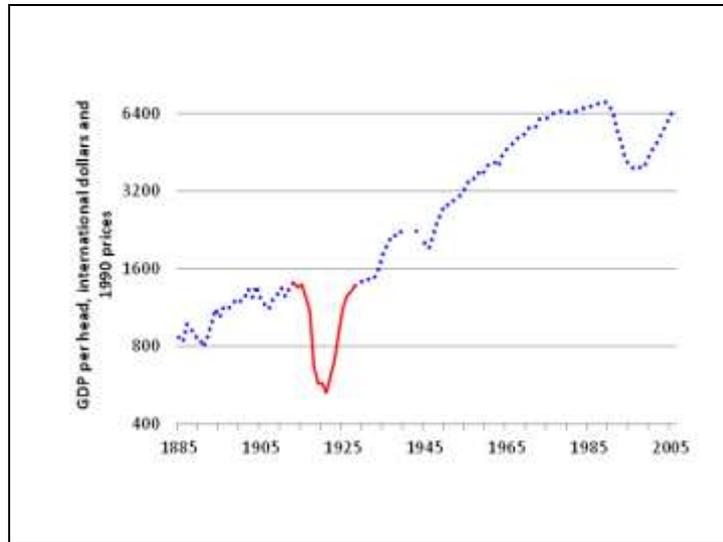
But by late 1916 Rasputin appeared to many as a malevolent puppeteer, pulling the strings of the tsarina and manipulating the government. He had to be stopped – and stopped he was, though not without bringing considerable shame and discredit to the tsarist regime. Concern about Rasputin was particularly strong in the Duma (Russian Parliament) and among conservative aristocrats, who were fearful that the ‘mad monk’ might single-handedly bring down the dynasty.

On 17th December 1916 a trio led by Prince Felix Yusupov, a minor royal, concocted a plan to murder Rasputin as a means of protecting the Romanovs.

Rasputin was lured to Yusupov’s Petrograd palace, plied with wine and fed cakes baked with large amounts of cyanide. When this failed to work, the three conspirators stabbed and shot Rasputin then threw his body into the icy Lena River.

Rasputin’s murder was intended to save tsarism – but by 1916 it seemed that the downfall of the Romanov Russian Empire would be inevitable anyway.

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Notes

This graph indicates that two years of war had a drastic telling impact on Russia's domestic economy. The conscription of millions of men produced a labour shortage on peasant landholdings and a resultant decline in food production.

This was also exacerbated by the policy of also conscripting large numbers of peasants and moving them to the industrial sector, which generated a slight rise in production but nowhere near enough to meet Russia's war needs.

The war placed Russia's transportation system under enormous strain, as priority was given for Russian trains to be redeployed to move soldiers and equipment to and from theatres of war.

In addition, a lack of maintenance and a failure to replace worn out infrastructure caused the Russian rail system to fail, and by mid-1916 this was having severe impact on Russia's towns and cities, which relied on railway transport for their supplies of food and coal for heating.

Finally, with insufficient gold reserves to fund the war effort, the government resorted to printing excessive amounts of paper money which in turn led to rapid inflation.

By November 1916 food prices were four times as high as before the war, and in response many workers went on strike for higher wages to meet the increased cost of living.

1917 Provisional Government

Alexander Kerensky



- Tsar abdicates
- Duma forms provisional government
- Hope for moderate, democratic gov't
- Overthrown by Bolsheviks

Notes

Following the initial success of the Brusilov offensive and the high hopes it engendered, the subsequent failure of the Russian Army High Command to capitalize on the breakthrough led many Russian soldiers on the Eastern Front to become disillusioned, and some regiments then began to refuse to move to the front line.

There was a rapid increase in the number of men deserting and by the autumn of 1917 an estimated 2 million men had unofficially left the army.

Some of these soldiers returned to their homes and used their weapons to seize land from the nobility. Manor houses were burnt down and in some cases wealthy landowners were murdered.

Added to this cocktail were rumours that the tsarina, Alexandra, and her favourite, the infamous Rasputin, were German spies. The rumours were unfounded, but by November 1916 influential critics of the regime were asking whether Russia's misfortunes - including 1,700,000 military dead and 5,000,000 wounded - were a consequence of 'stupidity or treason'.

Nicholas II, as supreme commander of the Russian Army, was increasingly blamed for the Russian nation's military failures and in the second half of 1916 there was a significant decline in his support.

Food riots, demonstrations and a mutiny at the Petrograd Garrison in February 1917 eventually forced Nicholas II to abdicate on the 1st March, while the War still continued. In place of the monarchy a Provisional Government led by liberals and moderate socialists was established, eventually under the leadership of Alexander Kerensky, and the policy of its leaders was to now pursue the war more effectively.