

Steps to revolution 1914–17

WHEN WAR BROKE out against Germany in 1914, the Tsar became more popular than he had been for years. The Russian people united in their support for him: problems could be set aside in the face of a common enemy. Crowds cheered the Tsar as troops paraded past him on the way to the war front. St Petersburg was renamed the more Russian-sounding Petrograd (*grad* means town in Russian, whereas *burg* means town in German).

Another positive result of the outbreak of war was that the Tsar started to work more closely with the Duma. Able people from the Duma began to be appointed to important posts.

1. Why was the outbreak of war a good thing for the Tsar?
2. What impressions do Sources 1 and 2 give you of the support for the Tsar?
3. What expectations do you think the Russian people had of him at the beginning of the war?

SOURCE 1 Written by Muriel Buchanan (daughter of the British Ambassador to Russia) on the outbreak of war

“The processions in the street carrying the Tsar’s portrait, framed in the flags of the allies, the bands everywhere playing the national anthem . . . the long unending line of khaki-clad figures who marched away singing and cheering, tall bronzed men with honest, open faces with childlike eyes and a trusting faith in the little father [the Tsar], and a sure and certain hope that the saints would protect them and bring them back to their villages.

. . . Those first days of war! How full we were of enthusiasm, of the conviction that we were fighting in a just and holy cause . . . ”

SOURCE 2 Written by the *Times* correspondent in July 1914, on witnessing a huge crowd in front of the Winter Palace

“At last the Tsar, moved by the magnitude of the demonstration, appears on the balcony overlooking the square. Instantly the throng sinks upon its knees and with absolute spontaneity sings the deep-throated Russian anthem. For perhaps the first time since Napoleon’s invasion of Russia the people and their Tsar were one, and the strength that unity spreads in a nation stirred throughout the Empire. ”



SOURCE 3 A map of the Eastern Front, showing the first battles. Russia and its allies, Britain and France, were fighting against Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire

Step 1: The effects of the war on the soldiers

Enthusiasm for the war did not last for long. After some initial successes against the Austrians, the Russians were heavily defeated by the Germans at Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes. Losses mounted rapidly – over one million soldiers were killed, wounded or taken prisoner by the end of 1914, and this number had risen to eight million by March 1917.

Soldiers saw their comrades being slaughtered in a futile manner. Many died without weapons or ammunition, and some did not even have boots to wear in the bitterly cold weather. They blamed their officers, who appeared unfeeling and ineffective. And things got worse as the war went on.

■ SOURCE INVESTIGATION

What was the state of the Russian army?

SOURCE 4 From a report by Michael Rodzianko, President of the Duma, on a visit to the war front

“The army had neither wagons nor horses nor first aid supplies . . . We visited the Warsaw station, where there were about 17,000 men wounded in battles. At the station we found a terrible scene: on the platform in dirt, filth and cold, in the rain, on the ground, even without straw, wounded, who filled the air with heart-rending cries, dolefully asked: ‘For God’s sake order them to dress our wounds, for five days we have not been attended to.’ ”

Rodzianko’s son fought in the army

“Our son . . . began to narrate his experiences. Criminal incompetence, lack of co-operation in the higher command . . . had resulted in slackness of our crack regiments.

Rodzianko told the story of a frontal attack on the Rai-Mestro heights, ordered by a Grand Duke who had been told not to attack from the front because of a swamp

The troops found themselves in a swamp, where many men perished . . . My son sank up to his armpits, and was with difficulty extricated . . . The wounded could not be brought out, and perished in the swamp. Our artillery fire was weak . . . the shells fell short and dropped among our own men . . . Nevertheless, the gallant guards fulfilled their task, though bled white, and succeeded in capturing the heights, WHICH THEY WERE THEN ORDERED TO ABANDON. ”



SOURCE 5 A priest blessing the wounded

SOURCE 6 Written by General Belaiev

“In recent battles, a third of the men had no rifles. The poor devils had to wait patiently until their comrades fell before their eyes and they could pick up weapons. The army is drowning in its own blood. ”

SOURCE 7 By the Chairman of the Military Commission of the Duma

“As early as the beginning of the second year of the war desertions [of soldiers] at the front and on their way to the front became commonplace, and the average number of deserters reached 25 per cent. I happen to know of three cases when the train was stopped because there were no passengers on it; all, with the exception of the officer in command, had run away. ”

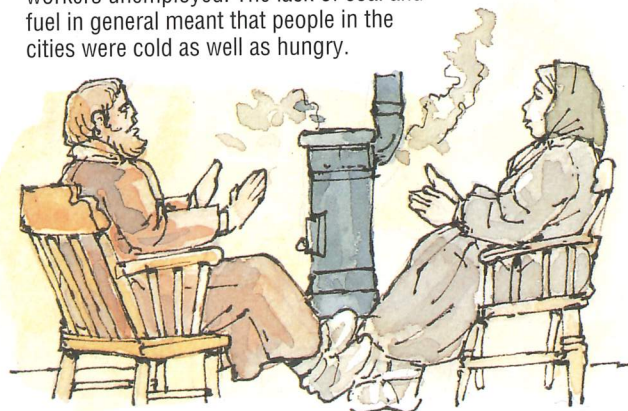
4. Why was the morale of the soldiers so low?
5. What do Sources 4-7 tell us about the problems of the army?
6. Which do you think was the most worrying problem? Why?

Step 2: The effects of the war on the Russians at home

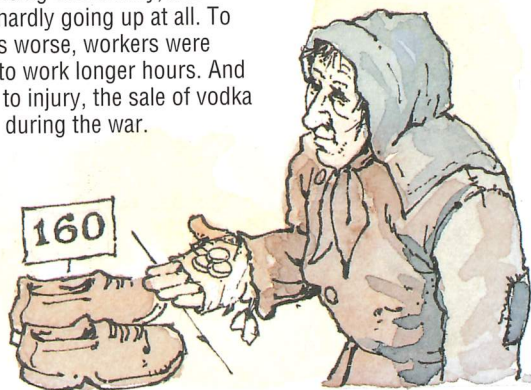
1 Food was getting short. Millions of male peasants had been conscripted into the army, so there was a shortage of farm workers and less food was being produced. In addition, food was not getting to the cities: the Russian railway system was being used to carry supplies to the war front, and so trains carrying food to the cities had been reduced.



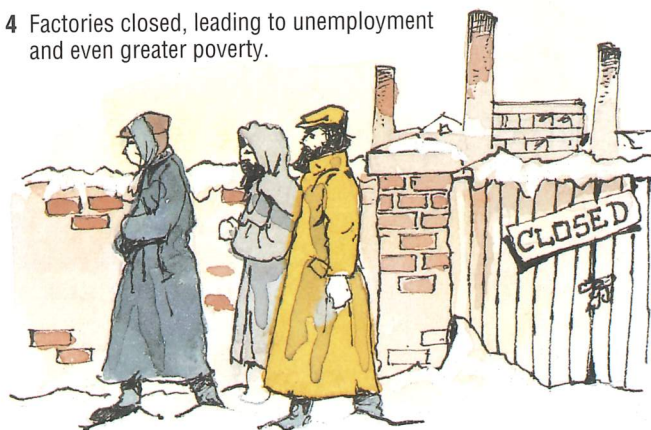
2 Coal and industrial materials were short. Many factories closed, making their workers unemployed. The lack of coal and fuel in general meant that people in the cities were cold as well as hungry.



3 Because of the shortages, the prices of goods were rising continually, but wages were hardly going up at all. To make matters worse, workers were being asked to work longer hours. And to add insult to injury, the sale of vodka was stopped during the war.



4 Factories closed, leading to unemployment and even greater poverty.

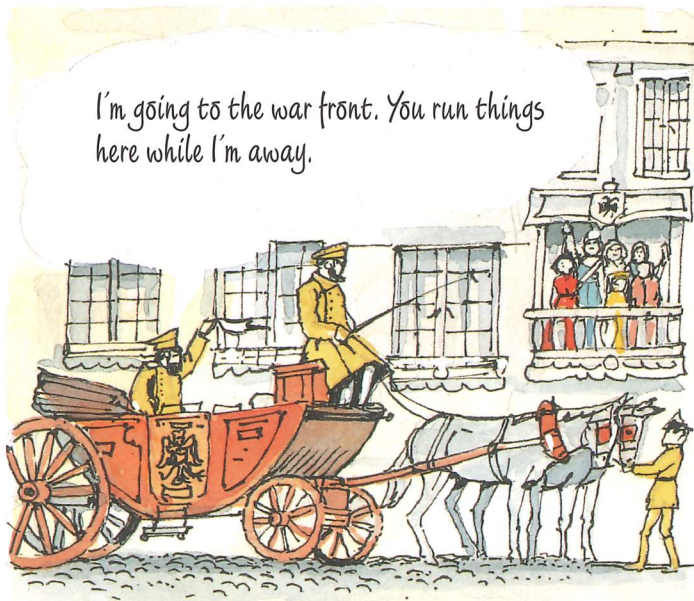


As defeat piled on defeat and the number of casualties increased, Russians in the cities began to lose confidence in the government. They were also suffering from the economic effects of the war.

1. Make a list of the reasons why people in the cities were getting more and more unhappy about the war.



Step 3: Turning point – a terrible mistake



In the midst of these difficulties, Nicholas II made a terrible mistake: in September 1915, he decided to take over the running of the war and to go to the war front himself. This had serious consequences. Firstly, Nicholas himself was now blamed for defeats in the war. Secondly, the Tsar handed over the day-to-day running of the country to the Tsarina. The people mistrusted her because of her German background, and thought she was a spy. Her close relationship with Rasputin contributed further to the collapse of her reputation. He seemed to be in charge of the government. There were stories that they were lovers.

The Tsarina made a mess of running the country. She would not work with the Duma at all. She dismissed able ministers and replaced them with 'our men', meaning men who would do what they were told or who were friends of Rasputin. Some were incompetent and others downright scoundrels. There were so many changes of ministers that nobody was organising food, fuel and other supplies for the cities properly. The railway system fell into chaos and trainloads of food were left rotting in the sidings.

2. What is the message of the cartoon in Source 8?
3. How do Sources 8 and 9 show the damage being done by the Tsarina and Rasputin?



SOURCE 8 A cartoon of Rasputin with the Tsar and Tsarina

SOURCE 9 Part of a letter from the Tsarina to Nicholas at the war front

“Deary, I heard that that horrid Rodzianko wants the Duma to be called together – oh please don’t, it’s not their business, they want to discuss things not concerning them and bring more discontent – they must be kept away . . .

Listen to our friend [Rasputin] . . . it is not for nothing God sent him to us . . . we must pay attention to what he says . . . Forgive me, but I don’t like the choice of the Minister of War, Polianov . . . is he not our friend’s [Rasputin’s] enemy? ”

Step 4: Losing support



As the news from the war got worse and the situation in the cities got more desperate, support for the Tsar and his wife began to decrease among the middle and upper classes of society, and even among the aristocracy. They were appalled that a man like Rasputin should be allowed such influence, and they had little respect for the Tsarina. They blamed the Tsar for allowing this situation to develop.

The winter of 1916 was a bad one. The railway lines were so iced up that hardly any food or fuel got into Petrograd. Prices went sky high. Huge bread queues formed, but often there was no bread.

SOURCE 10 Written by Sir Henry Wilson in Petrograd, February 1917

“... as certain as anything that the Emperor and Empress are riding for a fall. Everyone – officers, merchants, ladies – talks openly of the absolute necessity of doing away with them.”

SOURCE 11 A police report made at the end of 1916

“The industrial PROLETARIAT of the capital is on the verge of despair... the smallest outbreak will lead to uncontrollable riots... Even if we assume that wages have increased by 100 per cent, the cost of living has risen by 300 per cent. The impossibility of obtaining food, the time wasted in spending hours waiting in queues outside shops, the increasing death rate due to inadequate diet and anti-sanitary lodgings, cold and dampness as a result of lack of coal and firewood – all these conditions have created such a situation that the mass of industrial workers are quite ready to let themselves go to the wildest excesses of a hunger riot...”



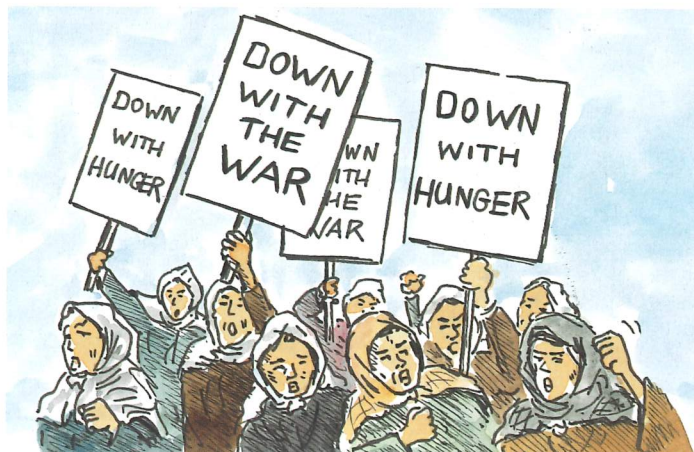
SOURCE 12 A bread queue in Moscow, September 1917



SOURCE 13 A demonstration on International Women's Day, 8 March

1. Why would the statement in Source 10 be very worrying for the Tsar?
2. What do Sources 11 and 12 show us about the state of Russian cities at the end of 1916? Why were people getting angry?

Step 5: The revolution begins

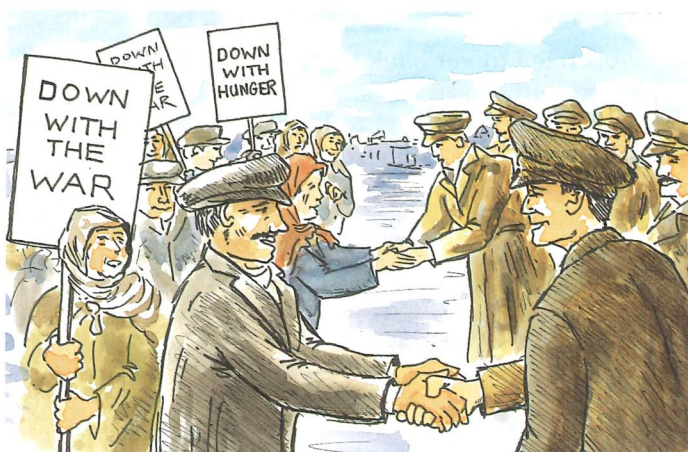


By March 1917 the situation had become desperate and there was a serious mood of discontent. The workers wanted political changes as well as food and fuel.

On 7 March in Petrograd, 40,000 workers from the giant Putilov engineering works went on strike for higher wages. The next day was International Women's Day and thousands of women joined strikers in demonstrations all over the city, shouting 'Down with hunger! Bread for the workers!' (see Source 13). In the two days that followed, thousands of workers, men and women, joined in demanding food, fuel and better conditions, and a new government.

The Tsar ordered that the demonstrations be put down by force. After all, there had been riots before. Rodzianko, leader of the Duma, sent a telegram saying that the situation was at crisis point. The Tsar commented to a minister, 'That fat Rodzianko has again sent me some nonsense to which I will not even bother to reply.' The Tsar was wrong not to take any notice.

Step 6: The army takes sides



12 March was a decisive day and changed the character of the riots. Soldiers in Petrograd refused to fire on crowds, and some regiments shot their officers and joined in the demonstrations. They had had enough of the war and the way they were treated. This made the demonstrations of 1917 different from anything that had gone before.

The soldiers joined the strikers and the women in the streets and marched to the Duma to demand that it take control of the government.

SOURCE 14 Report by an agent of the Okhrana (secret police), 11 March 1917

“Everything depends on the behaviour of the military units; if the latter do not join the proletariat, the movement will quickly subside: but if the troops turn against the government, then nothing can save the country from a revolutionary upheaval.”

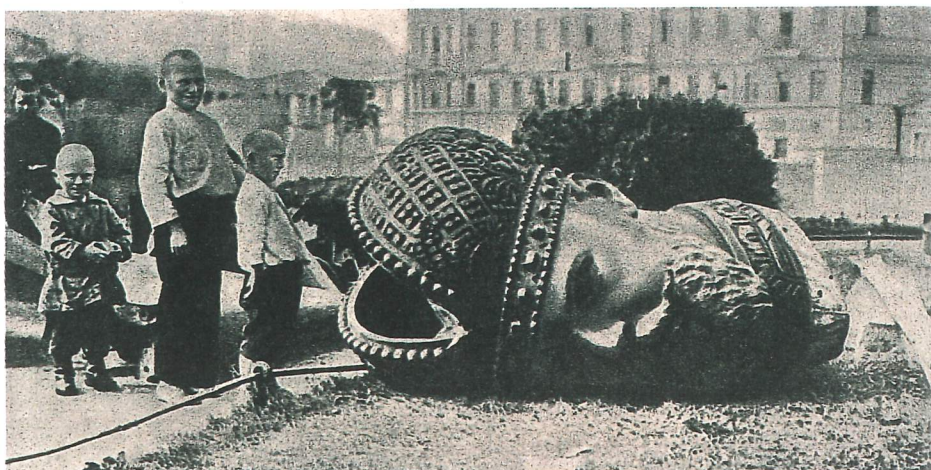
SOURCE 15 A diary entry for 12 March 1917 by Shulgín, a Duma deputy

“During the last few days we have been living, as it were, on a volcano . . . It is not, of course, a question of bread. The trouble is that in that large city it is impossible to find a few hundred people who feel kindly towards the government.”

3. On what, according to Sources 14 and 15, did the revolution depend?

Step 7: The Tsar abdicates

Nicholas tried to get back to Petrograd, but it was too late. Railway workers refused to let his train into the city. It was from his train that, on 15 March, the Tsar finally decided to abdicate in favour of his brother Michael. (Alexis, his son, was too ill to be Tsar.) But the people had had enough of the royal family.



1. What does Source 16 tell us about the people's attitude to the Tsar at the end of his reign?

SOURCE 16 A photograph showing the head of a statue of the Tsar on the ground

ACTIVITY

You are going to write an essay with the title 'What were the causes of the Russian Revolution in March 1917?'

Use the chart below to plan your essay. Make a copy on a large piece of paper. Make brief notes in each section about what you want to include.

CAUSES OF THE REVOLUTION OF MARCH 1917			
Before the war			
<p>Economic causes How well were industry and agriculture doing?</p>	<p>Social causes Had the conditions of a) the workers and b) the peasants improved in the years leading up to the war?</p>	<p>Political causes Were people's views being heard through the Duma? How well was the Tsar running the country?</p>	
The war			
<p>Effects of the war ... on people</p>	<p>Effects of the war ... on the army</p>	<p>The Tsar's mistakes</p>	<p>The role of the Tsarina and Rasputin</p>
The Revolution			
<p>Conditions in March 1917</p>		<p>Crucial role of the army</p>	
Conclusions: Weigh up the importance of different causes			
<p>Was the war the main cause?</p>		<p>Were the failures of the Tsar before and during the war the main cause?</p>	