

Case Study – Fall of the Romanov Dynasty

For hundreds of years the Romanov Dynasty had ruled Russia and its people. The collapse of the Tsarist autocracy was due to many factors, both from internal and external pressures.

Key features and issues of the modern world

The impact of modernity on Russia —end of serfdom and industrialisation. The autocratic rule of Nicholas II. The impact of the 1905 Revolution. Peter Stolypin and the attempt to reform the tsarist system. World War I and its impact. The abdication of Nicholas II and the murder of the royal family.

Ideas and their significance

Autocracy
Communism
Revolution

Individuals and groups

The Romanov family, Constantin Pobodenostsev, Grigory Rasputin, Peter Stolypin

Events

The events of the 1905 Revolution. World War I and the events leading to the 1917 Revolution.

Overview

By 1900 the Russian Empire bordered from Europe to the America coastline and had more than a hundred nationalities owing allegiance to Nicholas II. Tsar Nicholas who ruled from 1894 to 1917 like many of the previous autocrats was thought as the Tsar of All the Russias'. In October 1917, the centuries-old tsarist autocracy was swept away in a series of revolutionary disturbances. The process of disintegration had long been in the making, pre-dating the rule of Nicholas II, perhaps to the earliest times when kings first conceived the idea they had been ordained by God and could do no wrong. Russia's political and social order remained much the same even with a watershed Duma and Manifesto as it had been since the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Rapid industrialisation was opening up a deep gulf in Russian society. Many Russians mired in poverty and ignorance, as a great power and member of the European state system, it had been forced to Westernise. The economic dislocation caused by war added to social unrest and provided a catalyst for the events of February 1917. Casualties numbering millions, a series of humiliating defeats for the Russian army, countrywide food shortages, and widespread calls for peace brought the situation to a head. In 1917, Tsar Nicholas the 2nd was forced to abdicate and was executed shortly after resulting in the rise of the formation of Communist Russia under the Bolshevik Soviets, led by Vladimir Lenin.

Growing Discontent

Alexander III, who built railroads to unite Russia's vast empire, improves its administration and facilitates its economic development. Alexander's chief adviser was Konstantin Pobedonostsev who was deeply suspicious of the West and of education in particular. He also incited anti-Semitism among the peasants, with the aim of diverting popular anger away from the state during times of crisis. After the assassination of Alexander the 2nd, ending a period of reforms, political opponents were exiled or imprisoned, access to education was restricted, controls over freed serfs were reintroduced and religious and ethnic minorities persecuted.

The Last Tsar, Nicholas 2nd

Poorly suited to the role of monarch Nicholas inherited the throne in 1894 but hardly spent any time on the affairs of the state which rendered him incapable of understanding the complexity of governing the Empire. Nicholas insisted on retaining personal leadership and was more devoted to his family than the country. Nicholas married Alexandra but only had one son which unfortunately had haemophilia causing lots of grief and succession problems for the Tsar. The Tsar turned his back on reform by calling the Zemstva delegates “senseless dreams”. Nicholas deposed many of his respected ministers instead opting for unscrupulous advisers such as Plehve which called for the disastrous war with Japan. With the condition of Alexi deteriorating, the Tsarina turned to Rasputin who was believed to have special healing powers. Popular feeling was against the Tsarina and rumours spread of sexual relations between Rasputin and Alexandra.

Revolutionary Groups

Nicholas struggled in vain to combat the growing influence of revolutionary groups who were determined to overthrow the monarchy (autocracy). By the 1880s, Marxist dominated political debate among Russian intellectuals and revolutionaries. The creed attracted former populists, Social Democrats, and disenchanted liberals who began to regard industrial workers (rather than peasants) as the main revolutionary force. Despite the mass deportation of strikers to Siberia, laws prohibiting strikes failed to stop worker revolts. In an attempt to outwit activist groups, the Moscow secret police chief Colonel Zubatov, established legal trade unions. This attracted thousands of recruits, most of whom remained unaware of the true identities of the leaders. The formation of the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (RSDWP) in 1898 that marked a turning point in Russia's history and the eventual demise of the Romanovs. The party aimed to unite all Russian Marxists and promote the cause of revolution, although disagreements soon developed. The Socialist Revolutionary Party struck down the hated Grand Duke Sergei, the Tsar's uncle and governor of Moscow. This murder eventually revealed a scandal that had damning consequences for both the authorities and SR, when the leader of the terrorist section in the SR was exposed as a police agent.

The 1905 Revolution

The humiliating defeat at the hands of Japan in the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05 exposed the backwardness of Russia, and shocked the nation. Strikes increased and discontent flared amongst many of the working class. On Sunday 22 January, Cossacks attacked a crowd of 150 000 unarmed marchers, including women and children, on its way to present a petition to the Tsar at the Winter Palace. Estimates of those killed vary between a hundred and a thousand people. Thousands were injured. Bloody Sunday resulted in many people losing faith in the “little father” and now seeing him as “Nicholas the Bloody”. Anger and frustration fuelled protests, riots, strikes and mutinies only for the government to regain control with violent reprisals from their Cossack forces. The 1905 Revolution failed, but it forced the Tsar into making concessions. In 1905 Nicholas appointed a prime minister, Sergei Witte, with the specific task of pacifying the Russian people. Witte urged Nicholas to introduce a constitution and parliament as the only way to restore order. Nicholas issued his 'October' or 'Imperial' Manifesto, which promised fundamental civil liberties, the vote for all classes, and a state parliament (duma). As the violence receded, Nicholas went back on his promise to introduce reforms. He dismissed Witte, replacing him first with I.L. Goremykin and then, from July 1906, with Peter Stolypin, who was prepared to use repression tempered with economic reform. Stolypin introduced economic and social reforms in a bid to improve health, education and living conditions. To modernise agriculture and encourage investment, he expanded the class of landed peasants called kulaks.

World War 1

The war in 1914 began badly for Russia. To meet his commitments to France, Nicholas ordered an impossibly swift mobilisation. Nicholas took personal command in the field and lost credibility with officers and middle classes as the defeats continued. By August 1915, the whole of Poland was lost and the front pushed back deep into European Russia. Defeat and socialist propaganda weakened army morale and cohesion. The Tsar could no longer depend on its support. Winter food shortages raised prices in the cities. Over the next week the unrest spread. Looting broke out and hungry citizens and armed soldiers took to the streets. From the front, Nicholas tried to impose his authority, ordering martial law (10 March) and the dissolution of the Duma (11 March). But his orders were ignored. The garrison joined the protest and the Cadets formed a Provisional Government, promising general elections by the end the year. Days later Nicholas offered to make his government answerable to the Duma and made attempts to return to the capital, but it was too late. The nobility deserted the j Tsar, which left him with no choice but to abdicate in both his own name and that of his son, Alexei. Kerensky' placed Nicholas and his family under house arrest, pardy for their protection. In October 1917 the Provisional Government was overthrown and political power passed to the Bolsheviks. The aftermath was terrible, and the country was plunged into civil war lasting three years. In May 1918, the Tsar and his family were transferred to Ekaterinburg in the Urals. Living in the house of the merchant Ipatiev, the royal family was now hostage. By mid-summer, White Russian troops (those who opposed the Bolsheviks) began to make advances against the Bolsheviks. By the beginning of July, Ekaterinburg found itself threatened with capture by encroaching White forces. Acting without authority from Moscow, the local Soviet voted to execute the Romanovs in order to prevent them from falling into the hands of the Whites. Nicholas and his entire family were shot and buried in nearby woods. Their remains were discovered and identified in 1991.

Summary points

- ⑥ The Romanov dynasty ruled from 1613 to 1917, but in less than nine months was swept away in a series of revolutionary disturbances.
- ⑥ Alexander III, Tsar from 1881 to 1894, reversed the reformist trends begun by his father, Alexander II, under the influence of Konstantin Pobedonostsev.
- ⑥ Nicholas II, successor to Alexander II, followed in the same tradition as his father, yet undermined the monarchy through aloof and ineffectual leadership.
- ⑥ Grigory Rasputin, an unkempt, illiterate peasant boasting magical powers, further undermined the authority of the Tsar.
- ⑥ Nicholas struggled vainly to combat the rising influence of revolutionary groups such as Marxists and the Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party.
- ⑥ The humiliating defeat at the hands of Japan in the Russo-Japanese war exposed Russia's backwardness and led to 'Bloody Sunday' and the 1905 Revolution.
- ⑥ In October 1905, Nicholas II signed the October Manifesto, promising civil liberties, a state parliament and the vote for all classes.
- ⑥ World War I began badly for Russia, overstretching its army and proving its leaders, militarily and otherwise, incompetent.
- ⑥ The 'February Revolution' in 1917 brought strikes and riots, and the abdication of Nicholas II.
- ⑥ Following Nicholas' abdication, a power struggle broke out, leading to civil war and the eventual execution of Nicholas II and his entire family.



Timeline

1881-194	Reign of Tsar Alexander III. Nicholas II succeeds to the throne.	1905	'Bloody Sunday' in St Petersburg is followed by a wave of rebellion across Russia. SR assassinates Grand Duke Sergei. Revolution fails. Tsar Nicholas issues October Manifesto.
1895 and 1897	Martov organises strikes in St Petersburg.	1907	Stolypin's reforms and executions.
1898	Russian Social Democratic Workers' Party (RSDWP) is formed in secret.	1911	Stolypin is assassinated.
1900	Socialist Revolutionary Party is formed (SR).	1914	World War I begins, with heavy losses for the Russian army.
1903	RSDWP splits into 'Mensheviks', led by Martov, Plekhanov and Trotsky, and 'Bolsheviks', led by Lenin.	1917	Revolution in St Petersburg. Provisional Government is established and Tsar Nicholas II abdicates the throne. Bolsheviks take power in October.
1904	War with Japan. Russia is defeated. Members of the SR assassinate Viatcheslaf Plehve.	1918	Assassination of the Romanovs.