

Nicholas II

I INTRODUCTION

Nicholas II (1868-1918), the last emperor of Russia (1894-1917), deposed by the Russian Revolution of 1917, and killed with his wife and children. His reign was marked domestically by increasingly sharp conflict between classes and ethnic groups, and externally by wars against Japan (1904-1905) and Germany (1914-1917).

II EARLY LIFE AND REIGN

The eldest son of Emperor Alexander III (reigned 1881-1894) and his Danish consort, Empress Maria Fyodorovna, Nicholas was educated at home with his brother George. His formal education was completed before he reached the age of 20, and although Nicholas's teachers were the best the empire had to offer, he was too immature to absorb all that they taught him. Empress Marie, like the other Danish princesses of her generation, was a devoted but possessive mother, whose sons matured late. To his admirers, Nicholas's father, Alexander III, embodied all that a Russian autocratic emperor should be, both in his physical appearance and in his resolute and authoritarian personality. Nicholas lived always in his father's shadow and came to the throne in November 1894 with no political ideas of his own and limited experience in government.

Shortly after he succeeded his father, Nicholas married Princess Alix of Hesse-Darmstadt, a German princess whose mother was the daughter of Britain's Queen Victoria. Alix took the name Alexandra when she converted to Russian Orthodoxy. Very British in personality and values, Alexandra never fitted into the high society of the capital, Saint Petersburg, and was widely detested by the Russian aristocracy. Partly for this reason, she cultivated a passionate belief in the loyalty of the Russian masses, which in her view contrasted with the disloyalty and lack of patriotism of upper- and middle-class Russians. After the birth of four daughters between 1895 and 1901, a son and future heir, Alexis, was born to the imperial couple in 1904. Alexis had hemophilia, however, and his incurable and often painful illness caused great suffering to his parents. In 1905 a peasant pilgrim and mystic named Grigory Rasputin was presented at the palace. Rasputin's ability to mitigate the effects of Alexis's illness gave him great influence over Alexandra. Rasputin's influence also owed much to Alexandra's conviction that he spoke for the loyal Russian masses. Under the strain of Alexis's illness, Alexandra's high-strung personality became increasingly unstable and hysterical. This colored her passionate belief in autocracy—where power is concentrated in an absolute ruler—as the only system of government that could preserve her child's inheritance and save Russia from revolution.

Nicholas shared this belief, but in a more rational manner. Conservative senior advisers warned him that the only alternative to autocratic rule was extreme socialist revolution. The latter would result, they maintained, in the destruction not just of the dynasty but of the lives, property, and culture of Russia's aristocracy and bourgeoisie. Nicholas's advisers also argued that a multiethnic empire acquired by conquest—such as Russia—could never be preserved by liberal or democratic means. Nicholas tended to believe them and the preservation of autocracy remained the guiding principle of his reign.

Nicholas was an ineffective ruler. He never succeeded in coordinating the policies of his various ministers, and yet proved jealous of the power of statesmen such as Pyotr A. Stolypin (prime minister, 1906-1911) who attempted to do the job for him. The scale of the bureaucracy and the complexity of the issues it faced made it impossible for any individual to carry the burdens of head of state and head of government for life. This was especially true when that person, as was the case with Nicholas, was highly sensitive and deeply distrusted politics and politicians.

Nevertheless, the options available to any ruler of imperial Russia at this time were few. Backward by the standard of the more industrialized European states (above all, Germany and Britain), Russia had no alternative to rapid economic modernization if it was to remain a great power and guarantee its security. It was partly to lessen the ruinous expense of competing with more advanced rivals in military expenditures that Nicholas championed the cause of limitation of armaments, which led to the First Hague Conference in 1899 (see Hague Conferences).

From 1894 to 1902 Nicholas II allowed his finance minister, Sergey Witte, to dominate domestic policy. Witte launched a drive to develop Russian industry as quickly as possible. While economic growth was rapid in the 1890s, poor working conditions and low wages helped create violent conflict between workers and industrialists. Lack of union rights, combined with poor labor productivity and worker discipline, worsened the problem. At the same time, discontent was brewing in the countryside. Tension between nobles and peasants, always existent, was growing worse because of overpopulation. As competition for land increased, peasants resented the continued existence of large estates held by nobles; with the growing weakness of the nobility and the imperial regime, they felt more able to realize their dream of seizing the land for themselves. When social tension reached unprecedented levels in 1902 and 1903, Nicholas dismissed Witte and entrusted domestic policy largely to Vyacheslav Plehve, whose efforts to suppress discontent through the police proved ineffective.

III REVOLUTION OF 1905

Nicholas himself helped propel instability into revolution in 1905 by the disastrous foreign policy he pursued in East Asia. Determined that Russia should not be left out in the scramble for colonial possessions, Nicholas embarked on an expansionist policy in Manchuria and Korea that led to war with Japan in 1904 (see Russo-Japanese War). Russia's defeat by Japan ruined the monarchy's prestige and led to the development of an opposition movement that for a time included almost all sectors of Russian society. In January 1905, in an event that became known as Bloody Sunday, unarmed crowds demanding radical constitutional and social reforms were shot down by the army near the emperor's palace in Saint Petersburg (see Russian Revolution of 1905). In the wake of this event, riots and demonstrations broke out throughout the country. Workers went on strike, soldiers mutinied, peasants attacked landlords, and students and members of the middle class demanded constitutional government and social reform.

To appease opposition moderates and regain support for the regime, Nicholas was forced to promise a constitution in October 1905. Although he retained control over the executive branch and extensive legislative powers, wide-ranging civil rights, including freedom of speech and assembly, were promised, and an elected legislative assembly, the Duma, was created. But when the first two Dumas

demanded parliamentary control over the government and the expropriation of noble land, Nicholas supported a drastic and unconstitutional limitation of the electoral law in June 1907. This allowed him to achieve a Duma with very few members of left-wing parties, which were the groups demanding the most radical reforms.

Nicholas found it much easier to collaborate with the landowner-dominated Third and Fourth Dumas. Important military, educational, social insurance and, above all, agrarian reforms were enacted. Up to this time, peasant households had been allotted strips of land, but the land was collectively owned by village communes. Under land reforms advanced by Prime Minister Stolypin, the peasants were allowed to claim ownership of their land and leave the communes. As in the previous decade, economic growth was spectacular. Class conflict in the towns remained acute, however, and the immediate result of Stolypin's agrarian reforms was, if anything, to increase the radicalism of most of the peasantry and their determination to seize all noble land if given the chance. The continuing fear of social revolution was one reason the regime failed to honor its promise of civil rights. Nevertheless, from 1907 to 1914 Russians were freer to express their opinions and engage in political activity than at any other time in previous history. The regime's record on civil rights angered liberals, however, and the increasingly obvious divisions between ministers after the death of Stolypin in 1911 reduced the regime's prestige and effectiveness.

IV ABDICATION

In August 1914 Russia found itself at war with Austria and Germany. Although it did not want war, the Russian government felt obliged to resist the Austro-German attempt to destroy Serbia, which was perceived as a step toward German domination of Europe. The war brought Russia major military successes as well as defeats, but losses in the spring of 1915 resulted in a political crisis that was never resolved. Refusing the Duma's call for a government dependent on parliament, Nicholas took over nominal supreme command of the army in mid-1915 and allowed his wife an increasing influence on government in his absence at the front. The regime's prestige was fatally injured by Alexandra's relationship with Rasputin, although the latter's influence on government policy and ministerial appointments was greatly exaggerated. In the economic sphere, soaring prices, food shortages, and inadequate railroads exacerbated strained relations between the crown and the populace. Russia sustained heavy casualties and the people came to hate the ongoing war. When bread riots and wage strikes broke out in the capital in February 1917 and the garrison in Petrograd (as Saint Petersburg had been renamed in 1914) mutinied, the Duma politicians persuaded the army high command that continuing to support Nicholas would lead to civil war and would undermine the war against Germany. Abandoned by the generals, the emperor had no alternative but to abdicate in March.

V DEATH

Imprisoned after his abdication, Nicholas and his family were held first at Tsarskoye Selo south of Petrograd and then moved to Siberia. In April 1918 they were taken to Yekaterinburg in the Ural Mountains. Civil war was raging between the Bolsheviks, or Communists, who had taken over the government in October, and anti-Bolsheviks. As anti-Bolshevik forces approached the city in July, the family was killed by local Bolsheviks. The killing was almost certainly on the orders of Bolshevik leader

Vladimir Lenin and the central leadership, who at that time had embarked on a policy of mass killing of so-called class enemies in order to terrify and paralyze possible opposition to the Bolshevik regime.

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