

Why was the Romanov dynasty overthrown?

When historians look back on events it is easy to think that they were in some way inevitable. In fact what happened in the capital took everyone by surprise.

There had been a series of strikes, but these had been contained. On 23 February the situation in the capital suddenly deteriorated. A march to commemorate International Women's Day was joined by striking metal workers. The next day the strikers went around Petrograd to raise support and huge crowds made their way to the city centre, where they mingled together in an atmosphere of growing excitement listening to emotive speeches. On Saturday 25th even larger crowds gathered, and the strike spread across the city. The police could not stop the crowds converging on the city centre again, but there were worrying signs when some soldiers made common cause with the demonstrators. Alexandra urged Nicholas to be firm and authorize the use of the army to put down the unrest.

Nicholas was 650 km away at his military HQ at Mogilev. He followed his wife's advice and ordered the new military chief of Petrograd, General Khabalov to restore order immediately. Soldiers were stationed throughout the city centre and when the crowds arrived on the 26th they met armed resistance. Dozens of demonstrators were killed by troops dispersing them. The President of the Duma, Rodzianko, realized the situation had become critical and telegraphed the Tsar:

Source 39

Your most faithful servant reports to Your Majesty that popular risings, having begun in Petrograd, are taking on uncontrollable and threatening dimensions. Their cause is a shortage of baked bread...But the main reason is the absolute distrust of the authorities, who are not competent to lead the country out of its difficult situation...Your Majesty, save Russia; she is threatened with humiliation and disgrace...Your Majesty, urgently summon a person in whom the whole country can have faith and entrust him with the formation of a government that all the people can trust.

The Tsar's response to this message was the comment in Source 40.

He ordered the Duma to dissolve and resolved to return to the capital himself. The Duma did dissolve itself, but left a Temporary Committee behind to monitor developments. Nicholas telegraphed to his wife on 27 February 1917:

Source 41

After the news of yesterday from town – I saw many faces here with frightened expressions. Luckily Alexeev is calm, but finds a very energetic man must be named to make the ministers work for the food question, coal, railways etc. That is right of course.

The disorders among the troops come from the companies of the convalescents...according to news I got. I wonder what Paul [Grand Duke and commander of the Life Guards] is doing? He ought to keep them in hand.

God bless you my beloved Sunny! I cover your sweet face with kisses, also the children...
Ever your own Nicky

Timeline

1917

- 9 Jan** 150,000 workers in demonstration to commemorate Bloody Sunday.
- 18 Feb** Strike begins at Putilov Works.
- 19 Feb** Bread rationing announced by the government.
- 23 Feb** International Women's Day. Demonstrations, joined by Putilov strikers, who demand bread.
- 25 Feb** General strike spreads through Petrograd. Troops fire on crowds.
- 26 Feb** Duma refuses to disband when ordered by the Tsar. Troops join the crowds.
- 27 Feb** Petrograd Soviet set up. Provisional Duma Committee set up.
- 1 Mar** Soviet Order No 1, claimed authority over all Russian troops.
- 2 Mar** Provisional Government set up. Nicholas II abdicates.

Source 40

More rubbish from that fat pig! (Rodzianko boasted he was the fattest man in Russia!)

Think about

Look carefully at Sources 39, 40, and 41.

- ▶ What did the Tsar believe was the problem?
- ▶ How did he think the situation could be resolved?
- ▶ Why do you think he thought he understood what was happening better than Rodzianko, who was actually in Petrograd?

Note

'Sunny' was Nicholas' pet name for his wife.

On 27 February, what before had been a demonstration turned quickly into a revolution the goal of which was the overthrow of the government. Regiments involved in the shootings of the previous day now supported the demonstrators. It is estimated that half of the Petrograd garrison of 150,000 troops actively supported the revolution. Armed crowds broke into the prisons, the barracks, and the government arsenals and burned down police stations. The Winter Palace was seized and many government buildings.

Source 42



▲ The march to commemorate International Women's Day on 23 February 1917.

Think about

► What image is presented in Source 42 of the situation in the capital in February 1917?

Cross reference

For more on Kerensky see the next chapter.
For the 1905 Soviet refer to p.61.

Who was behind the revolution? It seems to have been genuinely spontaneous, a movement which quickly developed a life of its own. Witnesses recorded that the streets were full of people from every possible social background. Certainly it was not the result of a revolutionary plan hatched by one of the socialist parties. Lenin, in Switzerland at the time, was as taken by surprise as everyone else. Only a month before he had said: 'We older ones will not live to see the revolution in our lifetime'.

Out of the confused situation leaders emerged. Some were those released from the Peter and Paul Fortress, the Tsar's most famous political prison; others won respect, like Alexander Kerensky, because of their past defence of popular causes. As the crowds milled round the Tauride Palace, where they had gone to greet the expected new Duma government, groups of socialists set up a Provisional Executive Committee of the Soviet of Workers' Deputies as they had done in 1905. It called for immediate elections to a new Soviet which was to meet in the Tauride Palace that same evening. The 600 members who attended the following day elected the Menshevik Chkeidze as its Chairman.

PROVISIONAL GOVERNMENT

Elsewhere in the Tauride Palace the Duma leaders of the 'Temporary Committee', looked on with alarm. Figs sums up the situation:

Source 43

By 28 February, then, two rival centres of power had emerged: in the right wing of the Tauride Palace there was the temporary Committee of the Duma, which had the closest thing to formal power but no authority in the streets; while in the left wing there was the Soviet, which had the closest thing to power on the streets but no formal authority.

Figs, *A People's Tragedy*, 1996

The Duma leaders were reluctant to declare themselves the new government without the approval of the Tsar. However, on 1 March the Temporary Committee met with the Soviet leaders and agreed a programme. With great reluctance the Duma leaders took up the burdens of government. The following day the new Cabinet was announced to the world.

And what of the Tsar? Nicholas never made it to the capital. Disloyal troops blocked the line. From his train on 1 March he sanctioned the formation of a Duma government and then, when his own generals and members of the new government urged it, on 2 March he signed his abdication in favour of his brother Grand Duke Michael. He rejected his son's accession to the throne because of his haemophilia. When the Grand Duke rejected the throne, the 300 years of Romanov rule had come to an end.

Activity

Why did Nicholas abdicate?

- 1 Look carefully at the timeline on page 84. What were the key moments, from January 1917 onwards, which brought about the fall of the Romanov dynasty?
- 2 Nicholas was never short of advice. Historians going through the archives have been impressed by the excellent quality of much of the advice Nicholas and other Tsars received. This did not only come from his bureaucrats and ministers.

Source 44

'Your majesty, if I may be permitted to say so, has but one course open to you – namely, to break down the barrier that separates you from your people and to regain their confidence.' Drawing himself up and looking hard at me, the Emperor asked: 'Do you mean that I am to regain the confidence of my people or that they are to regain *my* confidence?' 'Both, sir,' I replied, 'for without such mutual confidence Russia will never win the war.'

Report by the British Ambassador, Sir George Buchanan, of his audience with the Tsar, 30 December 1916

Why did the Tsar not accept this advice?

What do the events of February tell you about the Tsar's character and his beliefs?

- 3 Many individuals played a part in the crisis. Make out a table like the one below and add how each did, or did not, contribute to Nicholas' abdication.

<i>Individual or group</i>	<i>Explanation of their role in the crisis</i>
Tsar Nicholas	
Tsarina Alexandra	
Lenin and the Bolsheviks	
Ordinary soldiers	
Army leaders	
The Russian peasantry	
Workers	
The Duma leaders	

- 4 Who do you think played the key role in the crisis? If his/her/their decisions/actions had been different, how might events have developed differently? When in February do you think the Tsar's abdication became the only possible solution to the political crisis? Why?
- 5 In 1905 the regime had survived a similar crisis. Why did it not survive this one?

Make out a table like the one below and fill it in with details from both crises. How was the situation in 1917 different from that in 1905?

	<i>1905</i>	<i>1917</i>
The war		
The armed forces' attitude to the regime		
The attitude of the liberal opposition		
The prestige of the royal family		
Social and economic discontent		
The Tsar's actions		