

**Document exercise: The February Revolution**

**Source A**

This is a hooligan movement, young people run about and shout that there is no bread, simply to create excitement, along with workers who prevent others from working. If the weather were cold they would all probably stay at home. But all this will pass and become calm, if only the Duma will behave itself.

Letter from the Tsarina to Nicholas II, 26 February 1917

**Source B**



**Source C**

The industrial proletariat is on the verge of despair and it believes that the smallest outbreak due to any pretext will lead to uncontrollable riots and tens of thousands of victims.

Report by the Okhrana (Tsarist secret police), October 1916

▲ The distribution of revolutionary newspapers to a crowd in February 1917.

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D. Lieven  
*the Russian*  
O. Figes  
*Russian*  
R. Pipes  
1899-19  
R. Kowalski  
1917-21  
S. Smith  
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in 1917

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## ■ Examination-style questions

### 1 Comprehension in context

To whom does the Tsarina in Source A attribute responsibility for the political situation?

### 2 Comparing the sources

Does Source B support the Tsarina's view of the situation? Explain your answer by careful reference to both sources.

### 3 Assessing the sources

What value would a historian studying the situation in Russia put on Source C?

### 4 Making judgements

Do these sources give a sufficient explanation of the political situation in February 1917?

## Conclusion

The dynasty which had ruled Russia for over 300 years collapsed in a few days. Although there was a mounting number of strikes before the outbreak of war in 1914, none the less there was something like stability at the centre of politics.

The war changed all this. It drove all the potential opposition groups together. In October 1905 some of the liberals had accepted the Tsar's semi-constitutional Manifesto. In 1917 the liberals en masse deserted the Crown – in fact they had deserted it in 1915 when the Progressive Bloc had presented their programme and Nicholas had rejected it. Even former monarchists had lost all faith in the Tsar's capacity to deal with the deteriorating military and economic situation.

It was also the war that created the severe food and fuel shortages in the capital and brought hundreds of thousands onto the streets. Military discipline had shown some signs of breaking down even before the February crisis. As the Russian army had suffered 50 per cent losses by the end of 1916, this is not surprising. When their loyalty was put to the test at the end of February, at least half of the Petrograd soldiers, many of them fresh recruits, made a conscious decision for political change.

In the last analysis, the responsibility must fall on the shoulders of the last Romanov. As we have seen, Nicholas had been urged from many quarters to make a compromise with the Duma opposition long before 1917. Even at the height of the crisis in February 1917, if the Tsar had appointed a government acceptable to moderate opinion, the regime would probably have been saved – in the short term at least. His firm belief, supported by his wife, that the future of Russia and the Romanov autocracy were one and the same made compromise impossible. Perhaps a wiser and more flexible man would have seen that even his most cherished principles had to be abandoned or amended in the circumstances. For Nicholas II, 300 years of history and tradition as well as his own upbringing and personality prevented him from making that imaginative leap.

## ■ Further reading

D. Lieven, *Nicholas II: Emperor of all the Russias*, 1993

O. Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924*, 1996.

R. Pipes, *The Russian Revolution 1899-1919*, 1990

R. Kowalski, *The Russian Revolution 1917-21*, 1997

S. Smith, *Red Petrograd: Revolution in the factories*, 1985

Ed D. Kaiser, *The Workers Revolution in 1917*, 1988

## Note

Figes suggests that Nicholas was much happier once the heavy responsibilities of state were taken from his shoulders.

revolutionary  
in February

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