

HIS 242 Unit 6

World War I

Remarks by Professor Blois

Pre-war alliances In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, Russia's relations with Germany, previously very close, worsened considerably. Germany's role in depriving Russia of her gains from the 1877-1878 war with Turkey played a large part in the two nations' drifting apart. The financial policies of Bismarck's successors deprived Russia of German credits that had previously been granted readily. This financial void was quickly filled by Belgian and French loans and investments. Russia's stance in European diplomacy was fundamentally altered when, following the upturn in her relations with France, the two nations signed a defensive alliance in 1891.

In the years immediately prior to World War I the Russo-French alliance grew much firmer, and in 1907 Russia signed an alliance with Great Britain, having normalized relations with that nation through a compromise of their conflicting interests in Persia. The emerging Triple Entente was threatened, but not weakened, by the abortive 1908 Buchlau agreement with Austria and by the earlier 1905 German attempt at Bjorko to pry Russia loose from her putative allies. The Entente put Russia in a position which required her entry into almost any imaginable war in the West.

When war did come, Russia, like the other powers, stumbled into it, though she was more unprepared than the rest. Indeed, Russia was caught short not only of guns and munitions, but also of meaningful war aims. It was only after the belated entry of Turkey into the war on the side of Germany that Russia was, in 1915, offered Constantinople and the straits at

the war's conclusion. By then, however, such a prize was far too little to buoy popular support for the war in Russia.

The East Prussian Campaign During the roughly three and one half years of Russia's involvement in the war, her army acquitted itself with respect. The historian A. J. P. Taylor has written that "despite all defeats and difficulties, the Russians fought heroically and made a decisive contribution to the course of the war." The Russian army alone campaigned on German soil during the war. Despite the fact that her war plans called for an offensive against the Austrians and a holding action against the Germans in the Polish salient, the Russians were persuaded by their allies to launch an offensive into Germany to relieve the beleaguered French. The result was an improvised invasion of East Prussia in August, 1914. The campaign can likely be credited with having saved Paris, but for the Russians it proved laden with hardships and foolish decisions.

From its very beginning the campaign was a fiasco. Two Russian army groups advanced into German territory, but the northern one moved so slowly that it failed to be a factor in the first decisive engagement, the battle of Tannenberg. Samsonov's southern army, lacking effective communications with its own units as well as with the northern force, was entrapped by the Germans, sustaining losses of over 300,000 and prompting Samsonov to commit suicide.

By its end, the campaign had become a symbol of Russia's unpreparedness. In a similar action, the Galician or Brusilov offensive of 1916, fought in what today is western Ukraine, Russian successes against Austria enabled the Italian army to escape disaster on the Alpine front and produced the context from which came the allied successes at Verdun and the Somme. Throughout the war, Russia was unable to achieve tangible gains for herself.

Undermining tsardom's last supports At the war's beginning a wave of patriotism swept Russia. The Duma voted support for the war, with only the Bolsheviks dissenting. Spurning the proffered support, Nicholas came to rely even more heavily than before on his wife and Rasputin.

Russia's early defeats led to a variety of reactions from different classes within Russian society. The workers were the first to become avidly oppositional. Army losses, inflation, and stringent national minority policies all served to rejuvenate the strike movement. In 1915 there were over 1,000 strikes, with more than 1,500 the following year as disaffection became widespread.

In the first years of the war, zemstvos and town councils played a role in the reorganization of industry on a war footing, the improvement of medical facilities, and the provision of other local services in support of the war effort. Many future leaders of the Provisional Government, including Guchkov and Lvov, were active in these undertakings. Yet already in 1915 the support was turning into opposition. In the Duma, a liberal bloc formed demanding creation of a government that could inspire public confidence.

Finally, even the conservative support enjoyed by the tsar was eroded. By late 1916 generals were reporting that revolt in the army was imminent, and in the capital (renamed Petrograd in September 1914) there was talk of a *coup d'etat*. The ultra-conservative Council of State voted overwhelmingly to protest the "irresponsible forces" behind the government and to call for the formation of a government that would enjoy popular confidence--a step identical to that taken by the Progressive Bloc two years earlier.

The tragedy of Russia's position may be seen in the following anecdote. On New Year's Eve (on the Old Style Russian calendar 13 January 1917), and also "on the eve" of what became the Russian Revolution, the British ambassador Sir George Buchanan called on the tsar to impress on

him the need for public support. Rising from his seat upon hearing this plea, Nicholas replied, "Do you mean that *I* am to regain the confidence of my people or that they are to regain *my* confidence?" Here is evidence of the tsar's failure to recognize, let alone deal with, even the gravest of national calamities. As Buchanan, who also felt strongly that the empress Alexandra--born in Potsdam--was a one woman fifth column with her husband's ear, wrote: "[the tsar's] initial and fundamental mistake was in failing to comprehend that the Russia of his day could not be governed on the same lines as the Russia which Peter the Great had known."

The war as a cause of the revolution Despite the fact that recent research has diminished the significance of the war as a cause of the events of 1917, its importance cannot be denied, since the revolutions of that year emerged out of the crucible of the World War I. There are two significant interpretations of 1917 that center on the war. The first stresses the structural weakness of Russia's economy and political system, stretched beyond the breaking point by the war. The second dwells on the role of the tsar and the "dark forces" around the throne as inimical to Russia's welfare and especially to the prosecution of the war.

The structural argument is best expressed in the work of M. T. Florinsky who, in the 1930s, studied the effects of the war on various social groups and institutions in Russia. Florinsky concluded that the period between 1861 and 1914 had been insufficient for Russia to adjust to the modern world. Of all the major belligerents, Russia was the least able to withstand a protracted military struggle. "The fragile and unbalanced edifice went down under the strain of the war," he wrote.

That the revolution was due to the tsar's wartime failings rather than to systemic factors is best put by Sir Bernard Pares, a British scholar/diplomat who spent the war years in Petrograd and had contact with many officials of the Russian government. "I have become quite convinced," wrote Pares, "that the

cause of the ruin came not at all from below, but from above." At our distance from the events involved, Pares' interpretation may seem less defensible, but the culpability of Nicholas is undeniable.

Recommended readings

list books by Florinsky, Golovin, Lenin (Imperialism...), Pares, and Solzhenitsyn's 'August 1914'