

On March 15, 1917, Tsar Nicholas II, Emperor and Autocrat of All the Russias, abdicated his throne in favor of his younger brother, Grand Duke Mikhail Aleksandrovich.¹ The next day, when the Grand Duke refused to take the head of a crumbling and hated government, the Romanov dynasty ended after over three centuries of rule. Fewer than nine months later, one of the most conservative autocratic nations in the world became the nation of the common, proletarian masses, all spouting the phrase: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need”.² This dramatic shift has its roots in the actions, and inactions, of the final tsar in the years before his abdication. Nicholas II was thoroughly unprepared for the challenges facing a politically, economically, technologically, and militarily backward country in the Age of Imperialism. His inability to comprehend these challenges and his unwillingness to compromise with the changing times was his own undoing, forcing him to do nothing less than surrender the throne of Emperor. Nicholas II had many faults, but the documents of his compatriots, advisors, and family members reveal the weaknesses that inevitably led to the end of the Romanov dynasty: he was a conservative and indecisive man who was incapable of compromise. These fatal flaws all culminated in the drastic and necessary decision to abdicate, leaving the way to ultimate power free for the radical elements of Russian society. The documents of his advisors show the inevitable progression into chaos and revolution due to Nicholas II’s internal policy.

One of Nicholas II’s greatest mistakes was listening to the political advice of his wife, conservative and autocratic Empress Alexandra Feodorovna. By herself, Alexandra was horrible at politics, and she was furthermore influenced by Grigori Rasputin, a Russian monk who had the Empress enthralled by his ability to care for her only son, the hemophilic Tsarevich Alexei.³

¹ Michael Kort, *The Soviet Colossus: History and Aftermath*, 6th Ed. (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2006) 92.

² Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1970) Part I.

³ Kort, *The Soviet Colossus*, 88.

Alexandra and Nicholas corresponded frequently, often several times a day, while he was away at General Headquarters during the war. In one series of exchanges in September 1916, the extent of Rasputin's and Alexandra's damaging influence on Nicholas can be easily seen. Rasputin, through Alexandra, begs Nicholas to name Alexander Protopopov as Minister of the Interior; Nicholas himself even recognizes the folly of the choice, writing, "All these changes...happen much too fast".⁴ Yet within days, Nicholas appoints Protopopov to the position in question and writes to his wife, "...you ought to be my eye and ear there—near the capital while I have to stick here [at General Headquarters]... Now I will certainly feel quiet and no more worried, at least for the interior".⁵ This, however, was the time when Nicholas needed to worry very much about the unrest in the interior. Nicholas, who was not a very gifted leader in his own right, could not successfully separate his love for his wife and what was best for his country, and listened foolishly to the advice of an untrained woman. As internal affairs continued to deteriorate, so did the quality of Alexandra's advice. In February 1917, Alexandra writes, "The Russian...must learn to fear you—love is not enough... 'the screaming mass'... they fear you still and must yet more".⁶ By late February, it was exquisitely clear to the rest of the nation that the only action that might save the autocracy was the Tsar's concession of power to the democratic institutions of the state; compromise to the "the screaming mass" must be made or the government was going to fall. Alexandra was advising Nicholas against the only hope his autocratic government had, and he continued to follow this advice. Many of his advisors were completely exasperated by Nicholas's decision to follow the political advice of his

⁴ Romanov, Nicholas Alexandrovich (Tsar and Autocrat of All the Russias), "Correspondence of Nicholas and Alexandra" (September 9, 1916), in Jonathan Daly and Leonid Trofimov, *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922: A Documentary History*, (Hackett, Indianapolis, 2009), Doc. 9, p. 22-23.

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Romanova, Alexandra Feodorovna (Tsarina), "Letters between Nicholas and Alexandra" (February 22, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg and Vladimir M. Khrustalev, eds., *The Fall of the Romanovs: Political Dreams and Personal Struggles in a Time of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), Doc. 1, pp. 65-67.

amateur wife and her charlatan Russian mystic. Grand Duke Nikolai Mikhailovich appealed directly to Nicholas: “Repeatedly you have told me that you could trust no one, that you were being deceived. If that is true, then the same must be said for your wife who loves you dearly, but is led astray by the evil circle that surrounds her”.⁷ Together, Rasputin and Alexandra did great harm to the reputation of the government and the Tsar and did much to dissuade Nicholas from taking the actions necessary to stabilize the government and the nation in the upheavals of 1917.

The Tsar had many other advisors, some members of his formal Council of Ministers, some members of the military who played especially important roles during World War I, and some of the more prominent members of his extended royal family. The role of the Tsar’s advisor changed dramatically as the nation fell further and further into dissent, chaos, and violence as World War I progressed. Ivan Goremykin, the Chairman of the Tsar’s Council of Ministers and his oldest and most conservative of advisors, embodied the traditional Russian attitude towards the Tsar. Early in World War I, the Tsar decided to replace the existing commander at the Front, an action that threatened to be politically disastrous. The Tsar’s Council of Ministers hotly debated whether or not to advise the Tsar against going to General Headquarters. Goremykin justified his decision to remain silent with traditional arguments recalling the holy infallibility of the Tsar: “The Sovereign Emperor... is anointed by God, and embodies Russia... we have to take the Tsar as gospel”.⁸ This attitude would prove to be ruinous to a nation that desperately needed the voices of the Tsar’s closest liberal advisors. Nicholas himself, who grew up obsessed with the conservative and traditional, was incapable of adjusting

⁷ Grand Duke Nikolai Mikhailovich, “Letter to the Tsar”, <www.alexanderpalace.org/palace/lettersdukes.html> (19 February 2010).

⁸ Iakhontov, Arkadii Nikolaevich (Secretary of the Tsar’s Council of Ministers), “Notes from Meeting of the Council of Ministers” (August 21, 1915), in Daly and Trofimov, *Russia in War and Revolution*, Doc. 7, pp. 17-18.

to a rapidly evolving international world and a swiftly changing domestic political scene. He needed the advice of outspoken, progressive advisors to resolve the challenges of running a backward nation in an advanced world.

Many of Nicholas's advisors recognized the need to delegate greater power to the existing democratic institutions early in the First World War. In the same meeting where Goremykin declared the infallibility of the Tsar, the Minister of the Interior Nikolai Shcherbatov stated, "...the Sovereign Emperor and the Government are at odds with all of the sensible elements in the country".⁹ One year later, Grand Duke Georgi Mikhailovich wrote in a letter to the Tsar "the only way to avert a general catastrophe" is to listen to "general desire" of the people, for "the voice of the people is the voice of God".¹⁰ Only a single year after Goremykin's passionate defense of the Tsar's holy words, one of the most conservative elements of the Russian nobility writes to tell the Tsar that by ignoring the voice of the Russian masses his is ignoring the voice of God. This complete reversal is telling evidence of the drastic and rapid changes that were overtaking the Russian political and social systems.

The letters from Grand Duke Alexander "Sandro" Mikhailovich to Nicholas II, written in January and February 1917, clearly show the extreme anxiety the ruling classes felt about the condition of the nation and the Tsar's political direction. In early January he writes, "[Your] ministers...their actions border on criminal... it is absolutely indispensable that the ministries and the legislative chambers should work together".¹¹ One week later he warns: "...You have definitely resolved to pursue a domestic policy that runs absolutely against the wishes of all your

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Grand Duke Georgi Mikhailovich, "Letter to the Tsar" (1916), <www.alexanderpalace.org/palace/lettersdukes.html> (19 February 2010).

¹¹ Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich, "Letter to the Tsar" (January 7, 1917), <www.alexanderpalace.org/palace/lettersdukes.html> (19 February 2010).

faithful subjects... it is impossible to rule the country without paying attention to the voice of the people... give the country what she wants: a ministry of confidence...”.¹² By early February, he is “in utter despair” regarding the actions of his brother-in-law the Tsar: “Your counselors are still leading Russia and you to sure perdition...you do not want to hear those who know Russia’s situation and who counsel you to take the steps to extricate us from the chaos we are in today...”.¹³ Most importantly, Sandro comments on Nicholas’s inexplicable ignorance of the circumstances of the Home Front and his inaction in the face of dire consequences. Whether his ignorance was feigned or unintentional, it is baffling that Nicholas does not understand how ominous the situation had become. By February of 1917, strikes and demonstrations were devastating Petrograd and chaos was spreading about the vast nation.¹⁴ The entire nation was hungry and forced by wartime needs to live and work in despicable conditions. The economic explosion benefitted only the war industries and agricultural production was decreasing as ill-kept infrastructure began to collapse. The Government, especially Nicholas’s hand-picked ministers, was hated and despised by the entire population. The men in power were incompetent, corrupt, arrogant, and simply idiotic. Meanwhile, Nicholas was back at General Headquarters near the Front, far from the disturbances that were rocking the cities and industries of Russia. Both the State Duma and the State Council had been suspended by Nicholas’s order, a grave error that only alienated one of the last elements of society that supported the regime.¹⁵ The Government was becoming more and more isolated and more and more weak; many of the Tsar’s most intelligent and forward-thinking advisors were desperately attempting to persuade

¹² Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich, “Letter to the Tsar” (January 14, 1917), <www.alexanderpalace.org/palace/lettersdukes.html> (19 February 2010).

¹³ Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich, “Letter to the Tsar” (February 7, 1917), <www.alexanderpalace.org/palace/lettersdukes.html> (19 February 2010).

¹⁴ Kort, *The Soviet Colossus*, 88.

¹⁵ Grand Duke Mikhail Aleksandrovich, et. al., “Manifesto of the Grand Dukes”, (March 3, 1917), in Mark D. Steinberg and Vladimir M. Khrustalev, eds., *The Fall of the Romanovs: Political Dreams and Personal Struggles in a Time of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), pp. 88.

the Tsar to rethink his domestic policy and give the people the democratic representation they were demanding.

Already in 1915 Minister of the Interior Nikolai Shcherbatov recognized “neither the army, nor the cities, nor the zemstvos, nor the merchants, nor the nobility stand behind the government, so it cannot stand...”.¹⁶ This trend of isolation continued. In 1917, the State Council, the conservative upper house of the bicameral legislative system that was created as a result of 1905 Revolution, wrote to Nicholas appealing him to recognize the people’s “hatred of the government...and those grave suspicions of the authorities”.¹⁷ On February 26, 1917, Mikhail Rodzianko, Chairman of the Fourth State Duma, sent a telegram to Nicholas warning him the “authorities [Ministers] are not competent to lead the country out of its difficult situation”.¹⁸ Still, the Tsar ignored the warnings of these men and continued to lead the Russian army in disastrous defeats against Germany despite the boiling internal situation.

At this time, the situation and the Tsar’s advisors were desperate. Pleas from all ends of the political spectrum were sent to Nicholas, all requesting the dismissal of the current Council of Ministers, the resumption of the State Duma and State Council, and the creation of a government based on popular representation. Rodzianko wrote that there was “no other way out” but to “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”.¹⁹ The State Council begged for a “decisive change by Your Imperial Majesty in the direction of internal politics...

¹⁶ Iakhontov, “Notes” in Daly and Trofimov, *Russia in War and Revolution*, Doc. 7, pp. 17-18.

¹⁷ State Council, “Telegram Appealing to the Tsar” (February 28, 1917), in Steinberg and Khrustalev, eds., *The Fall of the Romanovs*, Doc. 14, p. 84.

¹⁸ Rodzianko, Mikhail (Chairman of the Fourth State Duma), “Telegram to the Tsar” (February 26, 1917), in Steinberg and Khrustalev, eds., *The Fall of the Romanovs*, Doc. 6, p. 76.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

for popular representation... and the resignation of current Council of Ministers”.²⁰ In the “Manifesto of the Grand Dukes”, the Grand Dukes created an imperial act calling for “the restricting of the government administration in the empire on the basis of broad, popular representation...and the resumption of the State Council and State Duma”.²¹ Even General Mikhail Alekseev, Nicholas II’s Chief of Staff, sent Nicholas a telegram on March 1 pleading for the “immediate issuance of an imperial act... convoking a responsible ministry and assigning its formation to the Chairman of the Duma [Rodzianko]”.²² Still, Nicholas refused to listen to the words of his many advisors and chose instead to simply return to the capital to reinforce his autocratic position. Finally, with hundreds of thousands of hungry workers striking in the streets of Petrograd, the mutiny of the entire military force sent to subdue to the strikes, the establishment of a Provisional Government by the State Duma, and the formation of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies by the revolutionary elements of the populace, Nicholas II began to see reason. He sent out a request for advice to several generals; four different generals, including Alekseev, all called for the Tsar’s abdication as the only way to save the nation and the throne.²³ Nicholas II finally, finally bowed to the inevitable, listened to the advice of his many advisors, and abdicated the throne.

Tsar Nicholas II was not the man necessary to maintain the Romanov dynasty and rule Russia effectively. His conservatism and inflexibility, as well as his decision to take awful advice and his inability to listen to sound advice all led to the necessity of his abdication. It is

²⁰ State Council, “Telegram Appealing to the Tsar” (February 28, 1917), in Steinberg and Khrustalev, eds., *The Fall of the Romanovs*, Doc. 14, p. 84.

²¹ Grand Duke Mikhail Aleksandrovich, et. al., “Manifesto of the Grand Dukes”, (March 3, 1917), in Steinberg and Khrustalev, eds., *The Fall of the Romanovs*, Doc. 18, p. 88.

²² Alekseev, Mikhail (Nicholas II’s Chief of Staff), “Telegram to Nicholas II” (March 1, 1917), in Steinberg and Khrustalev, eds., *The Fall of the Romanovs*, Doc. 19, p. 88.

²³ Alekseev, Mikhail et.al., “Telegram to Nicholas II” (March 2, 1917), in Steinberg and Khrustalev, eds., *The Fall of the Romanovs*, Doc. 20, p. 89-91.

quite possible, had Nicholas II listened to reason and converted his autocratic rule to a parliamentary monarchy long before the anarchy and violence of 1917, that the Tsar could have maintained his throne. By ignoring the populace and the counsel of his best advisors, Nicholas made gradual change impossible. By forcibly suppressing the educated movement for greater popular representation and by subjecting his people to horrible living conditions while waging war against a technologically superior enemy, Nicholas sowed the seeds of his own destruction. The written words of his many advisors show this inevitable disintegration and implosion; whether they were arguing for continued autocratic rule or a more moderate parliamentary monarchy, both camps reveal the weaknesses, incompetence, and stupidity of the twentieth century Tsarist government and why its ultimate destruction at the hands of the Russian masses became inevitable.

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