

Was the fall of the Romanov dynasty inevitable?



International Women's Day 1917

As with much of modern history, railways played a crucial role in the fall of the Romanov dynasty. Or rather, the breakdown of railways. During the winter of 1917, the coldest Russia had experienced for several years, arctic frosts and blizzards brought the railways supplying Petrograd to a virtual standstill, meaning the city was starved of regular supplies of flour and fuel. Thus, on the 23rd February 1917, International Women's Day, thousands of working class women joined protesters on the streets to demand food and an end to the war, bearing slogans such as 'Bread and Peace'. The number of workers on strike that day swelled to 100,000 as the menfolk joined, and never before had a protest containing such a diverse selection of social backgrounds been seen. Most importantly, this was the first time that the Tsar's Cossacks had shown a weakness and unwillingness to clear the crowds, a weakness that emboldened the protesters over the coming days and pointed towards the Tsar's increasing inability to rule by oppression¹. This was to prove a pivotal day, and arguably the tipping point at which the fall of the Romanov dynasty became truly inevitable, as within two days a general strike had paralysed the city, and within four Tsar Nicolas II had abdicated.

The question of historical inevitability is intrinsically linked with the question 'what or who drives history', and in his essay 'Historical Inevitability' Berlin presented two

¹ Figs, *A People's Tragedy*, p.308

fundamentally different answers to this question: the personal, or the impersonal theory of history. This boils down to a debate as to whether human beings play an active, or a passive, role in the shaping of our world.² With regard to the fall of the Romanovs, the impersonal theory falls in line with deterministic Marxist 'dialectical materialism': that the socio-economic forces resulting from industrialisation and the creation of an urban proletariat meant the fall of the Romanovs did indeed become inevitable. However, the personal theory, that the actions of individuals and groups of individuals did have an influence on the fall of the Romanovs, provides a more compelling case. Given the autocratic nature of the regime, the personalities of the Tsars themselves had a huge influence on the fate of Russia, not to mention such important individuals as Rasputin and Lenin.

But the question still stands as to whether there was any point in the last decades of autocratic rule from which it could be argued there was no way back for the Romanovs. The International Women's Day of 1917 stands out as a prime candidate for such a turning point, but a case could also be argued for other key moments, such as Russia's defeat in the Crimean War and the subsequent need for change and reform, or the appointment of Count Witte as Minister of Finance in 1893 and the rapid industrialisation that followed. Inevitability is perhaps best defined as the point at which there are no other plausible paths of development for history to progress along, and this will form the basis of an examination of crucial turning points in the fall of the Romanov dynasty.

Trotsky's famous description of war as "a locomotive of history"³, from a 1922 report on the Communist International, perhaps applies more aptly to Russian history than to the history of any other country, and the Russian defeat in the Crimean War (1853-6) fully demonstrates this. Defeat in 1856 and the subsequent Treaty of Paris was a humiliation for Russia, shattering the myth of Russian military might established in 1815 and forcing a complete reassessment of Russia's social and economic structure. This was the turning point when the need for modernisation in Russia became inescapable, and the new Tsar, Alexander II, duly responded.⁴ The Emancipation of the Serfs in 1861 opened up the possibility of Russian development on western European lines, socially, economically and politically, and the subsequent reforms (most importantly in education with the regard to the development of opposition) of the 1860s marked the first steps towards this. Arguably, the new openness encouraged by these reforms aroused expectations which the Tsar would never be able to satisfy, particularly given the Tsar's still deep-rooted belief in autocracy.⁵ This led to the beginning of a snowballing growth of

² <http://britishscholar.org/publications/2012/11/29/isaiah-berlin-and-the-humanity-of-history/>

³ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1922/12/comintern.htm>

⁴ Kochan & Abyraham, *The Making of Modern Russia*, p.180-181

⁵ Oxley, P., *Russia 1855-1991: From Tsars to Commissars*, p.33

opposition to the Romanov regime such that it could be argued its collapse became inevitable. However, the strength of Alexander II's character (demonstrated by the historically significant Emancipation) meant the possibility of instituting constitutional reform to satisfy the liberal opposition and ensure the survival of his dynasty was still open to him; a possibility that came within touching distance on the 13th March 1881.

Had Alexander II lived to see the Loris-Melikov constitution proposal implemented, a document he signed hours before he died⁶, this day might be recognised as a turning point not towards the inevitable downfall of the Romanovs, but towards their status as the founders of a constitutional monarchy. Instead, the last two Tsars, in reaction to their predecessor's assassination, turned their back on the liberal and modernising reforms of the 1860s and sought to cement the autocracy through repression.⁷ Figes argues that the "Romanovs were retreating to the past hoping it would save them from the future"⁸, with reference to the principles of personal rule established under Muscovite Tsardom in the 17th century; and in comparison to the liberal Western political culture, the political repression of the Romanovs was indeed remarkably backward. This repression, arguably, drove opposition towards more revolutionary ideas; for example, without the execution of his brother Aleksandr Ilyich Ulyanov by the tsarist regime in 1887, Lenin may never have been radicalised into the Bolshevik revolutionary we recognise today⁹. It could be argued too that the fossilized autocratic attitude of the last two Tsars, and their refusal to modernise Russia politically, made their downfall inevitable. However, the Tsarist regime still held control of the army, and with this repressive tool the possibility either to maintain the dynasty by oppression or through constitutional reform was still conceivable.

Alongside the increased political repression of the last decades of Romanov rule the importance of pressure from Western Europe at this point cannot be understated, as in terms of economic, social and political progress Russia was far behind modern powerhouses such as Britain and France¹⁰. The arguments of Trotsky in *1905* demonstrate the profound influence this pressure had, which arguably explains the rapid speed of Russia's industrialisation (the Russian empire had become the fifth largest industrial nation by 1913¹¹) as its economy desperately tried to keep pace with Western Europe: "Russia's social existence was always under constant pressure from the more developed social and state relations of Western Europe, and as time

⁶ Bromley, *Russia 1848-1917*, p.55

⁷ *ibid*, p.59

⁸ Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, p.6

⁹ *ibid*, p.145

¹⁰ Bromley, *Russia 1848-1917*, p.67

¹¹ Overy, *Times History of the World*, p.212

went on this pressure became more and more powerful.”¹² The benchmark that Western Europe set for Russian modernisation, both economically and politically, meant that change was inevitable in Russia. However, the example set by constitutional monarchies such as Britain provided the Tsars with a route to ensuring their dynasty’s survival, and it is conceivable that had Russia strengthened its relationship with Britain this could have been achieved.

The industrialisation of Russia in the 1890s emerged as the dominant force for change, and the already industrialised or industrialising nations of Western Europe arguably had a profound impact on the speed of this change. Count Witte is the man most credited for Russia’s continued and rapid industrial growth¹³, and thus his appointment as Minister of Finance in 1893 could be argued to be a turning point after which the fall of the Romanovs was inevitable. Most importantly, Russian industrialisation triggered the creation of an industrial proletariat, a process only made possible by the freedom of movement that Alexander II’s Emancipation of 1861 allowed the peasants; in the last half-century of Romanov rule, Russia’s urban population quadrupled from 7 million to 28 million¹⁴. This created an array of socio-economic problems which inevitably lead to political, economic and social unrest. At this point, a view of Marxist dialectical materialism would suggest that the downfall of the Romanovs was part of the inevitable progress of Russian society, and indeed the very language of industrialisation (of targets, and outputs, and production figures) arguably makes inevitability a more mathematical concept. This new urban class was becoming rapidly more educated and susceptible to revolutionary ideas, and in particular Marxist ideas, thanks to the education of reforms of 1864. This was reflected in the rise of opposition parties aimed (at least in part) at the working classes: the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party was founded in 1898, and the Socialist Revolutionary Party in 1901. Thus, a conflict between a rapidly more educated, urban and complex society, and a fossilized autocracy that would not concede its political power, became inevitable¹⁵. But as the events of 1905 would show, this conflict did not necessarily mean the outright fall of the Romanov dynasty.

Trotsky’s dictum resurfaces again with the Russo-Japanese War of 1904-5, another potential turning point on the path towards the inevitable downfall of the regime. The humiliating Russian losses meant the Russian people lost confidence in the military and the Tsarist political system, and brought to the surface the seething unrest present in much of Russian society¹⁶; it is no coincidence that the infamous

¹² Trotsky, *1905*, p.21

¹³ Lynch, *Reaction and Revolution: Russia 1894-1924*, p.13

¹⁴ Figes, *A People’s Tragedy*, p.108

¹⁵ *ibid*, p.15

¹⁶ Carr, *The Russian Revolution from Lenin to Stalin 1917-29*, p.2

protests of 'Bloody Sunday' on 9th January 1905 happened just weeks after the humiliating Russian surrender at Port Arthur. The ensuing 'revolution' in 1905 forced Nicholas into making the concessions of the 'October Manifesto', which some would argue established a constitutional monarchy in Russia and set the country on a path of Western development. However, as Count Witte later claimed, Nicholas always intended to return to his old autocratic ways as soon as the danger passed¹⁷; and indeed, with the crushing of the St. Petersburg Soviet and the Moscow rising in December 1905, the tsarist regime showed how well it had recovered its powers of political repression. Had Nicholas II allowed the *duma* to exist along liberal Western lines he may well have secured the survival of his regime, but his entrenched desire for autocracy and the swift return to repression meant the 'October Manifesto' solved few of Russia's problems and opposition continued to escalate. Trotsky's description of the events of 1905 as "the dress rehearsal for revolution in 1917"¹⁸ suggests that the fall of the Romanovs was all but inevitable, and it was only a matter of when the final production would be unveiled that was of issue. However, 1905 arguably showed that as long as the tsarist regime held its nerve and retained the loyalty of the army, then it would be nigh on impossible for protesters to mount a challenge serious enough to topple the regime.¹⁹

The 'locomotive' of war crashed into Russian history again in 1914, and the colossal social and economic strains it imposed on a barely modernised Russia could be argued to have made the fall of the Romanovs inevitable²⁰. Nicholas II's decision to take command of the Russian army in 1915 might be argued to be the pivotal moment with regard to the Romanovs' downfall, as it meant he identified himself directly with the Russian defeats that followed, leaving himself open to criticism from both his army and his people. Furthermore, this decision cut the Tsar off from information about the situation in the capital, which would prove costly in February 1917, when, from his headquarters in Mogilev, the Tsar massively underestimated the seriousness of the situation in his capital 500 miles away and ill-advisedly sanctioned the use of force on his people. The decision also meant that from 1915-6 the Russian government was left in the hands of the unfortunately German Tsarina Alexandra and her faith healer Rasputin, a man whose influence and subsequent assassination severely damaged the image of the tsarist regime²¹. On the other hand, had the Russian army defeated the Germans in the war (and it had a genuine opportunity of doing so with its initial offensive in August 1914, and then again in June-July 1916²²) the Tsar would have gained a huge popularity boost and could

¹⁷ Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, p.192

¹⁸ <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/mylife/ch14.htm>

¹⁹ Lynch, *Reaction and Revolution: Russia 1894-1924*, p.39

²⁰ Bromley, *Russia 1848-1917*, p.128-9

²¹ Service, *The Penguin History of Modern Russia*, p.27

²² Bromley, *Russia 1848-1917*, p.128

conceivably have followed the path of his ally Britain towards a true constitutional monarchy. In reality, Russia's defeats and the worsening socio-economic problems at home did mean the regime's collapse looked highly probable, but as 1905 had shown, so long as the Tsar retained the army as a repressive tool his departure was never certain.

Two things mark the International Women's Day (23rd February 1917) out as the crucial turning point when the fall of the Romanovs became truly inevitable. Firstly, it was the first occasion when the Tsar's army showed an unwillingness to suppress protesters. This was hugely important, as it showed cracks of weakness in the previously iron-fisted tsarist regime, and in the absence of vigorous repression 200,000 workers joined the demonstrations.²³ It is true that military discipline had shown signs of breaking down prior to this (unsurprising given the Russian army had lost half its troops by the end of 1916²⁴), but this was the first instance when the intangible murmurings of discontent transformed into tangible acts of disloyalty. Secondly, it was the first time that such a vast number of people from various social backgrounds had been united on the streets²⁵, first by demands for bread, and then for the overthrow of autocracy, and this made the pressure on the regime even greater. Arguably the revolution of February 1917 was inspired by the same factors as the 'revolution' of 1905. But 12 years on these factors were augmented by, as E.H.Carr puts it, "universal discontent with the conduct of the war"²⁶, a discontent arguably heightened by the humiliations suffered in the Russo-Japanese War as well as in WWI. Thus nothing short of the removal of the Tsar would stem the tide of revolt, and so the fall of the Romanov dynasty became inevitable.

The surprise by which the February Revolution, initiated by the protests of International Women's Day, took the revolutionary parties both in exile and in the capital, suggests it was a genuinely spontaneous development²⁷. The fact that Lenin himself had predicted in January "we older men perhaps will not live to see the coming revolution"²⁸ demonstrates the impromptu nature of the revolution, and discredits the arguments that the fall of the Romanovs had become truly inevitable before February 1917; Lenin's prediction that the revolution was still "coming" perhaps owes more to his faith in Marxist theory than in his assessment of the Russian situation at the time. Attributing the inevitability of the fall of the Romanovs to a point further back in time, say the reforms of Alexander II which opened the door to liberal and then revolutionary ideas in Russia, is far easier with the benefit of

²³ Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, p.309

²⁴ Oxley, P., *Russia 1855-1991: From Tsars to Commissar*, p.89

²⁵ *ibid*, p.85

²⁶ Carr, *The Russian Revolution from Lenin to Stalin 1917-29*, p.2

²⁷ Oxley, P., *Russia 1855-1991: From Tsars to Commissar*, p.85

²⁸ Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, p.323

hindsight, but arguably until the Tsarist regime had lost the support of its army as a tool of repression its downfall was never guaranteed.

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