THE IMPACT OF WORLD WAR I ON RUSSIA’S REVOLUTIONARY SITUATION PRIOR TO 1917
During the period of 1905 through 1917, unrest and political instability plagued Russia, eventually resulting in a revolution that would see the end of Tsarist government and the rise of a new Marxist state. Many factors and key events would pave the way for Tsar Nicholas II’s abdication and the Bolshevik’s coup d’état, but one of the final strains for the Russian people before 1917 was Russia’s disastrous involvement in World War I. The Great War would increase the frustrations and resentments of the Russian people, leading to an intensified revolutionary situation that would contribute to the final revolutions in 1917. Russia’s blunders in World War I would effectively show its people, and the rest of the world, the weakness of the Tsar and his government. In the words of Vladimir Lenin, “War tests all economic and organizational forces of a nation.” (Kokošin) In the case of World War I, Russia failed the test.

Initially, Russia’s rapid descent into war in 1914 was met for a short time with immense patriotic support from its citizens. Russia was just coming out of a relatively stable period from 1908-1913 that made some progress through policies set forth by Prime Minister Pyotr Stolypin. Stolypin’s agrarian reforms helped keep the peasantry satisfied and brought Russia some financial stability (Christian). This, coupled with 1913’s celebration of the Romanov dynasty’s tercentennial anniversary, caused powerful, but temporary, support for the Tsar and the exciting idea of Mother Russia defeating the Central Powers in war. However, this fleeting moment of support and patriotism would soon be eroded as the Russian people began to see the human and economic costs of the war (J. Llewellyn et al). The Tsar and the Russian government were also eager to enter World War I in 1914, seeing it as an opportunity to transform Russia into a world power and gain a useful alliance with Great Britain and France. Like its European allies, Russia’s decision to enter the war was clouded by imperial rivalry, overdependence on the alliance system, and overconfidence in its military (J. Llewellyn et al). Russia also wanted to overcome
the embarrassing defeats in Crimea and Manchuria, viewing World War I as a chance to prove its military might. Even among the early enthusiasm about the war, there were those who tried to warn the Tsar and his government against entering the Great War. Count Sergei Witte, the former Chief Minister who was forced by Nicholas II to resign in 1906, was vocally opposed to Russia entry into World War I, fearing the end of all evolutionary progress Russia had experienced thus far and of the autocracy itself. P.N. Durnovo, a member of the Tsarist police and the State Council echoed a similar warning, stating, “In the event of a defeat…social revolution in its most extreme form is inevitable…Russia will be flung into hopeless anarchy, the outcome of which cannot even be foreseen.” (Christian) Despite the frighteningly accurate warnings of Witte and Durnovo, Russia entered World War I in August of 1914, forming the Triple Entente with France and Great Britain against the Central Powers of Austria-Hungary and Germany.

Within days of the declaration of war, Russia mobilized millions of troops, with 6.5 million men at the Eastern front by December of 1914. Though mobilization was quick, Russia’s army was dangerously unreliable, facing shortages of supplies and very low morale. The supply shortages were the worst in the beginning of the war, with only 4.7 million rifles available for the 6.5 million troops. In an account from a Russian general to the French ambassador, Maurice Paleologue, “In several infantry regiments which have taken part in the recent battles at least one-third of the men had no rifles…” Russian troops experienced these severe munitions and shell shortages along with inadequate military uniforms (Christian). In December of 1914, General Yanushkevich described the terrible clothing situation within the army, stating, “Many men have no boots, and their legs are frostbitten. They have no sheepskin or warm underwear, and are catching colds… mass surrenders to the enemy have been developing…” (Christian)
Even when supplies improved in 1916, the morale of Russia’s armies were extremely low. A report from October of 1916 described a “complete demoralization” of the Russian army and demands of peace from the soldiers. Another major issue within Russia’s army was the decline in the effectiveness of its soldiers as the war went on. At the beginning of the war in 1914, the army consisted of elite, professional officers and skilled recruits who underwent three full years of training. Due to massive casualties (by 1917 1.7 million had died, 8 million were wounded, and 2.5 million captured as prisoners of war), these professional soldiers were replaced by quickly trained, inexperienced draftees. These issues were further compounded by poor leadership from generals and officers. (Christian) The invasion of German East Prussia at the beginning of the war ended with a Russian defeat at the Battle of Tannenberg in 1914. There was rampant miscommunication and tensions between Russian generals, leading to tactical blunders and even the uncoded transmission of Russian battle plans over radio. The Russian army would suffer even more losses at the Battle of the Masurian Lakes, forcing them to retreat from German territory. Though there were some successful offenses against the Austrian-Hungarian armies, support from German reinforcements forced Russians to retreat in May of 1915 (J. Llewellyn et al). The precarious state of Russia’s army was not only detrimental to the chance of success in the war, but also posed a risk of intensifying the revolutionary situation brewing in Russia. As unrest and instability mounted in Russia, the Tsarist government knew that its army would be needed to keep control of the people. If the Russian army turned against the government because of the conditions it faced during the war, it could potentially become an instrument of revolution rather than the defense of the government (Christian). The army knew of the social divisions and revolutionary stirrings in Russia and by 1917, revolutionary propaganda was infiltrating the
troops. There was an increase in mass surrenders and desertion as ideas of revolution spread throughout the army.

On the home front, unrest and frustration among the Russian people was quickly growing, the short-lived support of the war completely eradicated. The anti-government sentiments of the 1905 revolution were revived as the Russian people realized their country was heading into an unwinnable war that would cost the lives of millions. Soon after the start of the war, a severe food shortage plagued Russia, as the draft had forced most farmers into battle and most supplies were allocated to the military, rather than the people. The winters of 1916 and 1917 were said to be the harshest of the century, causing massive wheat shortages in Russia. Russia’s railways were placed under enormous strain as it was used to move soldiers and equipment to the Eastern Front. By 1916, an estimated 30% of the railway stock was unusable, further reducing food and coal supplies for Russia’s cities who relied on railway shipments to receive these items. War was essentially ruining Russia’s domestic economy. Conscription of millions of troops contributed to a labor shortage, which also led to a decline in food production. By 1916, the Russian government was finding it increasingly difficult to fund the war effort, eventually resorting to printing excess currency, which only resulted in massive inflation (almost 400% by the end of 1916) (J. Llewellyn et al). These factors increased revolutionary ideas among the Russian people and there was a growing fear within the government of a violent outburst. A report from the Petrograd secret police in October of 1916 describes the tensions among Russians during the war, stating, “The economic condition of the masses is worse than terrible… the workers, as a whole, prepared for the wildest excesses of a hunger riot… the mood of anxiety, growing daily more intense, is spreading to even wider sections of the populace.” (Christian) With each passing year of Russia’s involvement in World War I, the Russian people were growing more and more
upset. Besides the devastating food shortages and disastrous economy, civilians were angry with how the Tsar was ruling the country, especially when Nicholas II made the politically dangerous decision of taking personal command of the army (J. Llewellyn et al).

The growing discontent among the Russian people was coupled with the issue of divisions between the Duma and the government. A new unity formed between the elite groups based on opposition to the Tsar and the autocracy. Part of this division was due to Tsar Nicholas II’s obstinate attitude and his inability to work with fellow politicians, most of whom called for a constitutional government. Stubborn and unwilling to face the reality of the situation his government was in, Nicholas II heavily relied upon individuals who did not truly understand the political situation of Russia. Specifically, Tsar Nicholas trusted and depended on his wife, the Empress Alexandra, and her spiritual advisor, Gregory Rasputin (Christian). One of Nicholas’ most damaging gaffes during the war was his decision to remove his army commander-in-chief, Nicholas Nicholaevich, and take command of the army himself (J. Llewellyn et al). Directing the army 500 miles from the front line at the Stavka staff headquarters, Nicholas II was extremely out of touch with the war and continuously made tactical errors. Nicholas’ generals and civilian advisors opposed this decision, especially because the Tsar had left his wife to rule Russia. The Tsar’s military experience was confined to cavalry training and he had no experience in strategic warfare or combat. Even though Nicholas was now officially commanding the military, he rarely intervened and put control mostly in the hands of his battlefield generals. The only real impact of his decision to takeover was that Nicholas was now responsible for every military failure of the Russian army (J. Llewellyn et al). He also abandoned Russia in a time of extreme instability, giving his inexperienced wife control over a restless population. Opposition to the government was at an all-time high when Tsarista Alexandra took control in place of her husband. A firm
believer in autocratic rule, Alexandra would dismiss anyone from office who she felt was disloyal to the Tsar and continued to rely on her close advisor, Rasputin. As discontent mounted, Alexandra was accused of being a German spy and was heavily criticized for her close relationship with Rasputin. She believed that Rasputin was the only person who could help her son, Tsarevich Alexei, survive the deadly hemophilia disease he was afflicted with from birth. The Russian people became increasingly concerned over the influence this strange man had on the Tsaritsa and feared the political sway he seemed to exert over her. With Nicholas away overseeing the war, Rasputin became more and more involved in Russia’s political situation, giving Alexandra ‘divine advice’ about domestic policy, political appointments, and military matters (Christian). Crude gutter pornography and graphic propaganda accused Alexandra of having sexual relations with Rasputin and allowing him to take over Russia. The country was becoming a powder keg, ready to blow at any moment, the war increasing the revolutionary situation with each passing day.

Though the revolutionary situation in Russia was a result of years of instability and unrest, Russia’s entrance into World War I was one of the final straws that “broke the camel’s back” and led to the successful 1917 Russian Revolution. The war was supposed to be a success for Russia, cementing the country’s status as a world power and overcoming the humiliating losses in the Crimean and Russo-Japanese wars. However, due to poor leadership from the Tsar, terrible military conditions, and unrest among the people of Russia, the war actually delivered the final blow to autocracy in Russia, with Nicholas II abdicating the thrown for himself and Tsarevich Alexei in March of 1917. By the end of 1918, Vladimir Lenin’s Bolshevik forces had executed the Romanov family and overthrew the provisional government of Russia, establishing a Marxist state that would later become the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922 (Russian
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Revolution-History.com). After examining the damaging effects of World War I on Russia’s Tsarist government, it must be considered how events would have played out if Nicholas II had heeded Count Witte’s and Durnovo’s warnings about entering the war. If Russia took a more isolationist approach and avoided the Great War, would Tsar Nicholas and the autocracy have survived? If the Tsarist government focused more on the domestic issues of Russia and the intense revolutionary situation, would the February Revolution of 1917 have even occurred? Though these questions will remain unanswered, it is undeniable that World War I had an immense effect on Russia’s revolutionary situation prior to 1917.
Bibliography

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