Overview

"Two different Russias settled side by side: the Russia of the ruling classes who had lost, although they did not realise it yet, ... and the Russia of Labour, marching towards power, without suspecting it."

KERENSKY (1927)

"No army can withstand the strength of an idea whose time has come."

VICTOR HUGO

Russia's internal state was in a critical condition, but in February it became fatal. Yet all the key players of the revolution were missing from Petrograd: Lenin and his fellow revolutionaries were in exile and the Tsar was 650 kilometres away at military headquarters in Mogilev. Despite the revolutionary devotion of Lenin, Trotsky and others, these men in no way initiated the events of February 1917.

Two crises ravaged Russia: food and fuel shortages. Food supplies were at a critical low. Moscow was receiving only 50 per cent of its necessary daily flour supply, and Petrograd a critical 20 per cent. Cities were suffering from an acute shortage of fuel. Wood yards were empty and peat supplies were exhausted. Out of the 73 factories that had stopped operating by December 1916, 50 had stopped due to a lack of fuel to power the machinery. The real tragedy was that Russia, the largest country in the world, had incredible amounts of raw materials for food and fuel, but lacked the organisation to transport it to the cities. Skilled workers were sent to the front; consequently, Russia's labour force was severely depleted. This exacerbated the organisational problems.

Many sections of educated society already considered tsarism obsolete. Liberal elements of the Duma, zemstva representatives and industrialists discredited the system of autocracy and promoted the concept of constitutional monarchy which would transfer some of the Tsar's absolute power into their hands. With the absence of the Tsar and the presence of Rasputin, their case for corruption and abuse of authority became even more convincing. The educated, property-owning classes wanted a share of power.

This chapter analyses the eight days of the February Revolution by focusing on the protests in Petrograd, so that patterns in the relationship between the hardships and revolution can be identified. It is important to focus on the key responses of the main players: the Tsar, Duma and soldiers. It is also important that, when making a point or presenting an argument, specific examples are
used; avoiding generalisations like 'the people' or 'leaders'. Ask yourself whether the political reforms achieved during the February Revolution could indeed be considered as an inevitable idea 'whose time had come'.

**Flow of chapter**

- Okhrana reports → Advice Ignored → Chairman of Duma British Ambassador
- Strikes at Putilov Steel Works → Economic Unrest → International Women's Day march
- Formation of Provisional Government → Social Revolution → Formation of Petrograd Soviet
- Abdication of Tsar Nicholas II → Historians' Perspectives
- George Kennan

**Key issues**

- What impact did the key features of Petrograd have on the revolution?
- What advice did the Tsar receive about the revolutionary situation?
- How did economic unrest result in social revolution?
- Flashpoint – Abdication of Tsar Nicholas II
- Why did the February Revolution occur?
What impact did the key features of Petrograd have on the revolution?

Petrograd is considered one of the most beautiful cities in the world. To understand the city in which the twin revolutions of 1917 occurred, it is crucial to acknowledge two key features that have dictated its historical development. Firstly, Petrograd is built along a 30 kilometre stretch of the wide Neva River, which runs 74 kilometres from Lake Ladoga to the Gulf of Finland. Numerous canals branch off the Neva, creating a city of islands and inlets. Not only do the waterways provide the main form of water transport, but they also enable the city to be protected by raising its bridges. Secondly, Petrograd’s geographical location, on the same line of latitude as Alaska and Greenland, means that the city experiences sub-zero winters when the canals and rivers freeze. This limited any outdoor marches or protests for months of the year.

What advice did the Tsar receive about the revolutionary situation?

Warning 1: Okhrana

The Tsar’s secret police regularly sent detailed reports to the Tsar informing him of the atmosphere in Petrograd. In January 1917 the following report was made:

The mass of the population is at present in a very troubled mood ... an exceptional heightening of opposition and bitterness of feeling became very obvious amongst wide sections of the population of Petrograd. There were more and more frequent complaints about the administration and fierce and relentless criticism of government policies ... Complaints were openly voiced about the venality of the government, the unbelievable burdens of the war, the unbearable conditions of everyday life ... the conviction has been expressed, without exception, that ‘we are on the eve of great events’ in comparison with which ‘1905 was but a toy’.

CITED IN LAVER, Russia 1914–1941 (1991), PP. 7–8

Warning 2: Chairman of Duma

Rodzianko was the Chairman of the Duma and visited the Tsar at army headquarters on 20 January 1917 to share his grave concerns:
Your majesty, I consider the state of the country to have become more critical and menacing than ever. The spirit of all the people is such that the gravest upheavals may be expected ... All Russia is unanimous in claiming a change of government and the appointment of a responsible premier invested with the confidence of the nation ... Sire, there is not a single honest or reliable man left in your entourage; all the best have either been eliminated or have resigned ... Indignation against and hatred of the Empress are growing throughout the country. She is looked on as Germany's champion ... Your Majesty, do not compel the people to choose between you and the good of the country.

Mikhail Rodzianko, cited in Massie, Nicholas and Alexandra (1967), p. 374

Warning 3: British Ambassador
Sir George Buchanan was the British Ambassador in Russia from 1910 to 1918. He sent a respectful, but prophetic warning to the Tsar in February 1917:

Your Majesty, I concluded, we must remember that the people and the army are but one, and that in the event of revolution only a small portion of the army can be counted on to defend the dynasty ...

If I see a friend walking through a wood on a dark night along a path which I knew ended in a precipice, would it not be my duty, sir, to warn him of the danger? And is it not equally my duty to warn Your Majesty of the abyss that lies ahead of you? You have, sir, come to the parting of the ways, and you have now to choose between the two paths. The one will lead you to victory and a glorious peace — the other to revolution and disaster. Let me implore you to choose the former.

Buchanan, My Mission to Russia (1923)

How did economic unrest result in social revolution?

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<tr>
<th>Julian date</th>
<th>Crisis in Petrograd</th>
<th>Response</th>
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<td>Saturday, 18 February 1917</td>
<td>20,000 workers at the Putilov Steel Works, the largest factory in Petrograd, were locked out by their managers after a disagreement over pay. Political activism resulted in the remaining workers at the factory also striking to support their workmates.</td>
<td>No significant response recorded by Tsar, Duma or the soldiers.</td>
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Thursday, 23 February 1917

International Women’s Day saw thousands of women marching through the streets of Petrograd in protest against the lack of food and futility of war. The crowd swelled to 90,000.

No significant response recorded by Tsar, Duma or the soldiers.

Friday, 24 February 1917

According to General Khabalov, Chief of the Petrograd Military District, around 200,000 workers were on strike. Only minor violence occurred.

Soldiers – Cossacks patrolled the city, but refused to fire on the striking workers in Nevsky Prospekt as long as bread was their only demand.

Khabalov

General Khabalov was the Chief of the Petrograd Military District during the February Revolution

Revolutionary newspapers are handed out to eager crowds.
Saturday, 25 February 1917

Khabalov estimated that the number of striking workers had grown to around 240 000. The city came to a standstill. Public transport ceased. All newspapers closed down.

Tsar – Nicholas telegraphed Khabalov: ‘I command you to suppress from tomorrow all disorders on the streets of the capital, which are impermissible at a time when the fatherland is carrying on a difficult war with Germany.’

Tsarina – Alexandra sent a message to Nicholas: ‘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 … But all this will pass and become calm, if only the Duma will behave itself.’

Sunday, 26 February 1917

This was the day Trotsky later defined as most decisive because the soldiers began to join the protesters, turning the strikes into dangerous revolts. While many soldiers still patrolled the streets clearing protesters at bayonet point, several were seen among the crowds firing on police.

Duma – Rodzianko telegraphed the Tsar urging immediate action: ‘The situation is serious. The capital is in a state of anarchy … It is necessary that some person enjoying the confidence of the whole country be entrusted immediately with the formation of a new government. There can be no delay. Any procrastination is fatal.’

Tsar – Nicholas dismissed Rodzianko’s telegram exclaiming, ‘More rubbish from that fat pig!’ Nicholas directed his agitation towards the Duma rather than the popular disturbances. He ordered the Duma to cease meeting immediately.

Monday, 27 February 1917

The workers controlled the entire city with the exception of the Winter Palace, Admiralty and telegraph installations. Protesters released an estimated 15 000 political prisoners and ordinary criminals. Prisons, police stations, government records and furniture were then burnt in huge bonfires.

Tsar – Nicholas telegraphed Alexandra suggesting that mutiny among the troops was minor and that the Duma ministers must simply work harder to solve the food and fuel problems.

Duma – Rodzianko sent an urgent telegram: ‘Measures must be taken, immediately, for tomorrow will already be too late. The final hour has struck, when the fate of the country and the dynasty is being decided.’

Significantly, the first political initiative was taken by 12 members of the Duma who refused the Tsar’s demand to dissolve, and formed a Provisional Committee.

Soldiers – No soldiers could now be relied upon by the government. John Pollock, an English journalist, estimated that up to 40 000 soldiers had mutinied; other estimates were as high as 75 000.
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Tsar</th>
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<td>Tuesday, 28 February 1917</td>
<td>The fighting escalated to extreme violence. Police with machine guns and rifles positioned themselves at the top of high buildings. Armoured trucks full of rebelling soldiers were taken where the fighting was heaviest. Shulgin, a conservative Duma leader, commented: 'These days passed as a nightmare – no beginning, no ending, no middle, all jumbled together.'</td>
<td>The Tsar received an urgent telegram from Alexandra: 'Concessions inevitable. Street fighting continues. Many units gone over to the enemy.' Yet Nicholas did not act. His mistake was one of omission. This failure to act decisively or to promise reform allowed the protests to gather deadly momentum.</td>
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<td>Wednesday, 1 March 1917</td>
<td>Soldiers including the Imperial Guard and Cossacks on horseback openly marched in official formation wearing red ribbons and carrying red flags, demonstrating their allegiance to the revolution.</td>
<td>The Tsar finally responded proactively by approving the formation of the Provisional Government. He began the return journey to Petrograd to personally solve the problems.</td>
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<td>Thursday, 2 March 1917</td>
<td>Due to the capture of the train tracks by armed revolutionary soldiers, the Tsar’s train journey was halted 250 kilometres short of Petrograd and deboured to Pskov.</td>
<td>Nicholas abdicated! He wrote in his diary that, ‘All around me there is treachery, cowardice and deceit.’ He requested that his brother Mikhail become the new tsar.</td>
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<td>Friday, 3 March 1917</td>
<td>Key political action took place behind the scenes because peace on the streets had been restored. An estimated 1330 had been killed fighting.</td>
<td>Grand Duke Mikhail abdicated! The Romanov Dynasty ended in a dismal blaze of helplessness and resignation.</td>
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One wealthy upper-class lady cunningly saved the destruction of her elegant Petrograd mansion by putting a sign on her door: ‘No trespassing. This house is the property of the Petrograd Soviet. Countess Kleinmichel has been taken to the Fortress of St Peter and Paul.’ She then leisurely packed her bags and escaped.