Autocracy in crisis: Nicholas the last

The collapse of the Soviet Union left Russia seeking both precedents and alternatives for her political future. The role and image of Nicholas II has been subject to particular revision and scrutiny. Though reviled by Soviet historians as 'Nicholas the bloody', post Soviet society has harboured popular nostalgia for the Nicholaevan era. The last tsar's public rehabilitation was symbolically concluded by the ceremony held on Friday 17 July 1998, when Nicholas II's remains were interred in the Peter Paul cathedral in St Petersburg with full state pomp and ceremony. Russia's then premier Boris Yeltsin described the tsar and his family, who had been murdered by the Bolsheviks on 17 July 1918, as the 'innocent victims' of the revolution.[1] This description epitomises the casting of Nicholas II as a hapless bystander to Russia's tumultuous revolution. Such an approach neglects the fundamental collision in Nicholaevan Russia between the demands of a rapidly modernising state structure and Russia's increasingly anachronistic style of government. Nicholas II remained true to his autocratic heritage and attempted to maintain personal autocratic power, which was unrealisable. The challenges laid down by very rapid industrial and economic change, alongside the weakness and vacillation of Nicholas II's policies, left Nicholaevan Russia in a state of crisis. This essay asserts that while Nicholas II failed to respond to the challenges of governing Russia, his failure can be explained by the context in which he operated as much as by his personal failings.

Russia was undergoing profound social and economic change at the turn of the twentieth century. Nicholas II's reign coincided with an intensification of the collision between political traditions that Russia's rulers faced. Economic development and cultural influence increasingly pushed Russia towards western style political

development, while Russia's increasingly anachronistic and inadequate system of government, and Nicholas II's own personal perceptions clung to strictly autocratic rule. Many contemporaries and historians argued that Russia was 'in crisis' by the turn of the twentieth century. This crisis can be framed as the collision between western style civil society and economic development, which pointed towards the development of a more representative system of government, and an autocratic system which proved unable to respond effectively to the evolutionary challenges posed by modernisation. Modernisation required the state to take on a plethora of new roles in relation to society, and it needed to mobilise that society, and allow civil society to develop, if it was to fulfil its roles effectively. The state's rejection of society's attempts to become involved in Russia's governance doomed it to failure.

The private letters and diaries left by Nicholas provide only the most limited assistance in analysing his political motivations.[2] Students and some biographers have seized upon his diary entries as evidence of his naivety, stupidity and even cruelty. The tsar routinely commented on his day's exercise, hunting triumphs and the weather at far greater length than his terse comments on issues of a political or national character. Expressions of emotion or of political opinion were very rare. Diaries were not, however, a window into Nicholas' soul. Their reserved and routine character may well be a reflection more of his methodical approach to diary keeping than his emotional state and political thought. Nicholas was an intensely private and reserved individual, whose phenomenal self-control left little evidence for historians as to his mental state. More recent historiographical trends have anyhow moved away from interest in Nicholas II as an individual. The groundbreaking work of Boris Kolonitskii and Orlando Figes has focused on the ways in which the tsar's image and popular

standing were eroded in the public eye, and the enormous significance this was to have in Russia's revolutions.[3]

Up until 1906, Russia was an autocracy in principle and in fact. Preserving the inviolability of the autocratic principle was Nicholas II's first priority.[4] Rapid industrialisation and urbanisation exposed the inadequacies of the system and its supporting bureaucracy, however, and left autocracy looking increasingly unviable. The late Imperial regime was overburdened with routine work, isolated from its subjects, and had neither time nor energy to conceive of 'bigger' policy ideas.[5] These administrative shortcomings were a key feature of the collapse of Tsarism. Lack of co-ordination of policies, corruption, inefficiency and arbitrariness were to become watchwords of Russian administration. The overarching problem for the Russian system of government was the expansion of tasks that it was expected to fulfil. The state's original role, to defend the realm, maintain order and extract taxes, had been extended to providing the population with basic services. The acceleration of industrialisation and urbanisation forced the state into an ever more interventionist role, in managing the economy and directing industry, and in providing more social services for the population. Education, healthcare, water supply and legal means all came into state remit. Provision of such services was a truly mighty task, which required effective local self-government, as well as a more advanced system of central government if it was to be administered effectively. The Nicholaevan regime was thoroughly ambivalent about releasing its grip on the process of ruling so that local government could operate effectively. The expansion of government's administrative duties and local self government both fuelled and required the development of a new societal strata of educated professionals; doctors, lawyers, educators, administrators, statisticians, surveyors and so on. This new strata formed a nucleus for the

development of civil society in Russia, which could conceivably have provided a bulwark for some degree of conservatism, but which would inevitably challenge the prerogatives of autocracy.[6] Nicholaevan government was unable to reconcile itself with the civil society that developed alongside a larger, more interventionist state.

The fundamental problem for Nicholas II was the collision between his political convictions, which revolved around a nostalgic desire for maintenance of traditional social structures and values, and the inexorably building pressure from Russian society and circumstances for fundamental reform of the Russian state. Nicholas II's personality and attitudes did not fit comfortably into an autocratic mould. Though to the last he remained an unswerving defender of the sanctity of autocratic rule, he had taken the reins of autocratic power reluctantly, and always made it clear that he defended the principle of autocracy and not his own personal power. Nicholas' response to his abdication gives some indication of this. His diary entries report that he slept extremely well after the abdication,[7] and Gurko remarked that 'the ease with which he abdicated in 1917 and his subsequent life and actions conclusively prove that he had no appreciation of the unlimited authority he possessed'.[8]

He has been characterised by many historians and biographers as more interested in sport and family life than in the affairs of state, and sometimes as lacking intelligence. More recent biographers have accepted his preoccupation with simple pleasures, but have noted his above average intelligence and education.[9] Biographers cannot claim any deep insight into Nicholas' personality. Factors in his upbringing, however, give the biographer a sense of the basis for his perceptions of power. Dominic Lieven's sympathetic and nuanced portrait of Nicholas concluded that 'his ethics were those of an honourable if naïve guard's officer. His conception of patriotism and duty was a

high one. The intrigue, ambition, jealousy and frequent pettiness of the political world revolted him.'[10]

One can see military influence in a range of aspects of Nicholas II's life. He was preoccupied with orderliness and self-discipline, with physical fitness and activity, and was saturated with convictions of moral duty and national service. He expressed almost childlike delight at military parades and ceremonies.[11] He did not, however, have any experience of senior command or of war first hand, and this may offer some explanation for the abiding romanticism with which he imbued military conflict. His deeply held religious faith also played a significant part in his outlook, both in terms of his certainty of his own god given right to rule, and in his fatalistic attitude when faced with adversity, which was regarded by many as a political weakness.[12]

Nicholas adopted the popular myths of Tsarism wholeheartedly in his attitudes towards autocratic power and his relationship with his subjects. He regarded himself as the 'little father' of his people, and believed that the problems he faced in governing Russia stemmed from the intrusion of bureaucrats, and the intrigues of various anti-state groups, namely Jews and revolutionaries.[13] His speech to the worker delegation presented to him on 19 January 1905, in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday, reveals just how deeply entrenched these beliefs were. He scolded the workers for 'having let traitors and enemies of the motherland lead you into error and delusion'.[14]

In Nicholas' highly personalised perception of autocratic rule, the bureaucracy and any proposed representative government would only interfere in the communication between the tsar and his people. Nicholas II did not recognise the importance of effective local government and efficient central bureaucracy in managing the state. The existing systems of Russian governance did not provide the necessary framework of a self-maintaining and capable bureaucracy.

Nicholas was enormously frustrated by ministerial staff, and genuinely believed that the bureaucracy was the only thing that stood between the will of the tsar and his subjects. This lack of respect seems to have been mutual. While Nicholas mistrusted his ministers, his own vacillations were the subject of extensive censure on their part. Vladimir Lambsdorf, the Minister for Foreign Affairs between 1900 and 1906, commented that Nicholas 'changes his mind with terrifying speed'.[15] For ministers, this meant that they could not be assured that a policy of theirs that had won the tsar's approval would continue to be approved. This lack of stability and system in government was not a feature exclusive to Nicholas II, however; it was a feature of autocratic rule in a large and complex state. Both Alexander II and Alexander III manipulated their ministers and distrusted their officials. This system protected the power of the autocrat, and ensured the tsar was in absolute control of his court, but castrated ministers, leaving them reluctant to initiate reform. The crucial difference between Nicholas II and his predecessors was that he lacked their commanding personality and political acumen, while being faced with challenges of far greater magnitude.

Nicholas' failure to come to terms with the realities of modern government is well reflected in his own day-to-day schedule. Despite his position as the 'Emperor of all the Russias', trivialities and rituals absorbed his time, and he lacked an effective mechanism through which to impose his will on Russia's ever-growing bureaucracy. Nicholas had no personal secretariat, which was a serious weakness in his autocratic power. Without a private secretariat, he had limited control over appointments and promotions in the civil service, and no effective buffer to ensure that he dealt with only the most important issues. While he was diligent in reading and commenting on official documents, he had no personal staff to ensure that his directions were

implemented. A final irony is that the Russian Empire's supreme autocrat took great pride in doing his own filing and letter writing, and personally sealed all his own envelopes.[16] Such eccentricities left Nicholas with less time to wield some level of control over the mighty administrative machine, and to direct and implement concerted policy.

The mythical 'father tsar' had retained a number of his most archaic duties. Until 1913, for example, the emperor's personal permission was required for a wife to live apart from her husband, and the Emperor's personal consent was required for names to be changed. Though the Petitions chancellery dealt with such petitions in the first instance, Nicholas himself spent ninety minutes each day discussing problematic cases. This was an extraordinary use of time for the ruler of a vast and modernising Empire. At no time was this strange state of affairs more apparent than in the build up to the outbreak of World War One. Nicholas' diary entries reveal that despite the ever increasing likelihood of a massive European war, his time continued to be filled with his usual activities - ceremonial duties, family meals, reading papers. Though Nicholas was profoundly distressed by unfolding events, his personal schedule was not significantly affected.[17] The creaking autocratic machine was unable to manoeuvre with sufficient speed and dexterity in times of crisis.

The highly personalised power favoured by Nicholas II relied heavily on the tsar's own image and personal prestige, and offered those close to him massive opportunities for political power. This scope was heightened further by the state's lack of a tightly accountable and functioning bureaucracy. The roles of the tsar's wife Alexandra and the colourful figure of Grigorii Rasputin are often highlighted as examples of the irresponsible way in which power was wielded. Ironically, when one puts aside the hype, the significance of Alexandra and Rasputin was predominantly in

the ways that they undermined the Emperor's public profile, and much less on tangible policy decisions. Cultural history helps us distinguish between Rasputin's actual political role, which was minor, and his role in undermining popular perceptions of autocracy, which may have been huge. While the influence of Rasputin at court was widely held to have decided ministerial positions and to have directed the autocrat's decision making, his influence on political decisions was not in fact as significant as has been suggested.[18] As for the Empress Alexandra, she was never comfortable in Russian high society, and her shyness and reserve did not endear her to the Russian population. Her association with the debauched and erratic Rasputin led to accusations of adultery and depravity from the popular press, which were widely believed, despite the fact that there was no substantiation for the scurrilous rumours in circulation. Alexandra was believed to be 'wearing the trousers' in her relationship with Nicholas II, to the extent that she was heavily involved in government policy.[19] These rumours were perceived to have a massive impact on the desacralisation of the monarchy among the lower classes, and were apparently received among educated circles as well.[20] They irreparably weakened Nicholas II's position. He was portrayed as a weak cuckold, the antithesis of the authoritative father tsar that Nicholas II's own propaganda propounded.[21] Alexandra was also, by virtue of her unpopularity and her German family connections, widely accused of treason in the World War period, aided and abetted, it was believed, by Rasputin. Lack of substantiation for these rumours was an irrelevance. As Figes and Kolonitskii astutely note, 'the point of all these rumours was not their truth or their untruth, but their ability to unify and mobilise an angry public against the monarchy.'[22]

Failings in the governance of Russia can be found from every angle. While many of them were systemic in origin, they were exacerbated by the inadequacies of Nicholas

II as an autocrat. Among the most conspicuous weaknesses was the fierce competition between the ministries, particularly between the two most important ministries, the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. This competition had its origins in the reorganisation of central government in the 1860's when political power was parcelled out to separate ministries, but no measures were taken to ensure coordination between the ministries.[23] Nicholas II did nothing to rein in rivalries, which impeded ministerial power and could therefore be seen to bolster his own position. Competition between ministries is inevitable in any system of government. In an autocracy, however, where ministers were all competing for the ear of the tsar, competition led to erratic policy making without collaboration between the various departments involved, and the impression of arbitrary government. The final decision of all questions of policy lay, in theory, with the tsar himself, but there was no clearly defined decision making process leading towards the tsar. As departments became bigger and more specialised, it became more difficult for a non-specialist to understand their workings, much less direct policy. Realistically, the tsar could not make informed and harmonious decisions on all areas of policy without coherent and highly informed advice, which he needed to be willing to accept.

An important explanation for Nicholas II's inability to direct policy effectively and to keep his ministries working efficiently was his lack of both a clearly defined political agenda and close political associates. Close links with senior statesmen were crucial if an autocrat was to effectively stamp his line on the state. Nicholas was not, however, a natural political operator. On his accession to the throne, his political profile and opinions were not publicly known, and indeed, can only be understood in the broadest of terms, encapsulating little more than notions of the sanctity of his rule and fond nostalgia for an imagined Russian past. There was a great deal of continuity between

the reign of Alexander III and Nicholas II, both in policy and in ministerial staff. This was not least because it took until the turn of the century for Nicholas to make any discernible impact on policy or on ministers. Nicholas lacked experience and a close cohort of advisors. Though he was considered polite and charming to his political advisors, he was aloof and apparently unwilling to establish close links with his ministers. Nicholas' reserved personality was a central explanation for his distaste for ministers and political wrangling,[24] and proved to be a serious impediment in developing a political coterie. Of his political upper strata, he had almost no personal friends on accession to the throne; only General Orlov was his friend and contemporary, and Orlov died in 1908.[25] This lack of friends or close acquaintances in the power structures caused Nicholas many difficulties. In the early years of his reign, he relied on the 'old guard' of ministers, like Sergei Witte, who had served under his father.

Nicholas was pleasant and unconfrontational in his dealings with ministers, but his mild manner did not offer ministers any surety of his support. His apparently diplomatic handling of his senior advisors, whereby he gave all an audience and seemed to take their views into account, obscured what was in fact the tsar's inherent dislike of argument and discord; he was essentially unwilling to countenance an opinion which ran counter to his own.[26] His inability to engage effectively with reasoned argument left ministers feeling insecure and even powerless. This insecurity in the ministerial mind did not make for effective government. It was entirely conceivable for a minister to have in his department an individual who held the ear of Nicholas more closely than he did himself. All this contributed to government's biggest failing before 1905, that it lacked co-ordination, cohesion, consistency and a grand plan. Nicholas did attempt to tackle this problem by calling a weekly meeting

of ministers, but in the absence of an effective and energetic chair, these meetings came to nothing. Pobedonostsev, chief procurator of the Holy Synod, laid this lack of co-ordination firmly at the tsar's feet.[27]

It is ironic that one of the potential benefits of autocratic rule was clear and well directed policy (as it emanated from one man), and yet this was flagrantly lacking in Nicholas' government. Marked vacillations in policy occurred with little clear direction from the top, and little apparent awareness of their potential for inflaming public opinion. A pertinent example of feckless policy direction was the replacement of the assassinated and hugely unpopular Viacheslav Von Plehve, Minister of the Interior, in 1904. The post of Minister of the Interior was of particular political importance, as its holder had significant influence on domestic policy. The post was filled by Prince Sviatopolk-Mirksy. Plehve and his predecessor had been old school conservatives, who believed that concessions to liberal society would only heighten Russia's domestic instablity, and who sought to establish order through firmness and repression. Sviatopolk-Mirsky, on the other hand, was of known liberal sentiments, and openly expressed concern to Nicholas that his own policies would in no way be comparable to those of Plehve. He proposed significant concessions to the development of what was essentially civil society. But Sviatopolk-Mirsky, like other ministers, proved able to win the Emperor's ear without actually winning his whole-hearted support, and his moment in the sun lasted less than five months. His appointment raised great expectations about the possibility of political change among educated society, but his ambitious ten-point reform programme was in the main part rejected by the Emperor, leaving Sviatopolk-Mirsky isolated and society frustrated. His appointment raised public expectations of a general softening of the regime's

position, when in fact it presaged nothing of the sort. Societal tensions and opposition to the autocracy were heightened rather than relaxed by such erratic policy.

The department of agriculture offers an excellent example of the inadequacies of Russian government, and the truly enormous challenges it faced. Formed in 1894, it was a relatively new department, but was vast in size, and was faced with a mounting sense of crisis over the state of the peasantry. Russia's backbone was her peasant population, both socially and economically. The state of the peasantry at the turn of the twentieth century was a contemporary as well as an oft-debated historical conundrum. Though historians have differed over the extent to which there was an economic crisis in rural Russia,[28] the famine of 1891-2 gave Russian government and society an impression of rural impoverishment and crisis. Concerned observers saw the wave of unprecedented peasant unrest and violence that emerged in the 1905-7 revolutionary period as the culmination of peasant woes.

Nicholas showed particular interest in agrarian issues, and was kept well informed about the peasantry debate and its connection with Russia's impending financial crisis. There were fundamental divisions among his advisors over the extent and causes of peasant unrest. Nicholas' own perspective embraced the sentimentally inclined notions of the peasantry as naïve, but profoundly loyal, god fearing and innocent subjects.[29] Peasant unrest and disorder was interpreted from such a position as the product of misunderstandings, or of the malign intervention of non-peasant, anti-state forces. If there was a challenge to peasant life, it was the forces of modernisation, which brought the corrupting influences of the towns closer to the unsullied villages. This naïve and traditionalist view of the peasantry was at odds with the rather better informed views held by two of the most significant figures in Nicholas' reign, Sergei Witte and Petr Stolypin. They held that the very structures of

traditional peasant life, in particular the commune, themselves retarded Russia's economic development, and promoted the Russian peasantry's disregard for the importance of private property. Stolypin sought to modernise Russian peasant life, and to erode the traditional village structures held dear by traditionalists. This was an important distinction between the tsar's perspective and that of his senior advisors. While the traditionalist view held the forces of modernity, industrialisation and urbanisation, to be at fault in provoking peasant unrest, Stolypin recognised the inevitability of social and economic change and development, and sought to reform peasant society to allow it easier access to these forces of modernisation.

Despite the efforts of a number of his advisors, including the senior statesman Alexander Polovtsov, even the long feared mass peasant disorders of 1905-7 failed to impress upon Nicholas II the dangers of semi-socialistic landholding and its capacity to unite peasants against landowners. Nicholas' response to impending crisis was very cautious: he appointed a commission to investigate agricultural conditions in January 1902, headed by Witte, but encouraged the Ministry of Internal Affairs to run rival committees, and ultimately it was the arch-conservative Goremykin who was appointed to head a rural reform programme. Witte regarded Nicholas' position on this issue as 'the epitome of indecisiveness and bad faith'.[30] Setting one ministry against another was an unsurprising tactic from a tsar who had little faith in any of his senior bureaucracy, and lacked strong personal conviction to drive through his own policy proposals.

Government's relations with Russia's nascent working class provide a further example of governmental incompetence, and in particular the tsar's inability to grasp the fundamentals of the challenges he faced. Nicholaevan labour policy demonstrated the lack of convergence between the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of

Finance, and the absence of effective leadership from Nicholas II. Russia's developing labour movement was a significant contributor to the sense of crisis that pervaded Russia at the turn of the century. Urbanisation had proceeded at a dramatic pace since the economic reforms of the 1890's, and brought with it a whole tranche of further problems. The industrial workforce more than doubled between 1890 and 1912, from 1.4 million to 2.9 million. The impact of this growth was acutely felt particularly because of high geographical concentration; more than 60% of Russia's workers in 1900 were situated in Petrograd, Moscow, Poland and Ukraine. This put enormous pressure on urban infrastructure, and housing and sanitation suffered. The creaking Russian governmental machine was ill equipped to cope with such challenges. In addition to the practical issues surrounding rapid growth of urban areas, there was the new problem of labour relations and state intervention and regulation.

While Witte recognised that the growth of a large industrial workforce would inevitably create labour conflict, and that protective pre-emptive legislation was the best way to manage this, the Ministry of Internal Affairs instinctively sought to repress self-organising groups. This conflict was writ large in Nicholaevan policies regarding labour. The department of factory inspectors, which operated under the wing of the ministry of Finance, sought to protect workers to some extent and to encourage better labour relations, while the Ministry of Internal Affairs maintained a hostile position on any labour protection. The brief experiment of legal workers' organisations was an example of the short sightedness of the regime in this respect. S.V. Zubatov, chief of Moscow's secret police, initiated a pioneering scheme for limited state sponsored workers' unions.[31] These 'Zubatov unions', established in 1902, aimed to operate as a safety valve for worker discontent, providing legal workers' organisations under the firm guidance of the state. By the summer of 1903,

Zubatov's experiment was abruptly terminated, as the unions became increasingly unmanageable and radical. The elemental forces of workers' organisation were not to be easily funnelled into safe channels. The only conceivable way of staunching the rising tide of labour radicalism would have been to initiate labour protection at a level that Nicholas II's regime was incapable of contemplating. Such innovative policies required boldness and concerted policy direction, neither of which qualities Nicholas II possessed.

The regime's inability to tackle the growing labour movement is most poignantly illustrated by its disastrous mishandling of the peaceful workers' demonstration on 9 January 1905, which came to be known as Bloody Sunday. The first failing of the regime's handling was in the failure to repress Father Gapon's movement, which had been overlooked by the usually zealous police authorities as part of the sanctioned actions of the Zubatov unions. The second failing was polar to the first, that of excessive force and repression. Having allowed the movement to develop, the demonstration was policed with a heavy handedness that the regime was to rue in the months of civil unrest that followed. More than a hundred unarmed demonstrators were killed by infantry troops in various locations around the city, with the focal point of unrest outside the tsar's city residence on Palace Square. The shooting of unarmed, peaceful petitioners before the tsar's very windows carried immeasurable symbolic significance. The aims and actions of the demonstrators in many respects accorded with the model of faithful subjects addressing their little father tsar; the unarmed supplicants sought to present their petition into the tsar's hands personally, carried his picture and religious icons, and symbolically at least can be seen to have approached the palace with heads bowed and bared. The shooting of these supplicants literally outside Nicholas' front door tarred him indelibly with bloodshed and oppression.

Nicholas II's personal response to the events of Bloody Sunday reveals his total incomprehension of the forces of change his regime faced. For Nicholas II, worker unrest was a symptom of a narrow malaise, the activities of a handful of revolutionaries. The notion that social unrest reflected a broader need for change went unheeded.

Possibly the most dangerous field of policy for an ill-advised and under-supported autocrat to operate in was that of foreign affairs. As Figes acerbically notes, 'unfortunately foreign policy was the one area of government where Nicholas felt competent to lead from the front'.[32] This danger was exacerbated by the patronage-ridden inadequacy of the Foreign Ministry.[33] The example which stands out in discussing Nicholas' foreign policy follies is Russia's involvement in the Russo-Japanese war, a conflict that was predicated on Nicholas' enthusiastic pursuit of expansionist aims and his inability to recognise the need for an economically weak Russia to avoid war at all costs. The naivety of a Russian patriot officer was allowed to run amok, and to draw Russia into a war against an enemy she underestimated and was ill prepared to fight. Nicholas was confident of victory and apparently unconcerned about the financial implications of the war.[34] The Russo-Japanese war came about as a result both of intrinsic territorial and influence conflict between Russia and Japan, but more than that as a result of ministerial bungling on the part of Nicholas and his myriad advisors, in particular the speculator Alexander Bezobrazov. The tsar's grand visions for Russia in the Far East had not been weighed against Russia's other interests.

Perhaps the final great misjudgement from Nicholas was his takeover of absolute control of the Russian army in summer 1915, replacing his cousin the Grand Duke Nicholas Nicholaevich. The tsar's ministers were not even consulted, and were

appalled by the decision. There was no semblance of understanding or effective communication between tsar and ministers, which, were it not so grave, would be comedic in a modern state at war. Anna Viroubova, a close confidante of the tsar and his wife, reported Nicholas' words on returning from his meeting with ministers to inform them of his decision to assume command:

The Emperor, entirely exhausted, returned from the conference. Throwing himself into an armchair, he stretched himself out like a man spent after extreme exertion, and I could see that his brow and hands were wet with perspiration. "They did not move me" he said in a low, tense voice. "I listened to their long dull speeches, and when all had finished I said 'Gentlemen, in two days from now I leave for Stavka'"[35]

There was some sense in his decision, which was taken primarily to raise the army's morale, by having God's anointed leader at the head of the troops. There were other more pragmatic reasons that favoured the decision. Having Grand Duke Nicholas Nicholaevich in such a powerful post strengthened the position of the grand dukes, whose relations with Nicholas II were troubled.[36] More importantly, by taking control himself, Nicholas could offer better co-ordination between civil and military authorities. Nicholas did not decide military and strategic operations, which were left to his chief of staff General Alekseev.[37] The decision to take over as commander in chief is, however, often credited as the beginning of the end for the tsar, as the post allowed him to be associated personally with the Russian army's disasters at the front. Also, it fed negative perceptions of the monarchy by leaving Alexandra and by proxy Rasputin in charge in the capital during his enforced prolonged absences.

The theme of impending crisis dogged Nicholas' reign, despite the fact that he was the first Romanov to have taken the throne in apparent calm rather than political crisis in the nineteenth century.[38] It is impossible to quantify this sense of crisis that was

remarked upon by almost all contemporaries in turn of the century Russia. By 1902-3, revolution was in the air, and even the establishment's most conservative figures were countenancing constitutional change. As early as 1901, the well-known Slavophile publicist General Kireev noted that 'in the eyes of the great majority a constitutional order is the (monarchy's) only salvation.'[39] The tsar himself was reluctant to accept that Russia was in a state of crisis, and that the very monarchy was at risk. Nicholas and Alexandra shared the belief that the tsar was 'truly loved' by ordinary Russians, the *narod.* Alexandra, reflecting on the apparent success of the Romanov Jubilee celebrations in 1913, said, 'They (*the state ministers*) are constantly frightening the Emperor with threats of revolution and here- you can see it for yourself- we need merely to show ourselves and at once their hearts are ours.'[40]

The revolutions of 1905 and 1917 confirmed that the sense of crisis was not a chimera, but reflected a very real turning point in Russia's political development. In such times of tumultuous change, a clear sighted and assertive tsar was required to provide some ballast to the unsteady Empire. Nicholas' response to the rising sense of governmental disquiet was to become ever more interventionist in government policy, a response which did not result in the desired for strong leadership, but instead only further muddled and weakened government policy. One can argue that the sense of crisis was a direct result of the tsar's refusal to countenance any sort of political change without the immediate threat of revolution hanging over him. Where the forces of change were given no legitimate arenas in which to operate, unstinting opposition to the regime became the only alternative.

Nicholas stated unambiguously at the outset of his reign that he was absolutely committed to preserving the principles of autocracy, and he declared that the hopes of zemstvo representatives for more involvement in government affairs were 'senseless

dreams'.[41] The general fear that the zemstvos were in some way encroaching on the autocratic prerogative persisted through Nicholas' reign, and became most marked in the context of Russia in crisis during World War One. This is a good example of the problems raised by the protection of autocracy in the context of a modern state. By rejecting the role of some degree of local self-government, Nicholas set himself up both on a collision course with society, and on a sure fire tactic for incompetent government. Zemstvos were absolutely crucial in the administration of rural Russia. This was recognised by the legislators of emancipation, yet Nicholas refused to acknowledge the changes wrought by modernisation, and instead preferred to cling to the myth of Russia one and indivisible, and of the naïve, trusting, steadfast Russian people.

The period between war and revolutions in Russia between 1905 and 1914 was perhaps the most critical for Nicholas II's rule. The concessions made by the tsar in the October manifesto of 1905 were given only with the greatest of reluctance. His diary entry on 17 October, the day he signed the manifesto, included a rare emotional outburst; 'Lord, help us, save and pacify Russia!'[42] The October manifesto promised civil liberties and a meaningful legislature and offered Russia an opportunity to develop a constitutional monarchy, along the lines of the models of France and Germany.[43] The Russian Fundamental State Laws which were drawn up in 1906 to clarify Russia's constitutional position did not however give as much to reformists as the October manifesto had seemed to offer. The tsar refused to relinquish any fundamental aspects of his autocratic power, and would not allow the word 'constitution' to be used.[44] Further, while aspects of the fundamental laws seemed to enshrine rule of law and civil rights, the intransigence of the tsar himself limited the impact of these apparently far reaching statements. The lack of clear legal challenges

to autocratic rule meant that any reforms relied on the goodwill of the autocrat to succeed. Nicholas II's personal hostility to these reforms assured their impotence.[45]

The October manifesto presented a challenge to Nicholas II's personal power, which was his central objection to it. Even in areas where reform was aimed towards efficiency rather than at directly challenging the tsar, he was obdurate. The October manifesto and Fundamental Laws established a Council of Ministers headed by a President, and was directed towards the coordination of policies and ministerial actions. Such coordination was vital in making government more effective and less arbitrary. The Emperor, however, was unwilling to allow it to operate effectively, and despite article 17 of the October manifesto, which placed the President of the Council of Ministers as an intermediate between tsar and ministers, ministers continued to be individually responsible to the Emperor, and to report directly to the tsar. There was a bewildering level of ministerial shuffling in the period 1905-1917, reflecting Nicholas II's increasingly interventionist attitude to government. The problems of uncoordinated government continued, and tensions between ministries, most notably between the ministries of Finance and the Ministry of the Interior, were unresolved.

The role of the Prime Minister was particularly vexed. Petr Stolypin is a useful personification of Russia's move towards twentieth century rule, and the tsar's continued resistance to the forces of modernisation. From taking the premiership in July 1906 up until his assassination on 14 September 1911, Stolypin was the dominant individual in government, and seemed to have won the respect and support of the tsar for the first two years of his period in office. He was generally regarded as a character that could bring order to Russia, despite his concessions to parliamentarism. In the years 1909-1910 however, his opponents gathered as he alienated a range of important interest groups, including the Orthodox Church and

landowners. The tsar, rather than offering absolute support to this exceptional minister, came to feel challenged by Stolypin, particularly after Stolypin forced the tsar's hand in pushing through his western zemstvos bill in March 1911. Though Stolypin was assassinated before his political denouement could occur, no one doubted it was on the cards. The tsar's failure to support Stolypin wholeheartedly can be regarded as a significant political misjudgement, but was entirely to be expected. Stolypin was energetic, charismatic and farsighted. His vision of his ministerial role presented a challenge to Nicholas' personalised conception of his own power. Stolypin had been a glimmer of hope for Russian government, a strong premier with the necessary good relations with the tsar to enable some sort of cohesion to be drawn between the disparate elements of tsar, ministers and parliament. Without Stolypin, governance slipped back to the old patterns of uncoordinated autonomous action.

The alienation of those political groups that could have provided a bulwark for the regime epitomises the damage the Tsarist regime did to itself by its uncompromising defence of absolute autocracy. The Constitutional Democratic Party (referred to as the Kadets), which was formed in 1905, provided a political voice for Russian liberalism. Despite the reformist beliefs of its members, and an unswerving hostility to revolution, the Kadet party presented a far more intransigent attitude to the autocratic regime than they would naturally have occupied. This is perhaps most apparent in the history of the short lived first State Duma (27 April 1906- 8 August 1906). This Duma was Russia's first flirtation with representative government, and the Kadets, for the only time in their existence, formed its majority grouping. Headed by Miliukov and Maklakov, the Kadets made far reaching demands for representative government and broad civil liberties in their response to Nicholas II's address from the throne. Their demands were categorically refused, and when they demanded the resignation of the

tsar's cabinet, the Duma was dissolved. Unbowed, more than 200 leading Kadets signed the so-called 'Vyborg manifesto', which endorsed civil disobedience as a method of protest.[46] Despite being committed supporters of the monarchy, Kadets were forced into radicalism by the regime's unswerving resistance to any political change or encroachments on the autocratic prerogative.[47]

The outbreak of war in 1914 'deeply stirred the patriotic sentiments of the educated classes'.[48] The tsar himself, though not eager to enter into war, did believe that the war would strengthen national feeling.[49] The challenge to the nation constituted by war offered a brief window for national endorsement of the tsar's personal rule. The initial mobilisation of soldiers in July and August went surprisingly well,[50] and scholars have remarked on a wave of patriotic fervour in the first months of the war.[51] The occasion of war offered the tsar a unique opportunity to capitalise on this patriotic surge. The Fourth Duma, unsurprisingly given its heavy bias towards the right, expressed openly patriotic and supportive sentiments. Its president, Mikhail Rodzyanko, even went so far as to suggest that the Duma did not sit in wartime so as to not disrupt the war effort, though this provoked the rancour of the moderate Duma deputies. The 'Union sacree', an agreement on the part of Duma deputies to suspend all internal conflict for the duration of the war, and to offer the government its full support, lasted until July 1915. Though its formation was predicated partly out of healthy self-interest on the part of the Octobrists and Kadets who were threatened by internal dissent in 1914, its existence presented a brief period of apparent concord between tsar and Duma. In 1915, some of the most hated reactionary ministers, including the minister of war Sukhomlinov and minister of the Interior Nikolai Maklakov, were removed and replaced with more moderate figures.[52]

The breakdown of cordial relations between government and Duma, and the formation of the Progressive bloc in August 1915, demonstrated the regime's inability to co-operate with society even in favourable conditions, and was testament to its increasingly incompetent handling of the war effort. The Progressive bloc's first quarrel was not with the government itself, but with the corruption and incompetence it fostered. The tsar's isolation in government was demonstrated by the support of many of his ministers for the progressive bloc, whose main demand was the establishment of a 'responsible ministry'. The tsar contemptuously prorogued the Duma on 3 September 1915, only to be faced by a rebellion from his own ministers, who largely recognised the need for a more responsible ministry. Having courted more liberal ideas over the summer, the tsar swung back to an unconciliatory position, and dismissed those ministers who were opposed to his choice of Chairman, the old conservative stalwart Goremykin.

The tsar became increasingly distanced from the domestic politics he so despised in the course of 1916, even basing himself in Stavka, the military headquarters, from April onwards. By October 1916, the secret police (*Okhrana*) repeatedly warned of the alarming popular mood, driven predominantly by food crisis fears, and the rising tide of opposition. Distanced geographically and emotionally from these reports, Nicholas failed to respond. His reliance on the incompetent Sturmer, and then the enormously unpopular Protopopov, forced even the reluctant Duma moderates into an oppositional position. Nicholas insistently held onto his personal prerogatives and hindered the formation of competent government. When he concentrated on his military role, the 1916 'paralysis of authority' in domestic affairs was the result. Miliukov's infamous speech of 2 November 1916, in which he asked rhetorically of Sturmer's incompetence, 'Is this stupidity, or is it treason?'[53] was in retrospect

regarded as a clarion call to revolution, but Miliukov's intentions were very different. He was forced into an attack on government by the malcontents in his party and the progressive bloc, and was frightened by society's resonant response to his illegally circulated speech.[54]

It is not only the tsar's relations with Russia's elected representatives that were highlighted by World War One. Society more generally was mobilised by the outbreak of war, and in their mobilisation were perceived as challenging Nicholas II's autocratic power. The disastrous shortage of ammunition and weapons, and the massive logistical problems thrown up by incompetent and ill-prepared war leadership forced Nicholas II's government to look to society for assistance. Educated society jumped at the chance afforded by the war to become more closely involved in public life, to display patriotic zeal, and to serve their country. The zemstva were critical to the war effort, organising food campaigns, hospitals, care of refugees, appeals to the population, and keeping statistical information on the war.[55] The Union of Towns and the Zemstvo Union, both of which first cut their teeth in the Russo-Japanese war, reformed at the outset of World War One.[56] The War Industries Committee, created by the ninth congress of Trade and Industry in May 1915, was set up by industrialists in an attempt to improve technical and administrative efficiency in industry, and to synchronise its efforts with the war. The war was a catalyst for the more effective organisation of Russia's industrialists, especially those based in Moscow, into a national pressure group. It was inevitable that this group became involved in politics, as it sought to influence policy making and decisions at the highest level.[57]

The government's relations with these organisations were highly ambivalent. On the one hand, the contribution of voluntary organisations to the war effort was absolutely necessary, and had to be courted by government. On the other hand, heavy police

surveillance and curtailing of voluntary organisations' activities demonstrated that Nicholas II's government was engaged in the feeblest sort of ceasefire with societal forces, rather than any real rapprochement. As early as November 1914, the minister of the Interior Nikolai Maklakov voiced suspicion about the intentions of the Unions of Zemstva and Towns, and warned that their activities be restricted to medical and sanitary assistance. In the September 1915 political crisis, Nicholas II displayed his disdain for the public organisations by refusing to meet with their representatives. While the war impressed as nothing else had the necessity of societal support if the state was to be administered effectively, Nicholas II was unable to recognise the need to solder firmer relations with society.

This survey of the last of the Romanovs allows us to draw some tentative conclusions. The institution of autocracy was itself anachronistic in the context of a modern and developing state. The personal control of one man over an Empire whose governance required that the State take an ever-larger role was simply not possible. If the semblance of autocracy was to be retained, it required a large and highly effective bureaucracy to support it, and to implement its rulings. Despite Nicholas II's theoretically untramelled autocratic power, he actually had very limited control over policy direction and political decisions, exactly because he lacked the sort of highly developed and proficient bureaucratic machine he needed. The absence of a sufficiently advanced and effective bureaucracy had its origins partly in Nicholas II's own anachronistic view of his own power. He was unable to recognise that his will would not be magically visited upon his people, and maintained a hostile attitude towards the governmental apparatus that should have allowed him to rule. Finally, Nicholaevan government never really came to terms with Russia's developing civil society. Educated society could potentially have become a bulwark for some form of

constitutional monarchy, much needed ballast for the Empire in times of profound social and economic change. Nicholas refused to sacrifice his autocratic prerogatives on the altar of constitutional monarchy. This refusal closed the doors to the development of a more meritocratic society, more efficient government, and a future for the Romanov dynasty.

Footnotes

1 So described by Boris Yeltsin, then Russian premier, during his opening speech for the interment ceremony. (Speech quoted in full in The New York Times 18 July 1998, Page 4, Column 3)

2 Bing, E. J., The secret letters of the last tsar. Being the confidential correspondence between Nicholas II and his mother, dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna (London, Nicholson and Watson, 1937); Fuhrmann, J. T., The complete wartime correspondence of tsar Nicholas II and the Empress Alexandra, April 1914- March 1917 (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1998); Kozlov, V. P., Pavlova, T. F., and Pereudova, Z. E., Dnevniki Imperatora Nikolaia II (Moscow, Orbita, 1991)

3 Figes, O. and Kolonitskii, B. I., Interpreting the Russian Revolution- The Language and Symbols of 1917 (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1999)

4 Ananich, B. V. and Ganelin, R. S., 'Nicholas II', in Raleigh, D. J. and Iskenderov, A. A.(ed.), The Emperors and Empresses of Russia (London, M.E. Sharpe, 1996), pp 334-368. p. 374

5Pearson, Thomas S., Russian Officialdom in Crisis. Autocracy and Local Self Government 1861-1900 (Cambridge, CUP, 1989),p. 258

6 Clowes, Edith W., Kassow, Samuel D., and West, James L., Between Tsar and People. Educated Society and the Quest for Public Identity in Late Imperial Russia (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1991), ch. 1; provides an insightful commentary on the difficulties of the Russian 'middle', and its relationship with the state.

7 Kozlov et al., Dnevniki Imperatora Nikolaia II, p. 625

8 Gurko, V. I., Features and Figures of the Past: Government and Opinion in the reign of Nicholas II (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1939), p. 493

9 Steinberg, M. D. and Khrustalev, V. M., The fall of the Romanovs (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1995), p. 4; Ananich and Ganelin, 'Nicholas II', p. 371; outlines N's 12 year educational programme.

10 Lieven, Dominic, Nicholas II- Emperor of all Russias (Cambridge, John Murray Ltd., 1994), p.107

11 Hynes, E. L., Letters of the tsar to the tsarita (London, John Lane, 1929); provides numerous examples of the tsar's naïve joy at inspecting troops and 'playing' with his fleet. (See for example, pp. 50-51, p. 94, p. 109)

12 Steinberg and Khrustalev, The fall of the Romanovs, p. 14

13 On his virulent anti-semitism, see Warth, R D, Nicholas II: The Life and Reign of Russia's Last Monarch (Westport, Praeger, 1997), p. 132

14 Warth, Nicholas II, p. 92

15 Lieven, Nicholas II, p. 102

16 Mossolov, A. A., At the court of the last tsar (London, Methuen, 1935), pp. 12-13

17 Kozlov et al, Dnevniki Imperatora Nikolaia II, pp. 474-478

18 Lieven, Nicholas II, pp. 164-5. Warth states that Nicholas II regarded Rasputin as a 'good, religious, simple-minded Russian'; hardly an indication that he was a primary political influence. (Warth, Nicholas II, p. 165)

19 Von Reenen, P., 'Alexandra Feodorovna's Intervention in Russian Domestic Policies during the First World War', Slovo, 10:1-2 (1998) pp. 71-82. ; argues that her political interventions were 'extraordinarily damaging'.

20 Figes and Kolonitskii, Interpreting the Russian Revolution, p. 16

21 See Figes, O., A People's Tragedy; the Russian Revolution 1891-1924 (London, Jonathan Cape, 1996), pp. 1-24

22 Figes and Kolonitskii, Interpreting the Russian Revolution, p. 19

23 Pearson, Russian Officialdom in Crisis, p. 14

24 Lieven, Nicholas II, p. 107

25 Lieven, Nicholas II, p. 69

26 Mossolov, At the court of the last tsar; pp. 8-11; provides a good explanation of this. Mossolov was the head of the Court Chancellery between 1900 and 1916.

27 As cited in Lieven, Nicholas II, p. 106

28 The best known discussion on the state of the peasantry is to be found in the articles of James Simms, and in John Bushnell's review of Teodor Shanin's seminal work. (Bushnell, J., 'Peasant economy and peasant revolution at the turn of the century: neirther immiseration nor autonomy', Russian Review, 47:1 (1988) pp. 75-88. , Shanin, T. M., Russia as a 'developing Society'. Volume 1; The Roots of Otherness: Russia's Turn of the Century (London, Macmillan, 1985), Simms, J. Y., 'The crisis in Russian agriculture at the end of the 19th century; a different view', Slavic Review, 36(1977) pp. 377-398. , Simms, J. Y., 'The economic impact of the Russian famine of 1891-1892', Slavonic and East European Review, 60:1 (1982) pp.

63-74. , Simms, J. Y., 'A closer look at the indirect tax receipts and the condition of the Russian peasantry, 1881-1889', Slavic Review, 43:4 (1984) pp. 667-671. , Simms, J. Y., 'More grist for the mill, a further look at the crisis in Russian agriculture at the end of the ninetenth century', Slavic Review, 50:4 (1991) pp. 999-1009.)

29 For a discussion of these notions of the Russian peasantry, see Frierson, Cathy A., Peasant Icons: Representations of Rural People in late nineteenth century Russia (1993), ch. 2, pp. 32-53.

30 Lieven, Nicholas II, p. 85

31 See Schneiderman, J., Sergei Zubatov and revolutionary Marxism: The struggle for the working class in tsarist Russia (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1976), on the Zubatov unions' experiment.

32 Figes, A People's Tragedy, p. 168

33 Warth, Nicholas II, p. 47

34 Warth, Nicholas II, p. 67

35 Viroubova, A., Memories of the Russian Court (London, Macmillan, 1923), p. 125.

36 See Ananich and Ganelin, 'Nicholas II', p. 390.

37 Lieven, Nicholas II, p. 212ff

38 Nicholas I took charge in 1825 in the wake of the failed Decembrist uprising, Alexander II took over with Russia in the throes of the disastrous Crimean war in 1855, and Alexander III was crowned in the wake of Alexander II's assassination in 1881.

39 Quoted in Lieven, Nicholas II, p. 89

40 Quoted in Figes, A People's Tragedy, p. 12

41 Variants of the speech are presented in ‘Slyshalis golosa liudei, uvlekavshikhsia bessmyslennymi mechtaniiami’ *Istoricheskii Arkhiv* 4, 1999, pp. 213-220.

42 Kozlov et al, Dnevniki Imperatora Nikolaia II, p. 285

43 For an insightful comparison of Russia’s constitutional monarchy with those of other European constitutional monarchies, see the essay of our dedicatee, McKean, R. B., 'The Russian Constitutional Monarchy in Comparative Perspective', in Frame, M. and Brennan, C.(ed.), Russia and the wider world in historical perspective (London, Macmillan, 2000), pp 109-125., pp. 109-125.

44McKean, 'The Russian Constitutional Monarchy', p. 112. The text of the Fundamental Laws is reproduced in G. Vernadsky et al. (ed.) A source book for Russian history from early times to 1917, volume three; From Alexander II to the February revolution (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 772-774.

45 McKean, 'The Russian Constitutional Monarchy', p. 118

46 Incidentally, the Vyborg manifesto’s call went unheeded, leaving its authors exposed and embarassed. The failure of this tactic was to ghost the Kadets for the rest of their existence, as even on the brink of revolution in 1916, they fought shy of appeals to the general population.

47 See Kroner, A., 'The role of the Kadets in three attempts to form coalition cabinets in 1905-06.', Revolutionary Russia, 5:1 (1992) pp. 22-45. , Galai, S., 'The Kadet Quest for the Masses', in McKean, R. B.(ed.), New Perspectives in Modern Russian History (Basingdstoke and London, Macmillan, 1992), pp 80-98..

48 Gurko, Features and Figures of the Past, p. 538

49 As reported by Viroubova, Memories of the Russian Court, p. 104

50 Sanborn, J.A. Drafting the Russian Nation: Military Conscription, Total War and Mass Politics, 1905-1925 (DeKalb, Northern Illinois University Press, 2003), pp. 29-30.

51 Jahn, H. F., Patriotic Culture During World War 1 (New York, Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 171.

52 See Pearson, R., The Russian Moderates and the crisis of Tsardom (London, Macmillan, 1977), p. 41

53 Full text of speech available in Golder, F., Documents of Russian history 1914-1917 (Masachussets, Gloucester, 1964), pp. 154-166.

54 See Pearson, The Russian Moderates, p. 113

55 Gleason, W., 'The All Russian Union of Zemstvos and World War One', in The Zemstvo in Russia: An Experiment in Local Self Government (1982), pp 365-382., pp. 365-382; Matsuzato, K., 'The role of the zemstva in the creation and collapse of tsarism's war efforts during World War One', Jahrbucher fur Geschichte Osteuropas, 46(1998) pp. , p. 322.

56 Figes, A People's Tragedy, p. 271

57 Pearson, The Russian Moderates, p. 34