Causes Of The 1917 Russian Revolution

The collapse of the Russian tsardom in 1917 was not simply the result of a singular, definitive factor, but was instead a much more complex response involving a number of different factors, each with relative importance. The most notable of these appear to be the autocratic regime, the economy and social classes, and the devastations that World War I brought. Underlying these distinct factors is the issue of modernisation, or lack thereof, in pre-revolutionary Russia; with comparison to its European counterparts, Russia's infrastructure and associated institutions were outdated and the countries industrial revolution was only beginning to take off in the late 19th century, while the transition was completed around half a century earlier in places such as England and the United States.

Russia's lack of modernisation can effectively be characterised into three distinct categories; social, economic, and political – and their deficiencies in these areas were brutishly exposed through their sobering defeat in the Crimean War (1853-56). Grand Duke Konstantin, in the wake of the debacle, described Russia as 'weaker and poorer than first-class powers', and pressed for immediate industrialisation and reform. In response, Alexander II initiated efforts of modernisation known as the Great Reforms – the cornerstone of which was the Emancipation Act (1861), which was to free the serfs from personal servitude and ensure that they were allotted sufficient land to ensure their subsistence needs. Serfdom in Imperial Russia was by no means vestigial; there were approximately 48 million serfs at the time of emancipation, accounting for over 80 percent of the population. As presented in Source One, however, the peasants were not satisfied with the settlement as they believed that by right all land should be theirs. Ogarev describes the act as 'the old serfdom being replaced by a new' which is ostensibly regarding the unfair terms of the emancipation, whereby the landlords were the beneficiaries and the peasants were reduced to buying narrow strips of land that proved unprofitable and difficult to maintain. (Redemption payments) Consequently, rural discontent grew as the ex-serfs still held their claims on the rest of the land and this drove peasant revolution in 1905 and 1917. Moreover, the emancipation failed to bring the expected prosperity that was necessary to accommodate for the rapid population growth that occurred in the half-century following its implementation; from 74.1 million in 1860 to 170.1 million in 1913. The absence of increased productivity and little per capita economic gain caused problems for both the peasants and the state. Ogarev's view is common amongst radical intellectuals, many of whom consider that the emancipation betrayed the peasants and it was this that kick-started the revolutionary movement in Russia. The political motivations behind Ogarev's words, however, must also be considered – he was a political activist and close friends with Herzen, who is known as the father of both Russian socialism and agrarian populism. It, therefore, makes sense for Ogarev to have been influenced by these ideas and so, like many of his other writings, this source may be have particular sympathies towards the individual and the idea of social liberation. We must also take into account the newspaper for which the source was written; Kolokol (The Bell). This newspaper often published Russian political secrets and denunciations of the Government and was banned in Russia – despite this, it made its way into Russia to spread revolutionary ideas with Herzen himself proclaiming the destruction of the existing order. Thus, it seems reasonable that Ogarev may have been overly critical of the emancipation in order to grant his liberation demands more legitimacy.

The formation of zemstvos was also part of the Great Reforms and a further step towards modernisation. They exercised limited rights of self-government at the local level, including working to improve roads, primary education and resolving local economic problems. Whilst this certainly was a step closer towards a more modern system, the monarchs resolutely refused to share supreme political power with popular institutions and after 1881 the zemstvos' authority was restricted by Alexander's counter reforms – resulting in little, if any, change in the everyday lives of Russian peasants.

Following the Great Reforms, the Russian Empire was still overwhelmingly agricultural and illiterate with comparison to other European powers; in 1897, for instance, over 80 percent of the population were still living in the countryside. The Crimean war had highlighted the increasing link between industry and power, and if Russia was to sustain its status as a great power then industrialisation would play a pivotal role in this. Steps to encourage industrial development were begun by the government in the 1880's through different fiscal policies and direct investment. Witte became finance minister in 1892 and he had a decisive aim of creating a strong modern state and he saw industrialisation as the key to Russia's greatness. The basis of the reforms that he proposed in the 1890's to bring about such industrialisation was the strengthening of protective tariffs to safeguard industry in the homeland against the competition of stronger European economies which had previously been relied upon. In order to raise the capital necessary for such developments to be made, Witte invited powers to participate in Russian industry through investing capital. The majority of this foreign capital was then invested into the expansion of Russia's railway system and most notably the Trans-Siberian Railway which was constructed between 1891 and 1902 and stretched over 6000 kilometres from Moscow to Vladivostok. It was intended to open up the remoter regions of the central and eastern empire by connecting them with the industrial west, thereby encouraging the internal migration of workers and increasing Russia's production and export potential. Witte's efforts had a major effect on the Russian economy and led to increases in annual production during his tenure as finance minister and continued when he was dismissed. Source Two demonstrates just how effective Witte proved to be under his post, with steep increases in major non extractive industries between 1892 and 1897, especially in comparison to the progress that was made between 1877 and 1891 before Witte was able to put his plans fully into action. For instance, table one cites an eighty percent increase overall in the products it mentions, compared to just forty-eight percent and twenty-six percent in the periods 1877 to 1887 and 1888 to 1892, respectively. The source also describes the development of the extractive industries such as coal and oil, which also saw major production growth under Witte's guidance. Whilst these figures do show that great progress was being made in Russian industry, it is not indicative of Russia's economy as a whole because Witte neglected lighter industry, paying no attention to Russia's agricultural needs, which still accounted for a large proportion of the Russian Empire – lack of provisions in this area resulted in the mass hunger of 1891-1892 and it was clearly a weak side of the governments state-sponsored provisions. Moreover, the source also compares Russia's output with that of Great Britain, Belgium, Germany, France and the United States. What is clear from this comparison is that whatever amount of progress had been made by Witte, the Russian industry was still a long way behind that of its European counterparts and the US, which is not surprising considering that industrial revolution in those countries had been achieved for the most part by 1860. However, he has been criticised for his extravagance and faced serious opposition, led by Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich, who wanted to reduce foreign capital investment in Russia. However, urgent change and modernisation was needed within Russian industry so to spur this on foreign capital was necessary for the changes that Witte wanted to implement.

Another defining factor of the 1917 Russian revolution was undoubtedly the political aspect, with widespread suffering under autocracy – again, this relates to the idea of Russia's systems being backwards because, at the beginning of the early 20th century, they were the last major European power in which the monarch was an autocrat. At the centre of this issue of autocratic rule and severe lack of democracy is that of censorship, which was very much strong and present in Imperial Russia. Although some reforms regarding this were made between 1855 and 1865 under Tsar Alexander II, censorship laws were re-imposed in 1866, effectively reversing the reforms of the past decade. As a result of this censorship, there was an absence of open political discourse and so discussion of this sort was forced into illegal, and often revolutionary, channels. The conjuncture of this censorship, the development of the intelligentsia, and social and economic problems produced organised revolutionary movements such as the Narodnichestvo. The issue of Russia being an autocratic state was escalated in 1894 when Alexander III died, leaving the ill-prepared Nicholas II as Tsar. He ascended to the throne at a time of turbulence and rapid change; a time where strong and decisive leadership was necessary. Furthermore, in 1895 Nicholas dismissed hopes for the creation of a national zemstvo as 'senseless dreams' and his unwillingness here shows a clear problem with the autocratic style of government; the Tsar would not even consider moderate reform and so this pushed even decently minded liberals into the revolutionary camp – such as Prince Lvov. As Figes asserted, 'the tsarist regime's downfall was not inevitable; but its own stupidity made it so'.

The dismantling of the village communes, which have since been described as 'the organising agent of the revolution on land', was without doubt the most important of Stolypin's reforms. It was linked to the creation of a new category of peasant landowners who, he hoped, would feel as if they were part of the system. Stolypin aptly named it 'a wager on the strong and sober' since revolutionary aims were likely to be omitted with the ascension of a more bourgeoisie agrarian structure. According to the ukase of November 9, 1906, the head of a peasant family had the right to convert his communal strips of arable into privately owned farms outside the village (khutora) or consolidated holdings within it (otruba). Further legislation was enacted to speed up the separations through agronomic measures and to help the separators acquire additional land from the nobility low-interest loans from the Peasant Land Bank. The state puts all its weight behind the reforms and sent thousands of officials to the countryside - Stolypin said that the dismantling of the commune would be a slow process that would stretch over two decades.

The communes increasingly resisted and fought against the separators, often by force or intimidation. In general, agrarian reforms must be regarded as a failure; by 1914, only ten percent of households in European Russia lived in farms independent from communes and between 1906 and 1917, about fifteen percent of all farming families in European Russia consolidated their land as private plots, increasing the total number of farms in hereditary tenure to around thirty percent. Yet for every household that enclosed its land there was another that had tried and failed, either because of communal resistance or bureaucratic delays, with the result that they lost interest.

Russia suffered a costly and humiliating series of defeats in its war with Japan, notably the 1905 Siege of Port Arthur and the battles of Mukden and Tsushima. The result 'left the army and the navy demoralised' and only fuelled the fire of civilian anger towards the failed policies of the Tsar. These victories also gave Japan a more dominant military position, resulting in more favourable arbitration by Roosevelt in the Treaty of Portsmouth. Japan were given control of

Korea, much of South Manchuria, and the southern half of Sakhalin Island. The Russian people were dissatisfied with the terms, particularly about giving up half of Sakhalin.

During the war, the ‘Bloody Sunday’ at St Petersburg had shocked the Russian population when the soldiers opened fire against their own population. Troops opened fire upon the approaching crowd, and killed at least 200 people. This, in conjunction with the subsequent losses of the war, increased the political pressure on the Tsar and his government. In response to the massacre, a wave of strikes spread throughout Russia, with about 414,000 people said to have participated in the work stoppage during January 1905. After a particularly violent strike in October, Nicholas issued the October Manifesto, which granted basic civil rights and liberties to the people, and brought an end to the 1905 Russian Revolution. A ministerial government was to be put in place, and the Duma was elected. The Duma served as a second governing body to aid the tsar, but it had little power, and suffered difficulties later. The Manifesto did, however, end the bitter 1905 Revolution, and there weren't many revolts in the next few years. For many historians the Revolution of 1905 is considered as a watershed in the path of Russian history; Figes, for instance, suggested that it had ‘changed society for good’, and that ‘many of the younger comrades of 1905 were the elders of 1917’. A similar view has been taken by Pipes who stated that after the suppression of the 1905 Revolution, ‘Russia gained nothing more than a breathing spell’.

The war was central to the coming of the 1917 revolution in Russia because it put enormous strains on the population and dramatically increased popular discontent. It also undermined the discipline of the Russian army, thereby reducing the government’s ability to use force to supress the increased discontent. – whether or not Russia would have avoided revolution had there been no war is difficult to determine, however it is certainly true that, even if a revolution was probable, the war profoundly shaped the revolution that did occur. The Russian people were already fractious, dissatisfied and eager for change. In 1905 their demands had taken the empire to the brink of revolution, before tensions were eased with promises of reforms - promises which were never truly fulfilled. The Russian empire rested on ‘unstable pillars’, and as such they were unable to sustain involvement in the war. In source three, Hickey notes that the war kindled patriotic support at first, but after just six months this support became negligible given the economic costs and civilian suffering that it caused. This was very much the case because at the time of Russia’s descent into war, they were emerging from a period of relative stability from 1908 to 1913 thanks to Stolypin’s agrarian reforms. The 1913 celebration of the Romanov dynasty’s tercentennial anniversary also played into the immense, yet brief, support for the Tsar as a wave of patriotism and hopes of a resurgence of former victory swept across the country.

Source three epitomises perfectly just how unprepared and unequipped Russia and its military were for the war. In his letter, Nicholas II expressed his worries of ammunition shortages, which ‘stood in the way of an energetic advance’. Such shortages were present from the very outset of Russia’s involvement in the war; the first campaigns of 1914 revealed similar shortcomings in weaponry, where they suffered from a shortage of artillery shells and new weapons such as machine guns. These shortages were aggravated further by Russia’s weak and outdated industry, which made overcoming them an irreconcilable task. Observing the wider context surrounding source three, it becomes clear that the mentioned shortages are likely to have been augmented by the Gorlice–Tarnów offensive launched in May of 1915, which forced the Tsar’s armies into headlong retreat. It also becomes evident that this source and the contained descriptions are well aligned with the ‘Great Retreat’ which took place in the months that

followed. As a result, the precise weaknesses of the Russian army at this point are only emphasised, such that they were to endure a series of unending retreats in the summer months.

These retreats dealt a crippling blow to the troops' morale and as a result rumours quickly spread among their ranks about treason at the court. Such conspiracy theories were granted credibility because of the German background of the Empress and other government figures. For many soldiers this was the vital psychological moment of the revolution - the moment when their loyalty to the monarchy ended; around a million men surrendered to the German and Austrian forces during the retreat. In a desperate attempt to restore morale and discipline the Tsar took over the Supreme Command. If the soldiers would not fight for 'Russia', then perhaps they would fight for him. It was the worst decision of his reign as Nicholas would now take all the blame for the reverses at the Front.

The most common view taken by historians seems to be that the Old Regime was fundamentally flawed, and so its collapse was inevitable notwithstanding the burdens of the First World War; though it can certainly be described as a catalyst for the collapse, war is by no means considered the prominent cause. S. A. Smith is a proponent of this view and has described the affliction of Imperial Russia as primarily ‘a crisis of modernisation’, suggesting that ‘the effect of industrialisation, urbanisation, internal migration, and the emergence of new social classes’ made the ‘erosion of the autocratic state’ inexorable. Smith goes further in his examination of the February Revolution, disregarding ‘military defeat’ and ‘war weariness’ as potential causes. Instead, he sees the revolution as a result of ‘the collapse of public support in the government’, and so adopts the ‘pessimistic’ view that the emergence of a Western style democracy from the Romanov’s was fanciful. Other revisionists have also taken a similar approach, with Hasegawa emphasising the ‘structural weakness of the regime itself’ and describing the tsarist regime as ‘pregnant with irreconcilable internal contradictions that it had no capacity to resolve’. The revisionist view is often seen as having emerged from guilt felt as a result of the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement of the 1960’s, and so it is naturally skewed to be less hostile in its assessment of the Soviets and the October Revolution. In addition to this, during the year 1976-7 Smith studied for his doctorate in History at the state-controlled University of Moscow in the Soviet Union, which may have influenced his later works and his inclination towards revisionist ideas.

Pipes has been critical of the revisionist interpretation, claiming that it is merely a rehash of the Soviet view. He concedes that the collapse of tsardom was ‘not improbable’, but maintains that it was ‘certainly not inevitable’. Similarly to Smith, he cites ‘deep-seated cultural and political flaws’ as being preventative to the tsarist state ‘adjusting to the economic and cultural growth of the country’, however he places much greater emphasis on World War One. He does not consider these ‘cultural and political flaws’ as being detrimental in isolation but instead states that they ‘proved fatal under the pressure generated by the war’. This ‘optimistic view’, espoused by liberals such as Pipes, is essentially suggesting that ‘peaceful modernisation’ would have been possible in Russia had there been no war, and hence the war is seen as the determining factor behind the collapse. Pipes is generally regarded as having conservative inclinations, and has been described as a radical conservative. This is perhaps no surprise given his position as a senior advisor on Soviet affairs in the Reagan Administration, which oversaw the anti-communist Reagan Doctrine and sought a ‘roll-back’ of communism. Pipes is also associated with the Committee on the Present Danger, which aimed to counter the Soviet Union during the Cold War. This helps to explain his strongly anti-Soviet view that Revolution

was only advanced as a result of the war and was motivated by ‘political reasons, rather than economic or social ones’.

Overall, it seems clear that Russia was very backward in terms of its industrial, social, and political systems and this gave way to the creation of underground revolutionary movements by discontents – such as the Decembrists and the Populists. Despite reforms, whether sincere or not, the situation for the working class people remained poor and they were still, after all, suffering with oppression from an autocratic ruler. The economy did improve dramatically, during the final part of the 19th century and the early 20th century thanks to Witte’s implementations and the expansion of Russia’s railway system, however Russia’s industry was still backwards in comparison to its European rivals and, so, going into World War One Russia did not have the capabilities to supply a prolonged war. It seems, therefore, reasonable to say that Russia’s severe lack of modernisation can be largely regarded as the reason for which the 1917 Russian Revolution occurred; if it had begun to develop its industries earlier then it would have been prepared for the population growth experienced in the latter half of the 19th century and they would not have entered the war in such a precarious political, economic, and social state.