

CAUSES OF THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION OF MARCH 1917

- Ben I've got to do an essay on the Causes of the Russian Revolution of March 1917.
- Anne The Revolution of February – of March – was a popular uprising: so you're looking for the reasons why a whole system of government that had lasted for three centuries collapsed ... you're looking at big movements – large-scale changes.
- Ben Sounds impressive.
- Anne It is. It's the historical equivalent of an unstoppable tidal wave striking a mighty – yet weak and crumbling – tower ... and sweeping it away...
- Ben ... so we're looking at two areas of causation: the forces which caused the mighty tower to be old and crumbling...
- Anne ... and the forces which created the unstoppable tidal wave. [pause] Which do you want to do first?
- Ben The crumbling tower! Why was the monarchy weak and crumbling in 1917?
- Anne Russia was vast, 125 million people across an entire continent – too BIG to rule!!! – *and* it had an out-of-date farming economy: desperately poor peasants ...
- Ben Does that count? I thought the Russian revolution was a revolution of workers in Petrograd.
- Anne Yeah, but we're talking about why the monarchy was weak, and you've got to realise that the loyalty of the peasantry was a key foundation of the Tsar's power. The Tsar relied on the same power-base as the monarchy had in medieval times – nobility-church-peasantry ... it was just so old-fashioned. And of course that old world was being swept away by the forces of industrialisation and modernisation. The Revolution of February/March...
- Ben What's this with the double dates?
- Anne Oh, the Russian calendar in 1917 was still the old-style Julian calendar, which was 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar used by the rest of the world.
- Ben How inconvenient of the Russians.
- Anne I'll stick to modern dates from now on, but the calendar shows how out-of-date the Tsarist state was.
- Ben Were there any key developments which weakened the Tsar's government?
- Anne In 1904, Russia lost a war with Japan ... a third-rate power – I mean, a TOTAL humiliation ... it *totally* undermined the credibility of the Tsar. It caused a revolution all by itself.
- Ben Bloody Sunday, 1905
- Anne Well yes, but Bloody Sunday was a factor all of its own, because it lost him the love of the poor people ...
- Ben ... which was a key foundation of his power.
- Anne Exactly.
- Ben What about Rasputin?
- Ann Well, Rasputin did discredit the monarchy, and made Nicholas look silly ... but I don't think you can have him as a major cause of the Russian Revolution. If he had been the cause, murdering him in 1916 would have stopped it happening. I think the factor *behind* the influence of Rasputin – the BIG secret ... that the Tsarevich was haemophiliac – that was the REAL weakness of the monarchy: the fact that the succession to this feudal family-business was not secure. .
- Ben And Nicholas himself?
- Anne A fool – weak – pig-headed – insisted on reading and signing everything personally – making mistakes right up to the last minute, when he ignored Rodzianko's telegram begging him to act. Deserved to lose his throne...
- Ben What about the unstoppable tidal wave? What forces were gathering to sweep Nicholas away?

Anne The forces of the modern world! Russia was just starting its Industrial Revolution, towns were growing and conditions were dreadful. Millions of workers, living – often sleeping – together in the factories where they worked, were easy to recruit by left-wing opposition groups such as the Social Revolutionaries, and the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks. They formed a growing proletariat, up for revolution.

Ben And a rising middle class wanting political power too?

Anne Absolutely – the Kadets – wanting a constitutional government like Britain’s. In 1905 the Tsar had given them a Duma ... a Parliament ... but they were plotting all the time to get rid of him, you know.

Ben It makes you wonder why Nicholas lasted so long?

Anne Hmm. Don’t under-estimate the strengths of the monarchy. This was an institution which had survived 300 years, you know. There was the Okhrana, rooting out dissent ... and supporters in the Duma – called the Octobrists ... and in the last resort, the monarchy was based on the Cossacks ... on the army.

Ben And [realising] ... of course! ... The First World War!

Anne Yes, the War took 15 million men from the farms, and trains had to be used for transport, so food didn’t get through to the towns, and that meant prices rose and in the winter of 1916–17 there was famine. So it created the unrest which unseated the monarchy – on 8th March the women went on a Bread March, which turned into riots ...

Ben So it was the war which sent the tidal wave away?

Anne Yes, but at the same time defeats such as Tannenburg – and Nicholas’s insistence of taking personal responsibility for the disaster!!! –

Ben Aha! – THAT’S IT OF COURSE ... those things had *lost him the support of the soldiers...*

Anne ... so they turned and joined the revolution...

Ben ... and that’s when the Kadets in the Duma saw their chance ...

Anne ... and they forced Nicholas to abdicate, 15th March 1917.

Ben Goodbye Nicholas.