

Collapse of the Romanov Dynasty - Essay

To what extent was Tsar Nicholas II responsible for the collapse of the Romanov Dynasty in 1917?

Though Tsar Nicholas II was a major catalyst in the collapse of the 300-year long Romanov rule over Russia, it was only by limited means that he was actually responsible for the events that unfolded throughout and post-WWI. Other factors, namely economic and political, held far more weight in ending the tsarist regime than a single individual could--regardless of how powerful he was--especially as such elements were the consequences of a flawed society that had been established long before Nicholas II had any influence at all.

Nonetheless, it is commonly agreed by historians that Nicholas II's actions and incompetence as a ruler did play a role in the collapse of the Romanov Dynasty, whether or not that was only to heighten the inevitability of it occurring. Despite being a "well-intentioned man," (Sklaviadis) Nicholas II himself was aware of his lack of ambition and skills to govern the state in any progressive way. 'I am not prepared to be a Tsar,' he states, 'I never wanted to become one. I know nothing of the business of ruling.' (Malone, 2009) His own words foreshadowed the drastically unfortunate events that were bestowed upon him. The economic impact of the Russo-Japanese War, which, ironically, was instigated by Nicholas II in hopes that it would distract citizens from their "popular discontent" with the state of their nation, caused them to '[continue] to lose faith in their Tsar.' (Sklaviadis) This is evidence of a mistake made on the Tsar's behalf that directly influenced citizen unrest and, consequently, incited a revolt against his own power. However, it is important to consider that there were plenty of equally incompetent leaders throughout Russia's history, yet it did not fall under their reign due to sheer luck of circumstance. Not doing so would be 'reducing a complex situation down to one simple solution.' (Muller) Though Nicholas II undoubtedly did fuel an already agitated country to revolt, only the right person in the right circumstances will trigger a certain event, but one without the other will not incur the same extent of damage, and, thus, he was only responsible for the collapse of the Romanov dynasty to a small extent.

More significant to the cause of the downfall of the Romanov dynasty, however, was Russia's crumbling economy. The state of the nation even before Nicholas' succession was far from ideal, with "very little of the work devoted to living standards shedding light on the situation in the countryside, where [some eighty-five percent of] Russians lived." (Dennison and Nafziger) The beginning of the 20th century also brought about failed harvests, inflation and economic depression. With the onset of World War I, however, this already aggravated situation worsened to the brink of utter crisis and economic

despair, ultimately leading to the people's revolt against the tsarist regime. An extract from a 1916 report compiled by the Okhrana show that, during the war, the prices of products on the home front had risen by approximately 300 percent, due to trouble with transport and government focus on military needs. This, according to the secret police, would have been "sufficient to provoke [...] the greatest disorders, attended by pogroms and endless street rioting." (G. Vernadsky et al.) Though the source may have been exaggerating the direness of the situation--thus compromising its reliability--it is a clear indicator of the Russian struggle to survive during the time of crisis, which inevitably incited a frustration within the people that Nicholas II could not induce independently. Put most simply, "If the Tsar's government before 1914 was weak, the war pushed the economy to breaking point." (Clare) Undoubtedly, the economic instability of Russia, which had been escalated due to World War I, was a much more significant factor in the collapse of the tsarist regime than Tsar Nicholas II.

The pre-existing political atmosphere of Russia also played a more integral role to the downfall of the Romanovs than what Tsar Nicholas II could have been held responsible for. Despite the nation being at peace at the time of Nicholas II's succession, actions of the rulers before him had placed him in a rather compromising situation. The 19th Century brought about mass modernisation of both technology and social paradigms for most Western countries that, unfortunately, could not be said about Russia. This was a result of Tsar Nicholas I's intensely strict program of "Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality," which led to increasing repression of citizens from all classes, specifically that of the poor. "[Measures taken by predecessors to improve the life of peasants] had little effect," stated Tsar Alexander II, showing pre-existing unrest among the common folk of Russia. This inevitably resulted in a more agitated public and motive to revolt against the Romanov rule. Historian J. Llewellyn argues that, perhaps, it was the very foundation of tsarism--beginning with Ivan IV in 1547--that caused the political atmosphere to be gradually more restless (J. Llewellyn et al.). Russia had no "court of appeal that could examine or restrain the tsar's laws," leaving far too much unfiltered power onto a single individual. This would ultimately result in an irreversible imbalance between citizen and authoritative voices. Thus, political factors had a far greater impact on the collapse of the Romanov dynasty than Tsar Nicholas II did, regardless of the fact that he did worsen the situation.

By no means was Nicholas II completely faultless in the downfall of the Romanovs--in fact, he was quite a considerable catalyst to his own undoing. However, to say that he was ultimately accountable would be ignorant to the more pressing factors at hand, such as those of the economic and political nature. Thus, it was only to a limited extent that Tsar Nicholas II was responsible for the collapse of the Romanov dynasty in 1917.