

The Fall of the Romanovs (1914-1917)

Yet it was not the internal but the external affairs of the empire that provided the definitive test of the dynasty. Clashes of interest with Japan, the United Kingdom and even France were settled peacefully; but rivalry with Austria-Hungary and Germany became ever more acute. In 1906 a diplomatic dispute between Germany and France over Morocco resulted in a French triumph that was acquired with Russian assistance. In the Balkans, the Russians themselves looked for France's help. The snag was that neither Paris nor St Petersburg relished a war with Austria-Hungary and Germany. Consequently the Russian government, despite much huffing and puffing, did not go to war when the Austrians annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908. The existence of a Duma and of a broad press meant that newspaper readers appreciated that a diplomatic defeat had been administered to Nicholas II. Tsarism, which had paraded itself as the protector of Serbs and other Slavs, looked weak and ineffectual. It looked as if the monarchy was failing the country.¹

The diplomatic rivalries intensified. The British and the Germans did not abandon friendly relations with each other; but the Anglo-German naval race narrowed the options in Britain. Meanwhile Russia looked on nervously lest Germany might take advantage of the crumbling condition of the Ottoman Empire. Exports of Russian and Ukrainian grain from Odessa through the Straits of the Dardanelles were important to the empire's balance of trade. In 1912 Bulgaria, Serbia and Greece declared war on the Ottoman Empire. In this instance Russia refused to back Serbian efforts to obtain access to a sea-port and a crisis in Russo-Austrian relations was

avoided. Unfortunately this sensible decision was seen in Russia as yet another sign of Nicholas II's weakness of will. Then a second Balkan war broke out in 1913. This time it occurred between Serbia and Bulgaria, the joint victors over Turkey. As a result Serbia obtained greater territory in Macedonia and appeared even more menacing to Austrian interests.

Russia's relations worsened with Austria-Hungary and Germany even though Serbia had not been acting at Russian instigation. And on 28 June 1914 a fateful event occurred. This was the assassination of the heir to the Habsburg throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, by the Serbian nationalist Gavrilo Princip in Sarajevo, capital of recently-annexed Bosnia. Austria demanded humiliating concessions from the Serbian government, which it blamed for the Archduke's death. Russia took Serbia's side, and Germany supported Austria. Austria stood by her ultimatum and declared war on Serbia. Russia announced a general mobilization of her armies. Then Germany declared war on Russia and France. Britain showed solidarity with France and Russia by declaring war on Germany and Austria-Hungary.

Nobody had anticipated exactly this denouement. No one as yet had definite ideas about war aims. Nor was there much understanding that the fighting might drag on for years and bring down dynasties and whole social orders. The calculation in Russian ruling circles was that a short, victorious war would bind Imperial society more closely together. A few long-sighted politicians such as Pëtr Durnovo could see that war against Germany would lead to intolerable strains and might initiate the regime's downfall. But such thoughts were not given a hearing in mid-1914. The Emperor's sense of dynastic and imperial honour predominated.² He might anyway have run into trouble if he had not taken up the challenge in the Balkans. The Octobrists and Kadets would have made a fuss in the Duma; even many socialists, whose Second International had opposed general war in Europe, felt that German pretensions should be resisted.

In the event their pressure did not need to be exerted: Nicholas II leapt into the darkness of the Great War without anyone pushing him. The decisions of the European powers had consequences of

massive significance. The Great War produced the situation in Russia, Austria and Germany that shattered the Romanov, Habsburg and Hohenzollern monarchies. It also made possible the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917. Except for the Great War, Lenin would have remained an *émigré* theorist scribbling in Swiss libraries; and even if Nicholas II had been deposed in a peacetime transfer of power, the inception of a communist order would hardly have been likely. The first three years of this military conflict, however, caused an economic and political disorder so huge that Nicholas II had to abdicate in February 1917. The subsequent Provisional Government proved no less unequal to its tasks, and Lenin became the country's ruler within months of tsarism's overthrow.

But let us return to 1914. As massive military struggle commenced, the Russian steamroller moved effortlessly into East Prussia in mid-August. Victory over Germany was identified as the crucial war aim. Even so, Austria-Hungary was also a redoubtable enemy and the Russians had to mount an attack on the southern sector of what was becoming known in the rest of Europe as the Eastern front. Not since the Napoleonic wars had so many countries been directly involved in military conflict.

Yet the Russians were quickly encircled by German forces. At the Battle of Tannenberg 100,000 Russian prisoners-of-war were taken, and the Germans advanced into Russian-ruled Poland.³ On the Western front, too, Belgium and Holland were overrun by German forces. But the Allies – Russia, France and the United Kingdom – regrouped and the lines were held. Static warfare ensued with two great systems of trenches cutting north to south across Europe. By the end of 1916, the Russian Imperial Army had conscripted fourteen million men, mainly peasants. Russian industrial expansion was substantial; so, too, was the size of Russia's factory and mining work-force, rising by roughly forty per cent in the first three years of the Great War.⁴ All classes of the population supported Russian entry into the war and sought victory over Germany and Austria-Hungary. A surge of patriotic feeling was suddenly available to the government.

The Emperor was determined to gain the greatest advantage from

the war. Negotiating with the Western Allies in early 1915, his Foreign Minister Sazonov laid down that the Straits of the Dardanelles should be incorporated into the Russian Empire when the Central Powers were defeated. Secret treaties were signed with Britain and France in accordance with these demands. Russian war aims were not simply defensive but expansionist.

All this had to be kept strictly confidential; otherwise the Fourth State Duma might not have rung loud with support for the war when it voted financial credits to the government in January 1915. Only the socialist parties had sections that repudiated the war as an 'imperialist' conflict. Yet it was not long before popular antagonism to the monarchy reappeared. The scandalous behaviour of Rasputin, the favourite 'holy man' of Nicholas and Alexandra, brought still greater opprobrium on the court. Rasputin was assassinated by a disgusted monarchist, Prince Yusupov, in 1916. But Alexandra's German ancestry continued to feed rumours that there was treachery in high places. Nicholas II did not help his cause by dutifully deciding to stay at military headquarters at Mogilév for the duration of the war. Thereby he cut himself off from information about the situation in the capital. The government's conduct of affairs induced Milyukov, the Kadet party leader, to put the question in the State Duma: 'Is this folly or is it treason?'⁵

Sharp dilemmas none the less awaited any conceivable wartime administration in Petrograd (the new name for the capital after St Petersburg was judged to be too German-sounding). Food supplies were a difficulty from the start; the task of equipping and provisioning the soldiers and horses of the Imperial armed forces was prodigious. The government showed no lack of will. In the winter of 1915–16 it introduced fixed prices for its grain purchases and disbarred sellers from refusing to sell to it. Nor had Nicholas II entirely run out of luck. Weather conditions in 1916 were favourable and agricultural output was only ten per cent below the record annual level attained in 1909–13.⁶ And the German naval blockade of the Black Sea had the benefit of preventing the export of foodstuffs and releasing a greater potential quantity of grain for domestic consumption.

All this, however, was outweighed by a set of severe disadvantages

for the Russian Empire's economy after 1914. Sufficient foodstuffs regularly reached the forces at the Eastern front; but the government was less successful in keeping the state warehouses stocked for sale to urban civilians. Among the problems were the peasantry's commercial interests. Peasants were affected by the rapid depreciation of the currency and by the shortage of industrial goods available during the war; they therefore had little incentive to sell grain to the towns. Certainly there was massive industrial growth: by 1916 output in large enterprises was between sixteen and twenty-two per cent higher than in 1913.⁷ But the increase resulted almost exclusively from factories producing armaments and other military supplies. About four fifths of industrial capital investment was directed towards this sector, and the production of goods for the agricultural sector practically ceased.⁸

No remedy was in sight so long as the country was at war and military exigencies had to dominate industrial policy. Not even the huge state loans raised from the empire's banks and private investors, from Russia's allies and from American finance-houses were sufficient to bail out the Imperial economy.⁹ The government was compelled to accelerate the emission of paper roubles to deal with the budgetary pressures. Rapid inflation became unavoidable.

Transport was another difficulty. The railway network had barely been adequate for the country's uses in peacetime; the wartime needs of the armed forces nearly crippled it.¹⁰ Grain shipments to the towns were increasingly unreliable. Industrialists complained about delays in the delivery of coal and iron from the Don Basin to Petrograd and Moscow. Financiers, too, grew nervous. In 1916 the banks started to exert a squeeze on credit. Each sector of the economy – agriculture, trade, industry, finance, transport – had problems which aggravated the problems in the other sectors. Nor was it human error that was mainly to blame. Not enough Russian factories, mines, roads, railways, banks, schools and farms had attained the level of development achieved by the world's other leading powers. A protracted war against Germany – the greatest such power on the European continent – unavoidably generated immense strains. Yet Nicholas II characteristically fumbled the poor hand he had

been dealt. Above all, he continued to treat liberal leaders of the State Duma with disdain; he rejected their very moderate demand for a 'government of public confidence' even though it was only by introducing some liberals to his cabinet that he could hope to have them on his side if ever his government reached the point of revolutionary crisis.

The tsar, a devoted husband and father, was more adept at ordering repression than at mustering political support. The Marxist deputies to the Duma, including both Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, were arrested in November 1914 on the grounds of their opposition to the war effort; and the Okhrana broke up the major strikes which occurred across the country in late 1915 and late 1916. The socialist parties survived only in depleted local groups: most Bolshevik, Menshevik and Socialist-Revolutionary leaders were in Siberian exile or Swiss emigration or had withdrawn from political activity. The state's sole compromise with the labour movement came with its granting of permission to workers to join their employers in electing War-Industry Committees. These bodies were supposed to flush out the blockages in industrial output. But the existence of the Committees allowed work-forces to discuss their grievances as well as any proposals for the raising of productivity – and this gave the labour movement a chance to escape the government's tight grip.¹¹

Furthermore, Nicholas II's very acknowledgement of the necessity of the War-Industry Committees counted against him. Traditionally the emperors had invoked the assistance of 'society' only when the state authorities despaired of solving their difficulties by themselves. But the German government was intent upon the dismemberment of the Russian Empire. This was a life-or-death combat for Russia, and the Emperor perceived that his administration could not cope by itself.

The War-Industry Committees were not his only compromise. In 1915 he allowed the municipal councils and the provincial zemstva to establish a central body known as *Zemgor*. The aim was to enhance the co-ordination of the country's administration. *Zemgor* was also authorized to supplement the inadequate medical facilities near the front. But neither *Zemgor* under Prince Georgi Lvov nor

the War-Industry Committees under the Octobrist leader Alexander Guchkov were given much scope for initiative. Frustrated by this, opposition politicians in the State Duma, the War-Industry Committees and Zemgor started to discuss the possibilities of joint action against Nicholas – and often they met in the seclusion of freemason lodges. Thus co-operation grew among the leading figures: Guchkov the Octobrist, Milyukov the Kadet, Lvov of Zemgor and Kerenski the Socialist-Revolutionary. Something drastic, they agreed, had to be done about the monarchy.

Yet timidity gripped all except Guchkov, who sounded out opinion among the generals about some sort of palace *coup d'état*; but in the winter of 1916–17 he still could obtain no promise of active participation. His sole source of consolation was that the commanders at Mogilëv tipped him the wink that they would not intervene to save the monarchy. Indeed nobody was even willing to denounce him to the Okhrana: opinion in the highest public circles had turned irretrievably against Nicholas II.

This did not happen in an ambience of pessimism about Russian victory over the Central Powers. On the contrary, it had been in 1916 that General Brusilov invented effective tactics for breaking through the defences of the enemy.¹² Although the Central Powers rallied and counter-attacked, the image of German invincibility was impaired. The hopeful mood of the generals was shared by industrialists. They, too, felt that they had surmounted their wartime difficulties as well as anyone could have expected of them. The early shortages of equipment experienced by the armed forces had been overcome; and the leaders of Russian industry, commerce and finance considered that the removal of Nicholas II would facilitate a decisive increase in economic and administrative efficiency. Such public figures had not personally suffered in the war; many of them had actually experienced an improvement either in their careers or in their bank accounts. But they had become convinced that they and their country would do better without being bound by the dictates of Nicholas II.

The Emperor was resented even more bitterly by those members of the upper and middle classes who had not done well out of

the war. There was an uncomfortably large number of them. The Okhrana's files bulged with reports on disaffection. By 1916 even the Council of the United Gentry, a traditional bastion of tsarism, was reconsidering its loyalty to the sovereign.¹³

The background to this was economic. There were bankruptcies and other financial embarrassments among industrialists who had failed to win governmental contracts. This happened most notably in the Moscow region (whereas Petrograd's large businesses gained a great deal from the war). But small and medium-sized firms across the empire experienced trouble; their output steadily declined after 1914 and many of them went into liquidation.¹⁴ Plenty of businessmen had grounds for objection to the sleazy co-operation between ministers and the magnates of industry and finance. Many owners of rural estates, too, were hard pressed: in their case the difficulty was the dual impact of the depreciation of the currency and the shortage of farm labourers caused by military conscription;¹⁵ and large commercial enterprises were discomfited by the introduction of state regulation of the grain trade. But the discontent did not lead to rebellions, only to grumbles.

The peasantry, too, was passive. Villages faced several painful problems: the conscription of their young males; the unavailability of manufactured goods; inadequate prices for grain and hay; the requisitioning of horses. There was destitution in several regions.¹⁶ Even so, the Russian Empire's vast economy was highly variegated, and some sections of the peasantry did rather well financially during the war. They could buy or rent land more cheaply from landlords. They could eat their produce, feed it to their livestock or sell it to neighbours. They could illicitly distil it into vodka. Nothing, however, could compensate for the loss of sons buried at the front.

Those peasants who moved actively against the monarchy were soldiers in the Petrograd garrison, who resented the poor food and the severe military discipline and were growing reluctant to carry out orders to suppress disorder among other sections of society. Matters came to a head with the resumption of industrial conflict in February 1917. Wages for workers in the Petrograd armaments plants probably rose slightly faster than inflation in 1914–15; but

thereafter they failed to keep pace – and the pay-rates in the capital were the highest in the country. It is reckoned that such workers by 1917 were being paid in real terms between fifteen and twenty per cent less than before the war.¹⁷ Wages in any case do not tell the whole story. Throughout the empire there was a deficit in consumer products. Bread had to be queued for, and its availability was unreliable. Housing and sanitation fell into disrepair. All urban amenities declined in quality as the population of the towns swelled with rural migrants searching for factory work and with refugees fleeing the German occupation.

Yet Nicholas II was surprisingly complacent about the labour movement. Having survived several industrial disturbances in the past dozen years, he was unruffled by the outbreak of a strike on 22 February 1917 at the gigantic Putilov armaments plant. Next day the women textile labourers demonstrated in the capital's central thoroughfares. The queuing for bread, amidst all their other problems, had become too much for them. They called on the male labour-force of the metallurgical plants to show solidarity. By 24 February there was virtually a general strike in Petrograd.

On 26 February, at last sensing the seriousness of the situation, Nicholas prorogued the State Duma. As it happened, the revolutionary activists were counselling against a strike since the Okhrana had so easily and ruthlessly suppressed trouble in the factories in December 1916. But the popular mood was implacable. Army commanders reported that troops sent out to quell the demonstrations were instead handing over their rifles to the protesters or simply joining them. This convinced the local revolutionaries – Bolsheviks, Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries – that the monarchy could be overthrown, and they resumed the task of agitating and organizing for such an end. The capital had become a maelstrom of revolt; and by closing down the Duma, the Emperor had effectively thrust conservatives and liberals, too, into a posture of outright opposition.

The Emperor was given dispiriting counsel by those whom he consulted. The Duma speaker, the Octobrist Mikhail Rodzyanko, who fancied his chances of becoming prime minister by mediating among the Duma's politicians, urged Nicholas to agree that his

position was hopeless. The Emperor would indeed have faced difficulties even if he had summoned regiments from the Eastern front; for the high command stayed very reluctant to get involved in politics. It is true that the monarchy's troubles were as yet located in a single city. Yet this limitation was only temporary; for Petrograd was the capital: as soon as news of the events spread to the provinces there was bound to be further popular commotion. Antipathy to the regime was fiercer than in 1905–6 or mid-1914. The capital's factories were at a standstill. The streets were full of rebellious soldiers and workers. Support for the regime was infinitesimal, and the reports of strikes, mutinies and demonstrations were becoming ever more frantic.

Abruptly on 2 March, while travelling by train from Mogilëv to Petrograd, the Emperor abdicated. At first he had tried to transfer his powers to his sickly, adolescent son Aleksei. Then he offered the throne to his liberally-inclined uncle, Grand Duke Mikhail. Such an outcome commended itself to Milyukov and the right wing of the Kadets. But Milyukov was no more in touch with current realities in Petrograd than the Emperor. Appearing on the balcony of the Tauride Palace, he was jeered for proposing the installation of a constitutional monarchy.¹⁸

Nicholas's final measure as sovereign was to abdicate. State authority was assumed by an unofficial committee created by prominent figures in the State Duma after the Duma had been prorogued in February. The formation of the Provisional Government was announced on 3 March. Milyukov, an Anglophile and a professor of Russian history, became Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the War Ministry was occupied by the ebullient Guchkov. But the greatest influence was held by men at the centre and the left of Russian liberalism. This was signalled by the selection of Lvov, who had led Zemgor, as Minister-Chairman of the Provisional Government. It was also evident in Lvov's invitation to Kerenski, a Socialist-Revolutionary, to head the Ministry of Justice. Lvov and most of his colleagues, while celebrating the removal of the Romanovs, argued that government and 'people' could at last co-operate to mutual advantage.

Under direct pressure from the socialist leaders of the anti-Romanov demonstrations in Petrograd, the cabinet announced a series of radical reforms. Universal and unconditional civil freedoms were promulgated: freedoms of opinion, faith, association, assembly and the press. Religious and social privileges were abolished. In addition, elections were promised for a Constituent Assembly and all adults over twenty-one years of age, including women, were to have the vote. These measures immediately made wartime Russia freer than any other country even at peace.

Although they had not secured the post of Minister-Chairman for their leader Milyukov, the Kadets were the mainstay of the first Provisional Government.¹⁹ Before 1917 they had tried to present themselves as standing above class and sectional aspirations. In particular, they had aspired to resolve the 'agrarian question' by handing over the gentry-owned estates to the peasantry and compensating landlords in cash. But in 1917 they argued that only the Constituent Assembly had the right to decide so fundamental a question and that, anyway, no basic reform should be attempted during the war lest peasant soldiers might desert the Eastern front to get their share of the redistributed land. It is true that the Provisional Government initially condoned the bargaining between striking workers and their employers over wages and conditions; but rapidly the need to maintain armaments production took precedence in the minds of ministers and any industrial stoppage incurred official disapproval.

And so the Kadets, as they observed a society riven between the wealthy élites and the millions of workers and peasants, chose to make common cause with the interests of wealth. Nor did they see much wrong with the expansionist war aims secretly agreed by Nicholas II with Britain and France in 1915. Thus the Provisional Government was not pursuing a strictly defensive policy which would maintain the willingness of soldiers to die for their country and of workers to work uncomplainingly in deteriorating conditions. The Kadets were taking a grave risk with the political dominance they had recently been donated.

They overlooked the fact that they had benefited from the February

Revolution without having played much part in it. The heroes on the streets had been Petrograd's workers and garrison soldiers, who believed that Russia should disown any expansionist pretensions in the war. The Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries shared this feeling and elaborated a policy of 'revolutionary defencism'. For them, the defence of Russia and her borderlands was the indispensable means of protecting the civic freedoms granted by the Provisional Government. Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries had great political authority. Even before Nicholas II had abdicated, they had helped to create the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies and established themselves in its leading posts. And they obtained dominance in the soviets which were established in other cities. Without the consent of the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries, the Provisional Government could never have been formed.

Lvov had been given his opportunity because Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries, recognizing that workers were a tiny minority of the population, made the judgement that any campaign for the immediate establishment of socialism would lead to civil war. They had always contended that Russia remained at much too low a level of industrialization and popular education for a socialist administration to be installed. On his return from Siberian exile, the Menshevik Irakli Tsereteli gave powerful expression to such opinions in the Petrograd Soviet. Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries concurred that, for the foreseeable future, the country needed a 'bourgeois government' led by the Kadets. Socialists should therefore offer conditional support to Prince Lvov. Even several leading Bolshevik leaders in Petrograd were of a similar mind.

At the same time neither Mensheviks nor Socialist-Revolutionaries renounced their struggle on behalf of the working class; and, through the Petrograd Soviet, they wielded so large an influence that ministers referred to the existence of 'dual power'. The cabinet could not have been created without the sanction of the Soviet, and the Soviet acted as if it had the right to give instructions to its own supporters — mainly workers and soldiers — which then became mandatory for the entire local population. Order No. 1, issued by the Petrograd

Soviet on 1 March, abolished the code of military discipline in the Petrograd garrison and enjoined troops to subject themselves to the authority of the Soviet.²⁰ This was the most famous of the early derogations from the Provisional Government's capacity to govern. Other such orders introduced the eight-hour day and various improvements in factory working conditions. Lvov and fellow ministers could do nothing but wring their hands and trust that things would eventually settle down.

Of this there was no likelihood. The crisis in the economy and administration traced a line of ineluctable logic so long as Russia remained at war. Milyukov understood this better than most ministers; but on 18 April he displayed a wilful stupidity unusual even in a professor of Russian history by sending a telegram to Paris and London in which he explicitly affirmed the cabinet's commitment to the secret treaties signed with the Allies in 1915. The contents of the telegram were bound to infuriate all Russian socialist opinion if ever they became publicly revealed. Just such a revelation duly happened. The personnel of Petrograd telegraph offices were Menshevik supporters to a man and instantly informed on Milyukov to the Petrograd Soviet. The Mensheviks, Socialist-Revolutionaries and Bolsheviks organized a street demonstration against the Provisional Government on 20 April. Against this assertion of the Petrograd Soviet's strength, the Provisional Government offered no resistance, and Milyukov and Guchkov resigned.

After such a trial of strength, Lvov despaired of keeping a liberal-led cabinet in office. His solution was to persuade the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries to take up portfolios in government. Both parties had huge memberships in mid-1917. The Mensheviks had 200,000 members and the Socialist-Revolutionaries claimed to have recruited a full million.²¹ On 5 May, a second cabinet was created. The Socialist-Revolutionary Alexander Kerenski was promoted to the War Ministry; and the Mensheviks Irakli Tsereteli and Mikhail Skobelev and the Socialist-Revolutionary leader Viktor Chernov became ministers for the first time.

Their inclination had once been to let the Kadet ministers stew in their own juice; but they now agreed to join them in the pot in

an attempt to take Russian politics off the boil. They did not do this without exacting substantial concessions. Skobelev's Ministry of Labour pressed for workers to have the right to impartial arbitration in cases of dispute.²² Firmer state regulation of industry was also ordered as part of a governmental campaign against financial corruption. And Chernov as Minister of Agriculture allowed peasants to take advantage of the rule that any land that had fallen into disuse in wartime could be taken over by elective 'land committees' and re-allocated for cultivation.²³ There was also a modification of governmental policy on the non-Russian regions. Tsereteli, Minister of Posts and Telegraphs, went outside his specific cabinet brief by insisting that broader autonomy for self-government should be offered to Ukraine.²⁴

These adjustments in policy might have worked reasonably well for the liberals and the more moderate socialists if peace had reigned. But society and economy continued to be dislocated by the war. Class antagonisms lost none of their volatility, and the situation in factory, garrison and village was a powder-keg that might be ignited at any time.

Workers in most places desisted from outright violence. But there were exceptions. Unpopular foremen in several Petrograd factories were tied up in sacks and paraded around their works in wheelbarrows.²⁵ Some victims were then thrown into the icy river Neva. Violence occurred also in the Baltic fleet, where several unpopular officers were lynched. Such was the fate of Admiral Nepenin in Helsinki. The dissatisfaction with the old disciplinary code made the sailors indiscriminate in this instance; for Nepenin was far from being the most authoritarian of the Imperial Navy's commanders. Most crews, at any rate, did not resort to these extreme methods. In both the Imperial Army and Navy the tendency was for the men to restrict themselves to humiliating their officers by behaviour of symbolic importance. Epauettes were torn off. Saluting ceased and the lower ranks indicated their determination to scrutinize and discuss instructions from above.

The defiant mood acquired organizational form. Workers set up factory-workshop committees, and analogous bodies were

established by soldiers and sailors in military units. The committees were at first held regularly accountable to open mass meetings. A neologism entered Russian vocabulary: *mitingovanie*. If a committee failed to respond to its electors' requests, an open meeting could be held and the committee membership could straightaway be changed.

The example set by workers, soldiers and sailors was picked up by other groups in society. The zeal to discuss, complain, demand and decide was ubiquitous. People relished their long-denied chance to voice their opinions without fear of the Okhrana, and engaged in passionate debate on public policy and private needs. Indeed politics embraced so large an area that the boundary disappeared between the public and private. Passengers on the trains of the Trans-Siberian railway to Vladivostok elected carriage councils ('soviet!'). They did this not out of ideological fanaticism but from the consideration that the train would need to pick up and distribute food on the journey. Each carriage needed to ensure it received its fair share. Thus the practical requirements of subsistence were in themselves a stimulus to popular participation.

The country's cultural customs also had their effect. The village land communes of Russia and Ukraine had traditionally enabled peasants to speak their mind on questions of local importance. This practice had been transmitted to those many industrial workers who hired themselves to factories not as individuals but as members of work-groups (*arteli*); and soldiers and sailors operated in small units under their terms of service. The apparent 'modernity' of politics in 1917 had a past which stretched back over centuries.

The various sectional groups became more assertive after perceiving the cabinet to be tardy in holding elections to a Constituent Assembly. In the absence of an elected government, it was every group for itself. Employers regarded 'wheel-barrowing' as the beginning of a Red Terror. They were over-reacting. But there was realism in their claim that the militance of the workers was having a deleterious impact on the economy. Strikes undoubtedly lowered productivity. Even more alarming to owners in Petrograd, from May 1917 onwards, were the instances of factory-workshop committees instituting 'workers' control' over the management of enterprises.²⁶ This

was direct action; it was no longer merely forceful lobbying: managers were not allowed to do anything that might incur the disapproval of their work-force. Such a turnabout had its rural equivalent. Already in March there were cases of peasants seizing gentry-owned land in Penza province. Illegal pasturing and timber-felling also became frequent.²⁷

The middle classes, dismayed by what they saw as the cabinet's indulgence of 'the masses', contributed to the embitterment of social relations. They, too, had an abundance of representative bodies. The most aggressive was the Petrograd Society of Factory and Works Owners, which had encouraged a series of lock-outs in the capital in summer 1917.²⁸ Nor was the atmosphere lightened by the comment of the Moscow industrialist P. P. Ryabushinski that only 'the bony hand of hunger' would compel workers to come to their senses. Even the owners of rural estates were bestirring themselves as their Union of Landowners campaigned against peasant demands in the countryside.

Yet not only did few gentry owners live on their estates but also none of them dared to attempt the sort of open challenge to 'the masses' delivered by the capital's industrialists. Instead they tried to recruit the richer peasants into the Union of Landowners.²⁹ In reality it would have made little difference if they had succeeded in expanding their membership in this fashion. For the influence of any given class or group depended on its ability to assemble cohesive strength in numbers in a given locality. Not even the Petrograd industrialists maintained their solidarity for very long; and this is not to mention the chaotic rivalries across the country among the industrialists, financiers and large landowners. Demoralization was setting in by midsummer. Savings were expatriated to western Europe; the competition for armaments-production contracts slackened; the families of the rich were sent south by fathers who worried for their safety.

Their concern had been induced by the somersault in social relations since February 1917, a concern that was also the product of the collapse of the coercive institutions of tsarism; for the personnel of the Okhrana and the local police had been arrested or had fled in fear of vengeance at the hands of those whom they had once

persecuted. The provincial governors appointed by Nicholas II were at first replaced by 'commissars' appointed by the Provisional Government. But these commissars, too, were unable to carry out their job. What usually happened was that locally-formed committees of public safety persuaded them to stand down in favour of their recommended candidate.³⁰

The main units of local self-assertion were the villages, the towns and the provinces of the Empire. But in some places the units were still larger. This was the case in several non-Russian regions. In Kiev a Ukrainian Central *Rada* (or Council) was formed under the leadership of socialists of various types; and, at the All-Ukrainian National Congress in April, the Rada was instructed to press for Ukraine to be accorded broad powers of self-government. The same idea was pursued by the Finns, whose most influential party, the social-democrats, called for the *Sejm* (parliament) to be allowed to administer Finland. Similar pressure was exerted from Estonia – which had been combined into a single administrative unit by the Provisional Government itself – and Latvia. In the Transcaucasus the Provisional Government established a Special Transcaucasian Committee; but the Committee operated under constant challenge from the socialist parties and soviets established by the major local nationalities: the Georgians, Armenians and Azeris.³¹

Among these various bodies, from Helsinki in the north to Tbilisi in the south, there was agreement that their respective national aspirations should be contained within the boundaries of a vast multinational state. Autonomy, not secession, was demanded. The country was no longer officially described as the Russian Empire, and even many anti-Russian nationalist leaders were reluctant to demand independence in case this might leave them defenceless against invasion by the Central Powers.

The peoples in the non-Russian regions were typically motivated less by national than by social and economic matters.³² The demand for bread and social welfare was general, and increasingly there was support for the slogan of peace. Furthermore, peasants were the huge majority of the population in these regions and nearly all of them favoured parties which promised to transfer the agricultural

land into their keeping. Georgians, Estonians and Ukrainians were united by such aspirations (and, of course, the Russian workers, peasants and soldiers shared them too). The problem for the Provisional Government was that the Rada, the Sejm and other national organs of self-government among the non-Russians were beginning to constitute a tier of unofficial regional opposition to policies announced in Petrograd.

Thus the centralized administrative structure, shaken in the February Revolution, was already tottering by spring 1917. The Provisional Government had assumed power promising to restore and enhance the fortunes of state. Within months it had become evident that the Romanov dynasty's collapse would produce yet further disintegration. The times were a-changing, and hopes and fears changed with them.