

Key question: How did the First World War affect Russia?



Timeline of key events

1st Aug
1914

Russia went to war against Austria-Hungary and Germany and it was an initial successes. Reactions to war breaking out: Russians united to support the Tsar and the crowds cheered him as troops paraded past him on way to the war front. The Tsar now worked closely with the Duma.

Aug/
Sept
1914

Russia suffered two military defeats at the Battles of Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes. Over 250,000 Russian troops were killed, wounded or taken prisoner.

During
1915

The Germans advanced 300 miles into Russia.

Aug
1915

Tsar Nicholas II took personal command of the Russian army.

In 1916

General Brusilov launched a major counter-attack against the Germans but achieved very little. Over 1 million died.

Turning point in the war

I'm going to the war front. You run things when I'm away.

Key issue

Tsar Nicholas II made a terrible mistake in deciding to take over the running of the war and in going to the war front as commander-in-chief. There were serious consequences:

1) The Tsar was now blamed for defeats in the war.

2) He handed over the day-to-day running of the country to the Tsarina. The people mistrusted her because of her German background and thought she was a spy.

3) The Tsarina had a close relationship to Rasputin, who seemed to be in charge of government; incompetent friends of his replaced ministers.

Rasputin "our friend"

The Tsarina had been under the influence of Rasputin for a long time. The Tsarina wrote a letter to Nicholas, who was in charge of the War front:

.. 'Listen to our Friend Rasputin, it is not for nothing God sent him to us we must pay attention to what he says.'

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Contributory factors on the impact of war

The effects of war on the soldiers

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Defeats hit their morale and they increasingly became reluctant to fight. Soldiers saw their comrades slaughtered in a futile manner and many died without weapons or ammunition. They blamed their officers who appeared unfeeling and ineffective.

'In recent battles a third of the men had no rifles. The poor devils had to wait patiently until their comrades fell before their eyes and they could pick up weapons. The army is drowning in its own blood.'

The effects of the war on Russians at home

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- Collapse of the economy.
- Food supplies were getting short.
- There was a shortage of farm workers.
- The railway system was being used to carry food to the front so trains carrying the Russian army.
- Food to the cities had been reduced. Thousand of tonnes of butter, meat and grain rotted in railway sidings in the countryside.
- Raw materials were short.
- Coal and fuel supplies to factories and power stations halted while coal trains stood at coal mines waiting for engines to pull them. As power failed, so more factories had to close leading to unemployment and greater poverty.

Another problem was inflation. In 1914, the rouble (Russian money) began to lose value at the same time food prices went up. People found that their wages were buying less and less food. Huge bread queues formed in cities such as Petrograd and Moscow but often there was no bread.

The growth of opposition

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As defeats and the number of casualties increased, Russian people living in the cities began to lose confidence in the government. They were also suffering from the economic effects of war. The Tsar and his wife lost the support of the middle and upper classes and even the aristocracy. They had little respect for the Tsarina and were appalled at the influence Rasputin held. They blamed the Tsar for allowing it to happen.

Rasputin: 'dark forces' destroying the throne

In Petrograd, rumours about the Tsarina and Rasputin circulated. They believed that as the Tsarina was German by birth, that they were both German agents working within to destroy Russia. Once of the Tsar's closest supporters spoke in the Duma about Tsarina and Rasputin, referring to them as the 'dark forces'.

Tsarina and Rasputin

From 1915 to 1916

For 16 months the Tsarina used her power to sack ministers who displeased her and choose ones who she and Rasputin favoured.

During the 16 months, Russia had four different Prime Ministers, five Ministers of the Interior, four Ministers of War and two Minister of Foreign Affairs.

Rasputin's fate

In December 1916, three nobles led by Prince Yusupov murdered Rasputin by feeding him with wine and cake laced with arsenic. They then threw his body into the frozen river Neva. The public rejoiced, and people embraced each other in the streets when they heard that the 'dark forces' were no more.