

THE DEATH OF RASPUTIN

In the third year of a world war that is sapping public morale, Nicholas II, Emperor and Autocrat of all the Russias, is now also commander-in-chief of the Russian imperial army. Much of his time is spent at Army Headquarters some 500 miles from the capital, Petrograd.

Throughout the country conditions are deteriorating fast. Blizzards and plummeting temperatures cut supplies and drive prices higher every week. 'Children are starving,' a secret police agent reports. 'A revolution, if it takes place, will be spontaneous, quite likely a hunger riot. Every day the masses are becoming more and more embittered.'

Confidence in the monarchy is further undermined by rumours surrounding the German-born Empress Alexandra, a first cousin of German Kaiser Wilhelm, and the self-professed holy man, Grigóry Raspútin.

Lev Tikhomírov, diary entry, 11 November 1916

They're saying the most bizarre things about the empress herself: that she's in constant communication with Kaiser Wilhelm and sends him messages about military matters. And of course there are even more rumours about Grigóry Raspútin.

Pável Milyukóv, leader of the opposition, speech to parliament, 1 November

Gentlemen, I should not like to dwell on those perhaps exaggerated, abnormal suspicions with which the alarmed conscience of the Russian patriot reacts to all that is taking place here. But how are you going to deny the possibility of such suspicions, when a handful of sinister individuals, from personal and base motives, direct the most important affairs of state?

Letter from Alexandra to Nicholas, 11 November. The royal couple write to each other in English, the mother tongue of neither. Rasputin is 'our friend' or just 'he'; 'baby' is the Tsarevich Alexei, heir to the throne

Ah Lovy, I pray so hard to God to make you feel & realize, that Rasputin is our caring; were He not here, I don't know what might not have happened. He saves us by His prayers and wise counsels, & is our rock of faith & help. Once more, remember that for your reign, Baby & us, you need the strength, prayers & advice of our Friend.

Maurice Paléologue, French ambassador to Russia

I forget who it was said of Caesar that he had 'all the vices and not one fault'. Nicholas II has not a single vice, but he has the worst fault an autocratic sovereign could possibly have – a want of personality.

Felix Yusúpov, husband of the tsar's niece Irina. Letter to Irina, 20 November

My darling, I miss you so much, I need your warmth, comfort and advice so badly. I have to resolve a whole lot of problems that have landed on me. I'm terribly busy working out a plan to destroy Rasputin. It's now simply imperative, or else all is lost. You must also play a part in it. It will all take place in the middle of December. Not a word about this to anyone.

Irina Yusúpova, letter of 25 November

Thank you for your mad letter. I didn't understand half of it, but I can see that you are preparing to do something wild. Please be careful and don't get caught up in any dirty business.

Empress Alexandra, letter to Nicholas, 9 December

My Angel, we dined yesterday at Ania's with our Friend Grigory. He entreats you to be firm, to be the Master & not always to give in to the prime minister. We must give a strong country to Baby, & dare not be weak for his sake, else he will have a yet harder reign, setting our faults to right & drawing the reins in tightly which you let loose.

Nicholas II's reply, 14 December

My own dearest Sweetheart, Loving thanks for your strong reprimanding letter. I read it with a smile because you speak like to a child. – It is a rotten business to have a man whom one dislikes & distrusts like Trépov as prime minister. But first of all one must choose a new successor & then kick him out after he has done his dirty business. I mean send him away, when he has shut up the Duma. I kiss you and the girlies ever so tenderly & remain your poor little huzy with no will, Nicky.

Felix Yusúpov's memoirs, 16 December

Everyone came to the following conclusion: Rasputin had to be done away with, using poison as the best means of concealing all trace of the murder. Our house on the Moika was chosen as the place where the murder would be carried out.

Grigory Rasputin, as recorded in Yusúpov's memoirs

I'm protected against ill fortune. Disaster will befall anyone who lifts a finger against me.

Felix Yusúpov

I pulled the trigger. Rasputin gave a wild scream and crumpled up on the bearskin.

Vladímir Purishkévich, one of Yusupov's co-conspirators

Rasputin was already at the gates, when I stopped and bit myself hard on the left wrist, to force myself to concentrate, and this third time hit him in the back. He stopped; carefully taking aim I fired a fourth time, apparently hitting him in the head, for he collapsed face down onto the ground in the snow, tearing at his head. I ran up to him and kicked him as hard as I could in the temple. He was lying with his hands stretched out in front of him, clawing at the snow as if he wanted to crawl forward on his stomach; but he was already unable to move and just lay there grinding and gnashing his teeth.

Felix Yusúpov

I pounced on the body and began to beat him with the rubber club. At that moment I was thinking neither of God's law, nor man's.

Grand Duchess Maria, Nicholas and Alexandra's third daughter, diary entry for 17 December

Bad news. Grigory has disappeared since last night. No one knows where he is.

Ryúrik Ívnev, poet and novelist, diary entry for 20 December 1916

Everyone is rejoicing over Rasputin's murder, celebrating, but I couldn't sleep all night. I cannot, cannot rejoice at murder. Maybe he was harmful, maybe Russia is saved, but I cannot, cannot rejoice at murder.

Vasíly Shulgín, monarchist member of parliament, diary entry for 17 February 1917

It has become even worse since Rasputin was killed. Before, everyone just blamed him. But now they've realised that it's not about Rasputin at all. They killed him, and nothing has changed. And now all the arrows hit home directly, instead of being intercepted by Rasputin.

Mikhail Rodzyánko, chairman of the parliament or Duma, in conversation with Grand Duke Mikhail Alexandrovich, younger brother of the tsar

While there is war, the people realise that a revolt would mean the destruction of the army, but the danger lies elsewhere. The government and Empress Alexandra Feodorovna will lead Russia into a separate peace and infamy, they will hand us over to the Germans. This is something the nation will not stomach, and if it were proved true – and the rumours going around are enough – it would cause the most terrible revolution which would wipe out the throne, the dynasty and all of us. There is still time to save the situation and save Russia, and even now your brother's reign can attain unprecedented achievements and greatness in history. But for that to happen, the entire direction of the government must change. Ministers need to be appointed who have the confidence of the country, who do not offend the people. Unfortunately I have to say to you that this can only be achieved by the removal of the empress. She has a harmful influence on everything, even the army. She and the emperor are surrounded by dark, useless mediocrities. Alexandra Feodorovna is ferociously hated; everywhere, in all circles, her removal is demanded. While she is in power, we're heading towards certain destruction.

KÉRENSKY AND THE NEW RUSSIA

After the February Revolution that has deposed the tsar, it is the young socialist lawyer Alexander Kerensky who becomes the symbol of a new democratic Russia – over the next 8 months of the Provisional Government he will be first minister of justice, then war and from July prime minister.

Alexander Kérensky, speech to the Petrograd Soviet, 2 March 1917 – the day the tsar signs his abdication

Citizens! I am A.F. Kérensky, member of the State Duma and minister of justice (*wild applause and cries of 'hurrah'*). The first act of the new government will be the immediate issuance of an act of total amnesty. A free Russia has been born, and nobody must be allowed to tear this freedom from the people's grasp.

Harold Williams, New Zealand journalist; article in the British Daily Chronicle, 8 March

It is a wonderful thing to see the birth of freedom. With freedom comes brotherhood, and in Petrograd today there is a flow of brotherly feeling everywhere. The police have gone, but discipline is marvellous. Never was any country in the world so interesting as Russia is now.

Housewife Magazine, Moscow, 2 March

Days of great freedom in Russia are here, and bright red is now encountered in many aspects of women's lives. Now that women are becoming enthused by the new possibilities for work, and have no time to think about endless fastenings and buckles, what is needed are simple dresses, overcoats, skirts, blouses and cardigans that can be put on quickly and without the assistance of others. Our new slogan will be: 'We are not beholden to anyone and can do everything for ourselves.'

James L. Houghteling, Jr, Attaché at the American Embassy, diary entry, 5 March

The church services today finished early, for the priests in omitting all reference to the imperial family had to cut out a full third of the service.

Alexander Benois, artist, writer and journalist

Our girls are in a sort of ecstasy over Kerensky. I remember how they would jokingly ask our kitchen staff, Dúnya, Mótya, Kátya, and even the cook Véra Grigórevna, 'Who is our saviour?' and with one voice they would answer excitedly, 'Kérensky!'

Robert Bruce Lockhart, British Diplomat, journalist and secret agent

How well I remember his first visit to Moscow. It was, I think, soon after he had been made minister of war. He had just returned from a visit to the front. He spoke in the Bolshoi Theatre, the first politician to speak from that famous stage. Generals, high officials, bankers, great industrialists, merchants, accompanied by their wives, occupied the stalls and first balcony boxes. He looked ill and tired. He drew himself up to his full height, as if calling up his last reserves of energy. Then, with an ever-increasing flow of words, he began to expound his gospel of suffering. The greatest of all revolutions in history had begun on the Cross of Calvary.

As he finished his peroration, he sank back exhausted into the arms of his aide-de-camp. In the limelight his face had the pallor of death. Soldiers assisted him off the stage, while in a frenzy of hysteria the whole audience rose and cheered itself hoarse. A millionaire's wife threw her pearl necklace on to the stage. Every woman present followed her example, and a hail of jewellery descended from every tier of the huge house.

Vasíly Knyázev, poet and satirist; piece entitled 'How Kerensky lives and works'

Comrade Kérensky rises at four in the morning and makes his first speech, addressing the sun: 'It's time to rise up, to break through the dawn!' And so forth. He casually dashes off 224 circulars and 348 decrees, reads through and signs 496 documents, knocks backs several cups of strong coffee and eats three sandwiches. With butter. Ten minutes later Comrade Kerensky is hurtling towards Helsingfors – a Finnish language textbook on his knee. Five minutes more and Comrade Kerensky is beginning to chat fairly fluently in Finnish. Another ten minutes and he gives a speech: 'Comrades in Helsingfors, do you believe in me?' 'We do!' answer the comrades in Helsingfors. 'Are you with me?' 'We are!' 'Till death?' 'Till death!'

Alexandra Tolstáya, daughter of Leo Tolstoy, nurse on the North-Western front

A huge crowd of soldiers had gathered. On a high platform, a thin man of about average height in a soldier's overcoat was yelling hoarsely, it was difficult to make out what he was saying.

When we returned to our detachment and the doctors were enthusiastically discussing and extolling Kérensky's speech, I remained silent. I felt uneasy. 'Do they really believe that this man can save Russia?' I thought.

Eléna Lakier, diarist, student at the Odessa Conservatoire, 16 May

I read in one of the papers that portraits of Kérensky can be found in every peasant family, where he's regarded as a saint, they even pray to him. Lenin, on the other hand, they identify with the Antichrist, an evil spirit who has sown discord and chaos throughout Russia. Kérensky is Christ, Lenin is the Antichrist: polar opposites. Kind, dear Kerensky, the genius and driving force behind the Russian Revolution.

L.V. Assiar, Journalist and critic

One of the soldiers began to disagree with the minister, and asked him, 'Why do I need land and freedom when I will be killed? We need peace, not freedom.' The soldier's comment fired Kérensky's oratory and he started vividly to expound on the mendacity, depravity and civil irresponsibility of the Bolshevik tendency. Meanwhile the soldier, looking sullenly at the minister, kept interrupting him and then finally exclaimed: 'We have to finish the war peacefully!' At which point Kérensky went right up to him and shouted indignantly, 'Be quiet when the war minister is speaking!' There was a long, painful pause: 'Regimental commander, I order you to release this soldier from military service. Send him back to his village and write in the release order that there is no place for cowards in the revolutionary army.' A deathly silence ensued. The soldier went pale, then fell forward, noiselessly, in a deep faint.

Alexander Benois, Artist, writer and journalist, 3 June

Animosity towards Kérensky is growing. The incident with the fainting soldier whom Kérensky labelled a coward is unsettling. But I still waver between approving of this talented ham and the worry that suddenly something dangerous might appear beneath the performance, that suddenly Kérensky will turn out to be a simple charlatan – a pawn in the hands of the English, a careerist or someone already corrupted by petty vanity.

Fyódor Stepún, philosopher and historian

I think the revolution's cause could only have benefited if Kerensky had exercised his undoubted right to more frequent rest. Anyone who cannot find a single quiet, concentrated hour in the day

cannot run the country. If Kerensky had been an enthusiastic angler he might not have lost Russia to the Bolsheviks.

Eléna Lakier, diarist, student at the Odessa Conservatoire, 25 July

I no longer have any hope that things will end well. Just as earlier I saw everything through rose-tinted spectacles and welcomed the revolution, now those spectacles are so black that nothing can be seen through them at all. It's a terrible feeling when your beloved idol turns out to have feet of clay. I blindly believed in Kérensky, but now he makes mistake after mistake and I no longer love and admire him. Today I even wanted to take his portrait off the wall... but I didn't have the heart.

Konstantín Paustóvsky, writer, 23 August

Kérensky gave off a hint of valerian, like a hypochondriac old lady. This smell, reminiscent of the stale air of old-fashioned rented apartments, was the give-away.

I soon realised that Kérensky was just a sick man with a heavy dose of 'Dostoevskyism', an actor convinced of his own great messianic duty who was careering headlong into the abyss.

Louis De Robien, attaché at the French Embassy, 23 August

People tell scandalous stories about him. Amongst the people, it is said that he has got divorced to marry the tsar's daughter, and that he is going to become Regent. It's the kind of story they love here, and the Slav imagination is busy embroidering on these fantastic themes. We shall see it all later on at the opera with some Chaliápin, or at the ballet with some Karsávina.

Zinaída Gíppius, poet, novelist and journalist, 14 August

Kérensky is a railway car that has come off the tracks. He wobbles and sways painfully and without the slightest conviction. He is a man near the end and it looks like his end will be without honour.

THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION

By the middle of September the Provisional Government, led by Prime Minister Alexander Kérensky, is lurching from crisis to irrelevance. Real political power is rapidly passing into the hands of the Petrograd Soviet, which controls workers' committees in the factories and soldiers' committees in the army. The Petrograd Soviet itself is falling under the control of the Bolshevik faction, and on 25 September leading Bolshevik Leon Trotsky is appointed chairman of the Soviet.

Joseph Stalin, article in the Bolshevik newspaper 'Workers' Path', 17 September

All power to the Soviets – such is the slogan of the new movement... All power to the imperialist bourgeoisie – such is the slogan of the Kérensky government. There is no room for doubt. We have two powers before us: the power of Kérensky and his government, and the power of the Soviets and the Committees. The fight between these two powers is the defining feature of the present moment. Either the power of the Kérensky government – and then the rule of the landlords and capitalists, war and chaos. Or the power of the Soviets – and then the rule of the workers and peasants, peace and the liquidation of chaos.

Sir George Buchanan, British Ambassador, diary entry for 21 September

If the government are not strong enough to put down the Bolsheviks by force, at the risk of breaking altogether with the Soviet, the only alternative will be a Bolshevik government.

Alexander Kérensky to the secretary to the Provisional Government, 20 October

I would be prepared to offer prayers to produce this uprising. I have greater forces than necessary. They will be utterly crushed.

Lenin, letter to the Bolshevik Party Central Committee, 24 October

Comrades, I am writing these lines on the evening of the 24th. The situation is critical in the extreme. In fact it is now absolutely clear that to delay the uprising would be fatal. With all my might I urge comrades to realise that everything now hangs by a thread; We must at all costs, this very evening, this very night, arrest the government. It is tottering. It must be given the deathblow. To delay is fatal.

Lenin is with his Bolshevik colleagues in the Smolny Institute, the building where the Petrograd Soviet sits. Kerensky and his cabinet of ministers are based three miles away in the Winter Palace, the former residence of the tsars.

Leon Trotsky

In the Winter Palace Kérensky has surrounded himself with cadets, officers and a battalion of women shock troops. I give the order to the commissars to set up reliable military blockades on the roads to Petrograd and to send out the agitators to meet the units summoned by the government. 'If you can't stop them with words, then bring your weapons into play.'

Pierre Pascal, a member of the French military mission in Petrograd

Captain Bertrand told me of events at the Telephone Exchange. It was occupied by Bolsheviks. Officer cadets arrived to recapture it. The Bolsheviks looked out and said, 'We're a squadron.' The cadets did a count and said, 'We're a platoon. There are more of you.' And they left.

Vladimir Nabókov, secretary to the Provisional Government, 25 October

The ministers were assembled in small groups. Some walked back and forth about the hall, others stood at the window. Tretyakóv sat down next to me on the sofa and began to talk indignantly about how Kérensky had abandoned them all and betrayed them, and that the situation was hopeless. Others (Teréshchenko, I remember, was in a highly nervous and excited state) were saying that all we had to do was 'hang on' for another 48 hours, and troops loyal to the government would arrive in the city.

Nikolai Podvoísky, Bolshevik chairman of the Petrograd Military Revolutionary Committee

Lenin was prowling around the small room in Smolny like a caged lion. He needed the Winter Palace, whatever the cost: the Winter Palace was the final obstacle in the path to power for the workers. Vladimir Ilyich cursed and shouted... he was ready to shoot us.

Message to the Provisional Government from the Military Revolutionary Committee, 25

October

The Winter Palace is surrounded by revolutionary forces. Cannon at the Peter and Paul Fortress and on the ships *Aurora* and *Amur* are aimed at the Winter Palace and the General Staff building. In the name of the Military Revolutionary Committee we propose that the Provisional Government and the troops loyal to it capitulate. You have twenty minutes to answer, after which we will immediately open fire.

Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Konoválov in the Winter Palace; telegram to General Dukhónin, supreme commander-in-chief of the army

The government has decided not to surrender, but to place itself under the protection of the people and of the army. Hasten the despatch of troops.

General Dukhónin's response

Measures for the earliest arrival of the troops are being taken, but I consider it my duty to report that in the region nearest to Petrograd movement is being hindered.

Minister of agriculture Semyón Máslov, telephone message to the City Council

We here in the Winter Palace have been abandoned. Democracy sent us into the Provisional Government; we didn't want these appointments, but we went. Yet now, when tragedy has struck, when we are being shot, we are not supported by anyone. Of course we will die. But my final words will be: 'Contempt and damnation to the democracy which knew how to appoint us but was unable to defend us!'

Pitirím Sorókin, a member of the City Council

The immediate horror that faced us was this situation at the Winter Palace. What could we do? After breathless council it was decided that all of us should go in procession to the Winter Palace and do our utmost to rescue the ministers, the women soldiers, and the cadets. Never had Petrograd seen such a hopeless march. In absolute silence, like phantoms, we moved forward. Near Kazan Cathedral three loaded automobiles full of sailors, machine guns and bombs, stopped us. 'Halt! Who goes there?' 'Representatives of the municipality, the Soviets, the Council of the Republic, and the socialist parties.' 'Where are you going?' 'To the Winter

Palace, to end this civil war and to save the defenders of the palace.’ ‘Nobody can approach the palace. Turn back at once or we will fire on you.’

There was nothing to be done, so we returned in ghastly silence. There we made one more effort to communicate with the palace, but the wires by this time had been cut. The firing had ceased and we knew that the massacre was probably in full swing.

The poet Zinaída Gíppius

There is shooting on Nevsky. The government sent armoured cars over there, and the armoured cars have gone over to the Bolsheviks, fraternising avidly. In a word, a cataclysm is imminent, the darkest, most idiotic, grubbiest social upheaval that history has ever seen. And we can expect it any minute now.

Artist and writer Alexander Benois

The *Aurora*, anchored in the middle of the Neva between the fortress and the palace, was firing on the latter at point-blank range. My heart sank. Could these really be the last moments of the Winter Palace’s existence? But next door was the Hermitage, home to everything I hold dearest in the world!

Opera singer Fyódor Chaliápin, on stage as Philip II in a performance of *Don Carlos*

Dressed in my rich porphyry mantle, sceptre in hand and the crown of King Philip of Spain on my head, I come out of the cathedral onto the square. At that moment a cannon shot suddenly rings out on the Nevá, not far from the theatre. As a king who does not tolerate dissent, I listen severely – is it in response to me? Another shot. From the height of the cathedral steps I notice my people tremble My square begins to empty. The chorus and the extras have moved to the wings and, forgetting all the heretics, have started to discuss loudly in which direction they should flee. It is no small task for King Philip II of Spain to convince his timid subjects that there is nowhere to run, for it is completely impossible to tell where the shells are going to fall.

Pavel Malyantóvich, minister of justice inside the Winter Palace

The door swung open... An officer cadet rushed in. He stood to attention, saluted and asked, anxious but determined: ‘What are the orders? Remain steadfast to the last man? We will if

that is the order of the Provisional Government.’ ‘No! It’s pointless! That much is clear! We don’t want bloodshed! We should surrender,’ we all shouted without conferring, but simply by looking each other in the eye and seeing the same feeling, the same decision.

Then, like a piece of wood borne on a wave, a small man was pushed into the room by the crowd, which poured in right after him and flooded every corner of the room.

Vladímir Antónov-Ovséenko, leader of the troops who have stormed the Winter Palace

‘In the name of the Military Revolutionary Committee, I pronounce you arrested!’ I said. ‘Members of the Provisional Government will give way to force and surrender to avoid bloodshed’, answered Konoválov.

Leon Trotsky, announcement to the Petrograd Soviet

On behalf of the Military Revolutionary Committee I declare that the Provisional Government is no more! I know of no other example in history of a revolutionary movement involving such vast masses of people which has passed so bloodlessly.

Editorial in the pro-Provisional Government newspaper ‘Speech’, 26 October

As these lines are being written, we do not as yet know whether the reins of government have already been seized by Messrs Lenin and Trotsky. We do not know whether there is still a government in Russia. But already we know one thing: a new, deep shock has taken place and its consequences for the domestic and international state of the country are incalculable. And if the legitimate government recognised by the whole country in the first days of the February upheaval is overthrown, then let all responsibility for future tragic events fall on the heads of those who in the days of the greatest mortal danger for their homeland threw her into the abyss of new tempests and agitations.

Leon Trotsky

The government must be formed. We number among us a few members of the Central Committee. A quick session opens in a corner of the room.

‘What shall we call them?’ asks Lenin, thinking aloud. ‘Anything but ministers; that’s such a vile, hackneyed word.’

‘We might call them commissars,’ I suggest, ‘but there are too many commissars just now. Perhaps “supreme commissars”? No, “supreme” doesn’t sound right. But why not “people’s commissars”?’

‘People’s commissars? Well, that might do, I think,’ Lenin agrees. ‘And the government as a whole?’

‘A Soviet, of course, the Soviet of People’s Commissars, eh?’

‘The Soviet of People’s Commissars?’ Lenin picks it up. ‘That’s splendid; it reeks of revolution!’