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An Historian's Perspective on Russia's Failed Transition from Monarchy to  
Democracy at the Beginning of the Last Century

*Introductory remarks:*

My responses on the roots and causes of the monarchy's collapse, both immediate and long term, are based mostly on contemporary scholarship of the Russian Revolution of 1917 which over the last forty years has devoted considerable attention to these and related questions. At the same time, my comments on the type and significance of the transitional regime rely almost exclusively on my own findings since this topic has yet to receive the attention it deserves. At the core of previous historical investigations lies a deeply rooted assumption that even though the 1917 Revolution represents a break with Russia's past the origins of the new Communist regime should be looked for in its monarchical predecessor. Among the chief proponents of this influential approach are historians Richard Pipes of Harvard and the late Leonard Schapiro of the London School of Economics. Both argue that the same patrimonial character of Russia's monarchical state persisted under the Bolsheviks and that the regime that came to power in November 1917 was, in basic terms, "a new form of the overthrown autocracy."

Preoccupied with defining the nature of the Communist regime (and its internal dynamics), historians of modern Russia have mostly ignored the transitional period from the monarchy to the Bolshevik dictatorship. More lamentable still is the fact that many of the insights gained from the well developed fields of pre-1917 Russia and Soviet studies were rarely, if ever, applied to the transitional period. The same is true for the considerably less developed historiography of the Provisional (transitional) Government, which usually treats the transitional revolutionary regime as a separate phenomenon and as having little or no value to our understanding of either the old (tsarist) or the new (Bolshevik) regimes.

Yet, the Russian case represents a telling example of how a prior regime type influenced the mode of transition and how the particular type of transitional regime undermined prospects for democratic consolidation and contributed to the failure of the 1917 revolution to produce a democratic outcome. My own research concerns the question of the nature and *modus operandi* of the transitional regime, as represented by the Provisional Government, and traces its intellectual origins back to the opposition politics of the last decade of monarchical rule. I focus primarily on the interconnections between the ideas and practices of the transitional government and the politics of the 1917 revolution. How were views regarding the form of transitional government and its legitimacy developed and implemented? How did the Provisional Government justify and exercise its “plenitude of power”? How did these elements transform the politics of the transitional regime?

With the overthrow of Russian monarchy and suspension of its political institutions in March 1917, the new Provisional Government of moderate and liberal politicians unilaterally declared itself the sole bearer of the supreme, executive, and legislative powers. The establishment of this revolutionary autocracy, however, was not the direct consequence of popular pressure during the February uprising in Petrograd. Its origins, formation, and scope of powers and responsibilities derived from the ideas about a type of *transitional* regime that leading liberal politicians had developed during the pre-revolutionary decade. They believed that a self-perpetuating government of “Public Trust” accountable only to the future Constituent Assembly, could ensure the successful transition from the old monarchical system to a new democratic order. Maintaining a complete monopoly on power and constantly reinventing the sources and symbols of legitimacy thus became the transitional government's central concern, dominating its thought and actions and shaping the political and legal climate in 1917. But by so doing the Provisional Government soon drove itself into a corner. Socially detached, economically bankrupt, and politically weak and isolated, it could no longer carry out the wide ranging and much anticipated program of reforms. The prospects for democratic consolidation were thus irreversibly damaged, fatally undermining the likelihood of the transition's democratic outcome. After only eight months in power, the Provisional

Government was swept away by their more determined Bolshevik rivals while a war-weary army and an indifferent population looked on.

The newly established regime, however, turned out to be no less autocratic and with an equally slender claim to legitimacy. Although infinitely more ruthless and ideological, the Bolsheviks initially presented themselves as yet another transitional authority. In contrast to the traditional interpretation, they showed many more commonalities with their liberal predecessors than with the admittedly archaic and widely discredited regime of the last tsar. In the end, of course, their “transition” lasted for seventy four years. But it, too, came to pass, bringing about yet another transitional period, which many observers now identify with the reign of tsar Boris (Yeltsin) during the 1990s.

Before addressing the workshop’s questions, a brief clarification about the 1906-1917 Russian monarchical regime is in order. One of the most persistent misconceptions about the February Revolution is that it brought down the autocratic rule of the last tsar. It is true that in February 1917 Russia still had monarchical rule, but it is also true that Russia was no longer an autocracy. In the aftermath of Russia’s disastrous defeat during the Russo-Japanese war and the 1905 Revolution, Nicholas II issued a manifesto, which, in addition to expanding civil liberties, provided for elections to a legislature and enacted the Constitution (or Fundamental Laws) outlining the structure of the new government. It provided for a sharing of power among Nicholas, his government and the two houses of the legislature, the Duma (or lower chamber of the parliament elected on a reasonably wide franchise) and the State Council (or upper chamber, with half of its members appointed by the emperor and the other half elected from the professional and socially privileged groups). According to the new arrangement, the administration of the vast empire was to remain in the hands of the monarch and his ministers while legislation became largely the province of the elected legislature. It is therefore more fitting (and legally accurate) to refer to the post-1906 Russian political regime as *dual monarchy* (not autocracy), a term which was indeed coined by jurists and constitutional scholars at the time.

This power sharing arrangement worked reasonably well until the February Revolution when Nicholas was forced to abdicate and the new transitional regime, as

represented by the Provisional Government, abolished the very institution of monarchy and suspended (and later dissolved) both houses of the legislature. The Provisional Government assumed the power to legislate but did not abolish the tsarist Constitution; it continued to apply the law but did so selectively, whenever politically and legally expedient. Any and all political continuity with the Old Regime and its institutions was publically renounced and the new regime's claim to legitimacy was said to have been based on the ever elusive notion of "public trust".

1. What set of economic, demographic, social, or geopolitical factors interacted to destabilize the monarchy?

The Russian monarchy was brought down by the revolution in February 1917. Although the monarchy's demise was sudden, it was not unexpected. Russians had long discussed revolution, and by late 1916 a tacit consensus emerged across the entire political and social spectrum that a major upheaval could happen at any time. The impending change of regime was also evident to foreign observers. By early 1917 the monarchy was thoroughly destabilized and the economic and social conditions for revolution were present: deteriorating economy (staggering inflation, food shortages, inadequate supplies of fuel and other goods of "daily necessity," rationing of selected foodstuffs), revival of pre-war social and economic tensions (acute shortage of arable peasant-owned land in European Russia and the resulting land and food riots), industrial strikes, alienation of educated society from the regime and of urban and rural working classes from both the regime and educated society. On the demographic front, millions of refugees from the western borderland regions (occupied by German armies) flooded the cities of European Russia and, together with the additional influx of new workers for expanding war industries and soldiers into the garrisons, overtaxed housing and municipal services. Overall, the conditions for the middle and lower classes noticeably deteriorated and widespread anxieties and a sense of impending national disaster spread to ever wider sections of Russian society.

## 2. What set of more immediate factors precipitated crisis in the monarchy?

The First World War was central to both the crisis of the Old Regime and to the character of the February Revolution, thereby shaping the transitional regime that followed. The war put enormous strains on the population and economy and dramatically increased popular discontent. Economically, Russia was unfit to bear the weight of modern war and supplies of food, fuel, and transport reached a crisis in the winter of 1916-1917. The war also undermined the discipline of the Imperial army, thus reducing the monarchy's ability to use force to suppress the rapidly increasing instances of industrial strikes and food riots in urban areas. The consumption of manpower, the steady rise in the age of new conscripts, and the presence of disgruntled veterans and new recruits in vast numbers in the capital city of Petrograd placed an additional question mark over the army's capacity to fight and its loyalty to the monarchy. In political terms, the war had created an even wider gulf between Nicholas II and Russia's elected politicians. It deepened the divisions within political and bureaucratic elites, and it destabilized the fragile yet functional power sharing arrangement between the monarch and the legislature, that is, between the regime and the educated public. It has often been argued that without the war, Russia might have avoided revolution.

Additional immediate factors which precipitated crisis in the monarchy and its downfall in February 1917 include: 1) a revival, during 1915-1916, of a united anti-government front of revolutionary, liberal and moderate opposition both inside and outside the legislature; 2) formation of several military and military-political plots to remove Nicholas from the throne and replace him with his underage son Alexis under the regency of tsar's brother Grand Duke Michael; membership lists of potential replacement governments, dominated by the liberal and moderate politicians from the Duma, began to circulate as early as August 1915; 3) an extreme war-weariness for which broad segments of the population blamed the tsarist government and the military high command also headed by Nicholas after his decision in August 1915, against the advice of his ministers, to go to the front and to assume personal command of the armed forces; 4) a discredited,

inflexible monarch and a divided, weak government which by early 1917 lost the confidence in its own right to govern; growing support by some ministers for closer cooperation with the legislature and non-government organizations and calls for significant reform of the political system; 5) widespread and highly damaging rumors of pro-German “treason in high places,” including court officials, ministers of Nicholas’ cabinet and even his German-born wife, the empress Alexandra. By the end of 1916, the belief in a pervasive treason at the top had permeated all levels of society as an explanation for military defeats and government mismanagement. It discredited the imperial family and Nicholas personally, alienated many of its conservative supporters, and weakened the monarchy’s image in the eyes of many people, among them officers and soldiers at the front. By late 1916-early 1917, there emerged a general consensus in educated society, including military and political elites, about the necessity of Nicholas’ abdication as the only way to solve the burning political and military problems, namely, to improve the government’s ability to prosecute the war, stave off a popular revolt and prevent disintegration of the Russian state.

### 3. Did elite divisions within the monarchy play a major role in the transition?

The received wisdom is that elite divisions within the monarchy played no role during the transitional period.

### 4. Did mass mobilization against the monarchy play a major role?

As many and various initiatives to reform the government were rejected by the obstinate monarch and economic conditions deteriorated, the liberal and socialist politicians moved to exploit social and economic frustrations to mobilize and radicalize masses. The strikes of 1915-1916, particularly, energized the socialist parties to capitalize on popular discontents to try to promote anti-monarchist attitudes and encourage any acts of civil disobedience and unrest that might be developing. The liberals and socialists dominated nongovernmental organizations such as War Industry Committees (WIC) and Union of Local Self-Governments and Municipalities (*Zemgor*) increased their activity at

the factories, at higher educational institutions and even in army garrisons. By late 1916 this had grown, in Petrograd, Moscow, and other large cities, into a significant presence. Meetings in Petrograd and Moscow in October and November of 1916 held by representatives of the socialist parties, *Zemgor*, and WIC led to creation of an Interparty Informational Bureau, which discussed the prospects for popular uprising and strategies to mobilize the industrial workers and to try to form broad anti-regime alliances. The Bureau also issued manifestos, leaflets, and other anti-regime propaganda. Although broader organization structures and leadership remained fragile, it appears that at least some of the strikes and demonstrations in January-February 1917 leading up to the February Revolution were planned ahead and coordinated by the Bureau and the socialist parties.

Moreover, the defeats and devastating casualties of 1914-1916 and the political and economic situation politicized the soldiers, especially the rear garrisons and in the capital. Fear, anger and despair drove the “peasants and workers in uniform” to the brink of rebellion (for example, numerous refusals to return to front-line positions occurred during 1916-early 1917). In contrast to the educated society which adopted strongly patriotic attitudes after the war broke out, the peasant and worker masses quickly lost interest in the goals of the war, seeing it mostly as a purposeless slaughter and a heavy burden they had to carry for the benefit of others. The war both mobilized and radicalized the discontented soldiers.

The expansion of the army during the war also meant that many conscripts brought their civilian political, mainly anti-regime, attitudes with them. Many new junior officers from educated society were either socialist sympathizers or card-carrying party members. Lower-class draftees likewise brought their social grievances and political attitudes with them into the ranks. Many soldiers of the Petrograd garrison were of local, often working-class background and maintained extensive contacts with the local population. These preexisting party affiliations and continued contacts with the civilian population provided a convenient medium for political agitation and anti-government mobilization in the army. Still, the extent to which socialist parties helped set off the February Revolution or merely capitalized on a popular revolt remains unclear. What is

certain, however, is that their efforts at mass mobilization proved both significant and successful once the revolution broke out.

5. Did violence play a major role? Why or why not?

The concerted efforts at mass mobilization by socialist parties and nongovernmental organizations (see previous paragraph) before the revolution along with swift and effective actions by the liberal and socialist politicians from the Duma in organizing anti-government forces, maintaining civic order, and arresting tsarist officials during the first days of the revolution played a decisive role in minimizing violence. The latest numbers indicate that the February Revolution claimed the lives of 433 persons, two thirds of whom were insurgents and the remaining third police, gendarmes, officers, and officials of the old regime. An additional 882 persons were wounded or crippled, most of them insurgents. These figures show that contrary to popular belief the February Revolution in Petrograd was by no means bloodless. At the same time, considering how massive and widespread the popular revolt was, these figures suggest that violence was relatively minor.

6. Did the collapse or crisis in the monarchy lead to democracy or a new form of autocracy? Explain the outcome.

Please refer to my introductory remarks (pp. 1-3).

7. What role if any did international actors play in either undermining autocracy or facilitating/impeding a democratic transition?

It is difficult to gauge the precise extent or impact, if any, of international actors' involvement in undermining Russian monarchy in the years and months leading up to its downfall. We do know that the Duma politicians believed that external pressure from the Entente Allies could force the obstinate monarch to grant political concessions, so they made a concerted effort to recruit the Allied representatives in Petrograd. While the



French ambassador, Maurice Paléologue, had a close association with the grand dukes and the moderately conservative deputies of the Duma, his British counterpart, Sir George Buchanan, had sympathized with the liberal Constitutional Democrats. The British ambassador from time to time stepped out of his role and made recommendations to the tsar on Russia's internal affairs. As the political situation worsened, Buchanan was increasingly troubled by the possibility of revolution, which would knock Russia out of the war. At the end of December 1916, having gained the reluctant permission of his home government, Buchanan requested an audience with Nicholas II, and advised him to dismiss some of his least popular ministers and form a "ministry of public trust." Not unexpectedly, the only tangible result of Buchanan's intervention was that the British ambassador infuriated the royal couple. But overall, the Allied representatives avoided interfering.

Their policy, however, changed drastically during the transitional regime of the Provisional Government. The Allies adopted a much more assertive, even interventionist position. Time and again, visiting high ranking delegations insisted that their respective governments were only interested in securing Russia's continued participation in the war. Rapidly deteriorating political, economic and social situation notwithstanding, the Allies gave the war, not democracy, their top priority.