Paper Title: Nicholas II: A Re-Evaluation

By:

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Modern historians have often described Tsar Nicholas Alexandrovich Romanov II as a weak- willed, unintelligent monarch for the political decisions he made in the years preceding the Russian Revolution of 1917. Leon Trotsky, a famous Russian revolutionary and archenemy of Joseph Stalin, once referred to the last Tsar as a "'charmer,' without will, without aim, without imagination… more awful than all the tyrants of ancient and modern history."[1]Although there is truth to the assertion that Nicholas II could be indecisive and easily influenced at times, it would be a travesty to condense the character of Nicholas II to such simplistic terms when research has shown him to be an exceedingly complex figure. As stated by Meriel Buchanan, the daughter of British Ambassador to Russia George Buchanan, in her personal memoirs, "It is, however, almost impossible to come to any clear and definite understanding of the character of Nicholas II, his actions at times showing him wavering between alternate decisions to a degree that was almost pitiable, while at other times he showed a determination to go his own way of so obstinate a nature that neither arguments nor persuasion would move him."[2] Nicholas's gentle personality did not lend itself to the demands of being an absolute autocrat, but he led his country through the Russo-Japanese War, the tragedy of Bloody Sunday, and World War I with a firmness that proved catastrophic to his reign as Tsar. In reality, Nicholas II was "a man of narrow, special education; of strong and—unfortunately—unchanging conviction; of soft-spoken, kindly

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[1] Leon Trotsky, "The Tzar and the Tzarina," in *The Russian Revolution: The Overthrow of Tzarism and the Triumph of the Soviets,* ed. F.W. Dupee, trans. Max Eastman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959), 54.
[2] Meriel Buchanan, *The Dissolution of an Empire,* ed. Harmon Tupper and Harry W. Nerhood ( New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1971), 65.

manner; and, underneath, of stubborn courage."[3] The characteristics of weakness and strength were both present in Nicholas II, but in the end it was Nicholas's stubborn conviction and willing self-sacrifice, not his cowardice or weak will, which led to his demise and the demise of the Romanov monarchy.

The idea that Nicholas II was weak, unintelligent, easily influenced, and a poor judge of character has been championed by many prominent historians such as Alan Moorehead and W. Bruce Lincoln. Alan Moorehead argues that although Nicholas did not have a naturally autocratic personality, his wife Aleksandra and multiple reactionary statesmen forced him to rule the country with an iron fist. Alan Moorehead believes that "Nicholas was a weak man, well intentioned and perhaps personally courageous, but weak, and there was no strength in him for compromise."[4] W. Bruce Lincoln is another historian who believed Nicholas II incapable of making decisions on his own and was completely controlled by his wife and the holy man Rasputin. W. Bruce Lincoln states Nicholas II's inability to make firm decisions caused him to be overwhelmed by the many statesmen who were forcing their demands upon the young Tsar, causing him to cling to the one person who encouraged him to stay strong against these demands: Aleksandra.[5] Although the arguments of Alan Moorehead and W. Bruce Lincoln are somewhat valid, their works attempt to cover the broad topics of the Russian Revolution and the entire Romanov family respectively; therefore, the broad nature of their works caused their assessments of Nicholas II to be brief and simplistic instead of giving him due credit for his abilities. Therefore, despite the criticism Nicholas II has received by the aforementioned historians, the works of Robert Massie, Edvard Radzinsky, Raymond Esthus, Dominic Lieven, and Meriel

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[3] Robert K. Massie, *Nicholas and Alexandra* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 63.
[4] Alan Moorehead, "The Divine Right of Kings," in *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 1958), 23.
[5] W. Bruce Lincoln, *The Romanovs: Autocrats of All the Russias* (New York: Doubleday, 1981), 602.

Buchanan serve to refute many of these accusations and show that there is reason to believe that Nicholas II was far more than a reactionary dictator with a feeble will. Christopher Read notes that, "One of the positive consequences of the growing debate was that it had laid the foundations for a more complex interpretation than the caricatural view of an unrelievedly wicked tsarism and a heroic and near-faultless opposition which one not infrequently encountered in the sixties and early seventies. Instead a more richly textured history has emerged as optimists and their opponents both developed their arguments."[6]

In order to understand the actions of Nicholas II during his reign as Tsar, it is necessary to understand the political situation in Russia at the time of his ascension to the throne. When Nicholas inherited the throne of Russia in 1894, he inherited the responsibility of ruling millions of people through a complicated governmental system. The common perception of Nicholas II is that if he were simply willing to relinquish his power and become a constitutional monarch the Russian Revolution would have never occurred; however, this interpretation of history largely trivializes the role of Nicholas II. In reality, the Tsar faced a plethora of economic, social, and political difficulties which made matters far more complex. According to Greg King, "By the beginning of the twentieth century, St. Petersburg was restless, a place of unsettled aspirations, immense wealth, and power alongside grinding poverty and despair."[7] Russia was a vast nation inhabited by a wide variety of people groups who each had their own culture, language, and political aspirations. The Tsar had to take into account the needs of each of these people groups and attempt to appease everyone. He had to walk the dangerous line of allowing enough liberalization in order to show the people he was willing to compromise, but not too much as to

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[6] Christopher Read. "In Search of Liberal Tsarism: the Historiography of Autocratic Decline." *Historical Journal* 45, no. 1 (2002): 200.

[7] Greg King, *The Court of the Last Tsar: Pomp, Power, and Pageantry in the Reign of Nicholas II* (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2006), 29.

allow a violent overthrow of the monarchy. This task would have been difficult for any ruler to accomplish.

Also, Russia had no private capital and large distances to cover, which made bringing adequate healthcare, education, and roads to Russia's millions of peasants extremely difficult and expensive.[8] Because of these obstacles, Russia trailed behind the rest of Europe in matters of industrialism. In a time when the rest of Europe was already industrialized and the great powers of Germany, England, Austria, and Great Britain were in a constant struggle for economic and military security, Russia felt the pressure to compete in this race as well. Unfortunately, it did not have the funds to do so. According to Dominic Lieven, "The basic dilemma facing Alexander II, Alexander III and Nicholas II was that it was impossible to ignore the demands either of external military security or of internal political stability and that these demands pulled hard in opposite directions."[9] Nicholas II faced with a barrage of pressure from advisors who felt the need to strengthen the military and pour funds into the development of arms, and from a separate set of advisors who wanted to focus on stabilizing the nation internally. Domestically, Russia had been stirring with political and social unrest since the early 1800s. Robert Daniels notes that "Revolutionary talk, punctuated by outbursts of violent if ineffective action, was a tradition in Russia from the Decembrist uprising of 1825 to the Revolution."[10] Hence, from the moment of Nicholas II's coronation he was given the impossible task of remedying the dissatisfaction of a people whose agitation had been growing for a century. There is no action Nicholas II could have taken that would have magically fixed this situation. Nicholas II did the best he could with the circumstances that he had been given, but it was not enough to stop the revolutionary fever from spreading.

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[8] Ibid., 11.
[9] Lieven, *Nicholas II*, 7.
[10] Robert V. Daniels, *Russia: The Roots of Confrontation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 81.

Although Nicholas's personality did lend itself to being willing to adapt to the social, cultural, and political changes which were taking place in Russia, all of his training had taught him that he was the immortal Tsar of Russia who should repress all liberalization. The late Tsar Alexander III, Nicholas's father, had embraced his role as Tsar and ruled Russia by crushing all opposition. In contrast, Nicholas II carried himself with a certain dignity that no one could deny, and possessed a sensitivity to other people's needs, which, unfortunately, was viewed as weakness from a political standpoint.[11] According to Dominic Lieven, "His calm, moderation and self-control—very un-Russian virtues—were often interpreted as indifferences and weakness."[12] Nicholas II was a man who recognized his own inadequacies, and this humility caused Nicholas to stand out among his relatives in a way that made him seem lacking in confidence and strength. For example, unlike his relatives before him, Nicholas II was willing to listen to the advice of his older, more experienced advisors during the early years of his reign, and he considered the opinions of these advisors carefully. The Tsar's habit of seeking the council of others is one of the primary reasons that Nicholas II is charged with being easily influenced; however, in reality Nicholas was displaying great wisdom by acknowledging his own inexperience and seeking out the advice of those who were more qualified. The young Tsar wanted to glean as much wisdom as possible in the beginning years of his reign when he was the most inexperienced, but as the years went on this dependence on the advice of his ministers waned significantly.[13] In fact, Nicholas II became so independent that his ministers complained that the Tsar thought he knew better than them what was best for Russia.[14] One of the earliest examples of Nicholas II showing his autonomy in matters of state was when he made the

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[11] Carolly Erickson, *Alexandra* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2001), 17.
[12] Lieven, *Nicholas II*, 108.
[13] Lieven, *Nicholas II*, 108.
[14] Marc Ferro, *Nicholas II: The Last of the Tsars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 65.

decision to place Russia's currency on the gold standard in 1897.[15] Despite the displeasure voiced by many influential Russian politicians, Nicholas II knew that in order to attract investment from abroad Russia needed to have a stable currency; therefore, the Tsar took the appropriate action.

It is correct to say that Nicholas II was a humble man, but he was also quite intelligent and was able to assert his power when necessary. Even historians who generally argue that Nicholas II was to blame for the 1917 Russian Revolution admit that he was not a wholly incompetent ruler. The Tsar was fluent in four languages, extremely well read, and possessed the ability to write about complicated issues with clarity and elegance.[16] He was a quick learner who upon his rise to the throne completely immersed himself into every aspect of his duty as Tsar without regards to his own self-preservation. Sir Bernard Pares writes, "The idea that he [Nicholas II] was weak, must itself be qualified. We find him refusing to oblige even his mother …he defends himself firmly against some of her criticisms of his policy. He is clearly in a high degree conscientious; and throughout his reign he worked dutifully day by day through the innumerable reports which were presented to him."[17] The fact that one of his harshest critics can acknowledge that Nicholas II was a dedicated ruler is a testimony to his character. Even Alexander Kerensky stated that when he met Nicholas II in the palace at Tsarskoye Selo after the Tsar had abdicated the throne, his "virulent hatred was turned to a sudden involuntary respect when he actually came in contact with the Emperor and realized that this man…was not the cold-blooded tyrant he had imagined, but rather a human being who had been tragically misplaced and pursued by fatal misfortune."[18] Despite his gentle personality and political inexperience,

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[15] Robert Service, *The Russian Revolution 1900-1927*. 3rd ed (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1999), 9.
[16] Lieven, *Nicholas II*, 39.
[17] Pares, *The Fall of the Russian Monarchy*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1939), 53.
[18] Buchanan, *The Dissolution of an Empire*, 281.

Nicholas II was determined to work hard and learn quickly in order to rule the people of Russia to the best of his ability.

Keeping in mind Nicholas II's background, it is necessary to address the major accusations leveled against the Tsar and his leadership abilities. First of all, historians such as Orlando Figes and Hugh Seton-Watson argue that Nicholas II was unable to make firm decisions and was controlled by his ministers and family members when it came to matters of state; however, in actuality Nicholas had quite strong opinions on foreign policy. When his advisors did influence him in the decision making process, they were only able to convince him to proceed in the direction he was already planning on going. For example, Nicholas II demonstrated his firm grasp of foreign policy issues when he called for the First Hague Peace Conference. In August of 1898, the Tsar personally wrote and signed a circular addressed to all major European powers describing his wish for global disarmament. Dan Morrill's article on the Hague Conference outlines the Tsarist intentions behind the circular issued on August 24, 1898 just prior to the actual conference which took place in 1899. Dan Morril's purpose is to show that there were many factors that influenced the Russian regime as it issued the 1898 circular, and that both pragmatism and idealism were present throughout the decision making process. He asserts that Nicholas II was very much involved in the events leading up to the issuance of the circular, and although Nicholas II was an idealist, he was also thinking strategically about how to remain a player in the European game of power. Nicholas II was well aware of the fact that at that point in history a country's strength was measured in her ability to hold colonies, and that Russia's power in this sense was lackluster at best.[19] He was also aware that Russia was trailing behind the rest of Europe in its arms development. Nicholas II was concerned if Russia's military would be sorely unprepared to wage war in the case of a European conflict, and he believed that

[19] Lieven, *Nicholas II*, 94.

limiting Europe's arms development would ensure that his country would be able to compete if military conflict ever occurred. Also, Russia had just seized Port Arthur in the Pacific and Nicholas II was already entertaining thoughts about Russia's next move in the Far East. He knew that peace was necessary among the European powers if Russia was to be free to do what she pleased in the East without Great Britain or the United States getting involved. However, it is important to recognize that Nicholas II had no wish to go to war with the Japanese or anyone else for that matter. According to Marc Ferro, "Above all, the Tsar was peaceful by nature, at least where his relations with the courts and Powers of Europe were concerned. He believed in his mission in Asia and wished for peace to prevail elsewhere, his well-understood interest thus coinciding with his ideal. Expansion in China or other parts of Asia was, in his eyes, not war but a crusade for civilization, and it required peace in the West."[20] Dan Morrill, in accordance with the statements made by Marc Ferro, also believes that at the foremost of the Tsar's thoughts were those of genuine idealism, continuing to view himself as a champion for peace.[21] Nicholas soon realized that his hope of immediate disarmament for Europe was unrealistic, but he "saw the circular as the first step in a long and tedious process, not as a move which would soon produce an end to the competition for new weapons."[22] As Marc Ferro observed, "Nicholas's 'peace' policy had the aim of giving him freedom of action in the Far East, where his action would, he knew, be encouraged in any case by Wilhelm II."[23] Nicholas knew exactly what he was doing when he initiated the Hague Peace Conference, just as he knew exactly what he was doing by engaging Japan in the Russo-Japanese War.

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[20] Ferro, *Nicholas II*, 63.
[21] Dan Morrill, "Nicholas II and the Call for the First Hague Conference," *Journal of Modern History* 46, no. 2 (June, 1974): 300.
[22]Ibid., 310.
[23] Ferro, *Nicholas II*, 65.

Although Nicholas II is often painted as a weak and indecisive leader, the Russo-Japanese war revealed another aspect of his character. His policy during the War showed a "stubborn resolve to defend the honor and worth of Russia. Indeed, during that war he was to show a doggedness and consistency that his most observant contemporaries did not fully perceive or comprehend."[24] The Russian accumulation of Port Arthur from the Chinese in 1898 had made war between Russia and Japan imminent as the Japanese grew more wary of Russian influence in the Pacific. The Trans-Siberian railroad was nearly complete, and the Japanese were concerned that Russia would attempt to exert its influence into Korea. Nicholas II was conscious of the tension building between Russia and Japan, but he also believed that it was imperative for Russia to have access to a warm water port on the Pacific for purposes of trade; therefore, he refused to back down. Russo-Japanese relations grew icier until the Japanese officially severed public relations and made an official declaration of war on February 8, 1904. However, before the news of war could be delivered to Nicholas II in St. Petersburg, the Japanese attacked Port Arthur at midnight on February 7. This move by Japan successfully propelled the two nations into a bloody struggle for influence on the Pacific. In his article on the Russo-Japanese War, Raymond Esthus uses the war as an example to show that Nicholas II was not a weak-willed, simple minded leader, and he supports his arguments by giving examples of Nicholas's stubbornness throughout the war. This stubbornness was particularly apparent in the peace negotiations of 1905 when Nicholas repeatedly emphasized to Sergei Witte that not one rouble of reparations should be paid to the Japanese. Dominic Lieven notes, "On this occasion Nicholas proved wiser than his advisers. The Japanese government, overstretched both financially and militarily, was desperate for peace and would have been prepared to accept it even without

[24] Raymond Esthus, "Nicholas II and the Russo-Japanese War," *Russian Review* 40, no. 4(1981): 397.

southern Sakhalin."[25] Without Nicholas's resolve, Russia might have lost far more than part of the island of Sakhalin. According to Raymond Esthus, "The role of Nicholas in the war and the peace negotiations does not answer all the questions about the complex character of this Russian autocrat, but it does make clear that as part of his God-anointed task Nicholas felt a heavy responsibility to uphold the honor and worth of Russia. It is true that he was shy, timid, and sometimes indecisive; yet what comes through during the Russo-Japanese War is his tenacity and resolution."[26] By refusing to back down on the issue of Sakhalin, Nicholas II showed himself to be quite capable of asserting his authority when necessary.

Marc Ferro also refutes the idea that Nicholas II was "little better than a weak puppet in the hands of his dominating brother-ruler,"[27] by pointing out that Nicholas II was not naive about Wilhelm's goals for the domination of power in Europe. According to Marc Ferro, "Wilhelm annoyed him [Nicholas II]…Nicholas realized quite well what his cousin's ulterior motive was, namely, to detach him from the alliance with France."[28] Simply put, Nicholas II had goals for the Far East and knew that he could count on support from the Kaiser, so he put up with Wilhelm II for political reasons only. Lord Salisbury's account of his conversation with Nicholas II in 1896 echoes Marc Ferro's thoughts about the Tsar's relationship with Wilhelm II when he wrote, "Incidentally, he [Nicholas II] expressed himself in terms by no means friendly to the Emperor of Germany. He said that the Emperor was a very nervous man; he (the Emperor of Russia) was a quiet man, and he could not stand nervous men."[29] Nicholas II was perfectly aware of Wilhelm's personal aims to sabotage the Franco-Russian Alliance and assume power in Europe.

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[25] Lieven, *Nicholas II,* 146.
[26] Esthus, "Nicholas II and the Russo-Japanese War," 411.
[27] Sidney Fay, "The Kaiser's Secret Negotiations with the Tsar," *The American Historical Review* 24, no. 1 (1918): 49.
[28] Ferro, *Nicholas II,* 58.
[29] Margaret M. Jefferson and Lord Salisbury, "Lord Salisbury's Conversations with the Tsar at Balmoral, 27 and 29 September 1896." *Slavonic and East European Review* 39, no. 92 (Dec., 1960): 220.

Therefore, the combined works of Marc Ferro, Raymond Esthus, and Lord Salisbury support the conclusion that Wilhelm merely advised the Tsar to move in the direction he had already planned on moving.[30] Overall, Nicholas II's actions before and during the Russo-Japanese blatantly show that the modern interpretations of the Tsar as a weak, incompetent ruler are at best inadequate. According to Raymond Esthus, "An investigation of the role of Nicholas in the Russo-Japanese War points up this problem, for what emerges is a complex, enigmatic personality."[31]

Another important event in Russian history that greatly influenced the public's view of Nicholas II was the tragic event that occurred in St. Petersburg on January 22, 1905. It was on this fateful day in January that the workers of St. Petersburg had decided to conduct a peaceful march to the Winter Palace to hand their Tsar, Nicholas II, a petition containing demands for universal suffrage, a constituent assembly, universal education, amnesty for political prisoners, an minimum wage, separation of church and state, an income tax, and an eight-hour workday.[32] When the day of the scheduled march arrived and the marchers worked their way through the ice and snow to the Winter Palace, they found that their way was blocked by Cossacks and Russian infantry. The marchers were unsure as to what this meant, for they were in no way wanting violence, so they continued on their way. As the procession moved forward, the soldiers opened fire on the marchers, tragically killing ninety-two people and wounding several hundred more. The actual number of deaths was probably much higher than reported.

Although Nicholas II was not even present in St. Petersburg on the day more commonly known as "Bloody Sunday, " historians often point to that icy, January morning as the supreme example of Nicholas's unfeeling cruelty and lack of leadership; however, information found in Nicholas's journals provide a much different side of the story. For example, when the Tsar had

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[30] Ferro, *Nicholas II*, 65.
[31] Esthus, "Nicholas II and the Russo-Japanese War," 396.
[32] Massie, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, 96.

been informed by his ministers that Russian citizens had been shot and killed as a result of their march on the Winter Palace, Nicholas remarked in his private journal that January 22, 1905, Bloody Sunday, was, "A painful day. There have been serious disorders in St. Petersburg because workmen wanted to come up to the Winter Palace. Troops had to open fire in several places in the city; there were many killed and wounded. God, how painful and sad."[33] Contrary to the belief that Nicholas sat cold and unfeeling as his people were shot down by the Cossacks, this candid journal entry seems to show that Nicholas was a compassionate man who deeply cared about his people. This compassion was echoed in the infamous October Manifesto where the Tsar wrote, "The well-being of the Russian sovereign is inseparable from the well-being of the people; and the people's sorrow is His sorrow."[34] Nicholas II expressed his genuine sorrow not just through empty words but with actions as well. For example, in the weeks following Bloody Sunday the Tsar gave substantial monetary donations to the families of those who had died on Bloody Sunday from his personal bank account.[35] Also, when Nicholas's ministers, most prominently Sergei Witte, proposed to Nicholas II that he dissociate himself from the tragedy of Bloody Sunday by publicly stating that the Cossacks had negated orders by firing their weapons, Nicholas "refused to cast this unfair aspersion upon the army and instead decided to receive a delegation of thirty-four hand-picked workers at Tsarskoe Selo."[36] This is yet another example of Nicholas's leadership abilities and his refusal to submit to the pressure of his ministers. He took responsibility for what happened and refused to lay the blame at someone else's feet, even though he never personally gave the command to fire upon the marchers. Unfortunately, just as

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[33] Edvard Radzinsky, *The Last Tsar: The Life and Death of Nicholas II*, trans. Marian Schwartz. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 76.
[34] Nicholas Romanov II, "The October Manifesto," in *Sources in European History Since 1900, Second Edition,* ed. Marvin Perry, Matthew Berg, and James Krukones (Wadsworth Cengage Learning), 94
[35] Moorehead, "The Divine Right of Kings" in *The Russian Revolution,* 55.
[36] Massie, *Nicholas and Alexandra,* 98.

in the aftermath of the Khodynka tragedy (a mass panic following the coronation of Nicholas II which resulted in the deaths of over thirteen hundred people), Nicholas's noble gestures toward his people following Bloody Sunday are often undermined or negated by historians because they do not fit with the traditional depiction of Nicholas II as a cruel, unfeeling tyrant.

After Bloody Sunday, it was apparent to Nicholas II that a change in the Russian government was necessary in order to placate the opposition and restore peace to the country. That change would be initiated by Nicholas's October Manifesto. Nicholas II's Manifesto was short and to the point, but its consequences were far reaching. Although historians such as Hugh Seton-Watson have claimed that Nicholas was not strong enough to compromise,[37] the issuance of this document was a monumental step toward liberalization in Russia. In the October Manifesto, Nicholas II addressed the people of Russia and stated that they would be receiving certain inviolable rights such as freedom of speech, assembly, association, and conscience, as well as a State Duma which would be made up of elected representatives and be directly involved in monitoring laws made by the government.[38] The State Duma was to be bicameral with the State Council consisting of one-hundred appointed members and a five-hundred member Duma whose members were elected through a complicated process. The first Duma only lasted forty-two days before it was dissolved, and a second and third Duma were created and dissolved by 1912. The last and final Duma was elected in 1912 and lasted through the Revolution of 1917.

Nicholas II has often been criticized for making "insincere concessions"[39] in the October Manifesto and dissolving the first three Dumas because their agenda was too liberal, but it is

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[37] Seton-Watson, *The Decline of Imperial Russia,* 378.
[38] Romanov, "The October Manifesto," 94.
[39] Pau N. Miliukov, *The Revolution Divided: Spring, 1917.* vol. 1, *The Russian Revolution*, ed. Richard Stites, trans. Tatyana and Richard Stites (Gulf Breeze, Florida: Academic International Press, 1978), 7.

important to note the difficulty of the Tsar's situation before judging his actions. First of all, Nicholas II was fearful that the Duma would use its newfound power to tear down the monarchy and launch the country into chaos. This usurpation of power had occurred in France in 1789 when the country launched into a bloody revolution after Louis XVI had summoned the Estates-General to Paris. Consequently, Nicholas II was wary of the Duma because he did not want to end up in a situation like that of Louis XVI. Secondly, the Tsar was under an enormous amount of pressure from numerous advisors, family members, and politicians who all wanted Nicholas II to take a different mode of action. As stated by Dominic Lieven, "Nicholas II was under pressure from one group of advisers who told him that concessions to liberalism would undermine the authoritarian state and doom property and the Russian Empire to destruction. Another group, with equal insistence, told him that, without such concessions, support for the government in educated society would disintegrate the regime would collapse…In these circumstances there was some excuse for uncertainty and wavering."[40] There would undoubtedly be a group of people who were unhappy with the Tsar no matter what decision he made, and his attempt to strike a balance between these two schools of thought was a daunting task. The conservatives were cautioning the Tsar against allowing too much liberalization and letting the power of the monarchy slowly dissolve, and the liberals were insistent on their call for a state representative body. Therefore, Nicholas II did not dissolve and re-elect the first three Dumas because he was a reactionary autocrat who was jealous of his own power, but because he was attempting to appease both the conservatives and the liberals at the same time. Nicholas II, in keeping with the spirit of compromise, even invited several leaders of the liberal movement, including Pavel Miliukov, into his personal Council of Ministers.[41] The Tsar was not required to invite anyone

[40] Ibid., 179.
[41] Service, *The Russian Revolution,* 18.

into his Council of Ministers, let alone men who openly opposed his policies, so this action of appointing several liberal politicians to his inner circle was a genuine act of goodwill.

Despite the assertion by Pavel Miliukov that "the concessions did not satisfy either society or the common people not only because they were few and paltry, but because they were granted reluctantly, with no thought to permanence, and were thus false and insincere,"[42] Alexander Kerensky notes that at this time "Russia was truly ready for pacification. The revolutionary movement was dying out of itself. For the October Manifesto had opened the way to freedom, to a creative social and political work."[43] The significance of the Duma as a representative body is discussed in Alexander Kerensky's work where he explains the evolution of constitutionalism in Russia between the years of 1905 and 1914. His work debunks theories which claim that soon after Nicholas II issued his Manifesto the government resumed its tyrannical exploitation of the Russian people. In fact, after the creation of the State Duma in 1905, education in Russia improved, crop production rose by 41 per cent, and the average public income increased by 79.4 per cent.[44] These impressive numbers show that although four different Dumas were created and dissolved between 1905 and 1917, significant economic, agricultural, and educational progress was made throughout Russia through the work of the Duma. In regards to foreign affairs, the Duma's power over the state budget and control of defense spending meant that it extended substantial influence in this area of policy.[45] For example, the memoirs of Mikhail Vladimirovich Rodzianko, President of the third and fourth Dumas, provide an interesting look at what went on between the Duma and Nicholas II during World War I and show that the Duma did indeed exercise influence in the government during the war. Mikhail

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[42] Ibid., 7.
[43] Alexander Kerensky, "Russia on the Eve of World War I.," *Russian Review* 5, no. 1 (Autumn, 1946): 15.
[44] Ibid., 23, 25.
[45] Dominic Lieven, "Pro-Germans and Russian Foreign Policy 1890-1914," *International History Review* 2, no. 1 (Jan., 1980): 40.

Rodzianko records the detailed discussions he had with the Emperor about conducting an official study on the condition of the military to ascertain how to best meet the needs of the Russian soldiers. According to Mikhail Rodzianko,

> My suggestion to form a special council pleased the Emperor, and a general plan for its organization was quickly drawn up…The news, as yet unofficial, that a council would be organized, disturbed the War Ministry. An attempt was made to prove to the Emperor that such a council was illegal, that it would be, as it were, a new Ministry for which a new law and certain formalities were necessary, all of which would take time. Fortunately, the Emperor swept aside all these objections and intrigues.[46]

Mikhail Rodzianko's experience with the Emperor show the considerable influence the Duma and its leaders wielded in the tsarist government, as well as highlighting Nicholas II's ability to overrule his ministers when necessary. Nicholas II was deeply concerned with the welfare of the Russian people, particularly the soldiers on the front lines, and was not about to let the disapproval of his ministers stand in the way of his duty to protect the Russian people. After Mikhail Rodzianko had conducted the study, he brought the results to Nicholas II and noted that the "report lasted more than an hour and during that time the Emperor did not smoke a single cigarette, indicating how attentively he followed."[47] The accounts of both Alexander Kerensky and Mihail Rodzianko highlight the fact that the Duma did hold sway with the Emperor and that Nicholas II did not render the Duma a meaningless body of men who had no influence in the government. The Duma was active in approving legislation, budget regulation, and helped bridge the gap between the traditional autocratic government and the Russian people. The people received more freedom, and they prospered as a result. Alexander Kerensky even went so far as to say, "Thanks to the constitutional regime, the cooperative movement attained its full development. And it was precisely in cooperation that the Russian people, and especially the

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[46] Mikhail Vladimirovich Rodzianko, "Rodzianko's Memoirs," in *Documents of Russian History 1914-1917*, ed. Frank Alfred Golder, trans. Emanuel Aronsberg (Gloucester, MA: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1964), 89.
[47] Ibid., 92.

Russian peasants, revealed their democratic spirit and their talent for organization."[48] Alexander Kerensky's statement shows the magnitude of the effects that the October Manifesto and State Duma had upon the people of Russia, and how Nicholas II was, in fact, taking a very radical step by issuing the Manifesto.

Meanwhile, amidst of the creation of State Duma in Russia, the political situation in the rest of Europe was heating up, and by 1913 World War I was just on the horizon. The actions of Nicholas II during World War I show that he was an intelligent man who was not afraid to lead his country by making strong decisions. As stated by Michael Akimov, the President of the State Council from 1907-1914, "For all his seeming pliability and gentleness, His Majesty at times revealed an unexpected independence, in some circumstances producing an impression of stubbornness."[49] It is important to note that Nicholas's decision for Russia to enter World War I as part of the Triple Entente was monumental. In the early 1800s Germany and Russia had enjoyed a relatively friendly relationship because of mutual interests, but a shift in Russo-German relations occurred when Germany refused to renew the Reinsurance Treaty in 1890. The Reinsurance Treaty was a neutrality agreement arranged by German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck between Russia and Germany that stated each country would remain neutral if either country was attacked by a third power. The German refusal to renew this treaty played a significant part in causing the Russian government to move towards an alliance with France. However, despite the concerns that many Russians had about Germany's motives, in the years leading up to 1914 there had been much discussion amongst Russia's statesmen about the possibility of a European war and how it would be in Russia's best interest to align itself with Germany. In the past half of all Russia's trade took place with Germany, whereas Russia's

[48] Kerensky, "Russia on the Eve of World War I," 24.
[49] Lieven, *Nicholas II,* 108.

economic policies generally conflicted with the other European powers, most notably England.[50] Minister of the Interior Peter Durnovo argued convincingly for the necessity of forming an alliance with Germany in his memorandum to Nicholas II in 1914. Peter Durnovo explained that German and Russian interests did not conflict and that there were no diplomatic advantages to alienating Germany by aligning Russia with England. He asserted that even if Russia were to win the war against Germany, it would not serve Russia's interests in the slightest. Peter Durnovo pointed out to Nicholas II that

> The interests of Russia and England are diametrically opposed. For England, it is profitable to kill Germany's maritime trade and industry, turning her into a poor and, if possible, agricultural country. For us, it is of advantage for Germany to develop her sea-going commerce and the industry which serves it, so as to supply the remotest world markets, and at the same time open her domestic market to our agricultural products, to supply her large working population.[51]

He then went on to note, "Under such circumstances, a struggle with Germany presents to us enormous difficulties, and will require countless sacrifices."[52] N.E. Markov, an influential member of the Duma, also informed the State Duma that Russia and England were not friends because their interests were entirely different. He argued that it would be a mistake to enter a war on the side of the English and that it would be much more profitable to form an alliance with Germany. N.E. Markov believed that if an alliance was formed with Germany, worldwide war could possibly be avoided along with the unforeseen consequences that would be sure to accompany such a war. In his passionate speech to the Duma, N.E. Markov states, "All history shows that it is England which has been keeping us out of the Straits...I believe, gentlemen, as the average person believes, that it were better if we had, in place of a great friendship with

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[50] Lieven, "Pro-Germans and Russian Foreign Policy," 41.
[51] Peter Durnovo, "Memorandum to Nicholas II," in *Readings in Russian Civilization III*, ed. Thomas Riba (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 466.
[52] Ibid., 461.

England, a small alliance with Germany."[53] In the face of tremendous evidence showing the advantages of an alliance with Germany, it is most surprising that Nicholas II, supposedly weak-willed and easily influenced, would go against the advice of his ministers and instead enter World War I on the side of England.

Dominic Lieven aims to explain Russia's involvement in World War I by looking at the relationship between internal and external policy, specifically giving attention to the opinions of leading pro-German Russian statesmen during the time of Nicholas II. In his article on Russian foreign policy during the years before the 1917 Revolution, Dominic Lieven points out the incredible pressure that Nicholas II was under from both the pro-German statesmen and the anti-German statesmen. In 1914 General Vladimir Sukhomlinov was insisting that the army was ready for war, and Foreign Minister Sergei Sazonov strongly believed that if Nicholas II failed to defend Russia's "Little Brother" Serbia against Germany that the Russian people would never forgive him. Sazonov insisted that if the Tsar were to mobilize the army against Germany, the Russian masses would be in complete support of the war.[54] As Meriel Buchanan points out, "in spite of the ignorance and indifference so often attributed to him, he [Nicholas II] had a clear and comprehensive grasp of international politics and foresaw the danger arising from the fact that there could be no definite assurance of England's attitude in the eventuality of a world war."[55] Nicholas was not simply an ignorant reactionary. On the contrary, he was fully aware of the pros and cons associated with an alliance with England, and he weighed each option carefully. In the end, however, his mistrust of Wilhelm II and his desire to" preserve his country's prestige and

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[53] N.E. Markov, "Excerpts From The Speech of Markov The Second," in *Documents of Russian History 1914-1917,* ed. Frank Alfred Golder, trans. Emanuel Aronsberg (Gloucester, MA: Appleton-Century-Crofts, Inc., 1964), 27.
[54] Lieven, "Pro-Germans and Russian Foreign Policy," 53.
[55] Buchanan, *The Dissolution of an Empire,* 60.

her pretension to status as a Great Power"[56] caused him to make the decision to enter the war against Germany. Yes, there were those in the Russian government who supported an alliance with England, but there were others, such as Peter Durnovo and N.E. Markov, who were soundly against it. Nicholas decided to go against their advice despite the harsh criticism he inevitably received. In the end, it was the Emperor who "remained the key figure in the foreign policy decision-making process,"[57] and took full responsibility for leading the country to war. This is hardly the picture of a man who was swayed by anyone who gave him a well reasoned argument. In a fantastic display of leadership, Nicholas II was able to rally the Russian people into support for the war in a way that had never been done before. According to Greg King, "Such unity of thought and purpose was unknown in imperial Russia."[58] Granted, the Tsar was not perfect and he undoubtedly made many mistakes during his reign, but to argue that Nicholas II was a weak leader who lacked any ability to make decisions on his own would be a mistake.

In addition to the entrance of Russia into World War I, Nicholas II showed wisdom and resolve in his decision to take over supreme command of the Russian Army. W. Bruce Lincoln, in his work on Russia's role in World War I, describes the condition of the Russian Army when Tsar Nicholas II took over command in September of 1915 and how the change in command affected the outcome of the war. Although several historians have argued that this was a deplorable action that showcased Nicholas's stubbornness, reactionary outlook, naiveté, and ignorance, there is significant evidence from this period which instead shows Nicholas's decision to be an example of his humility, wisdom, and self-sacrifice. W. Bruce Lincoln states that when the Tsar took command of the army in 1915 it was in ruinous condition from the previous thirteen months of war. This horrific period of fighting had demoralized the troops and resulted

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[56] Service, *The Russian Revolution,* 25.
[57] Lieven, "Pro-Germans and Russian Foreign Policy," 40.
[58] King, *The Court of the Last Tsar,* 476.

in the loss of Poland and much of her Baltic and Russian provinces.[59] The current commander of the army, Grand Duke Nicholas, was "elevated by part of public opinion to the rank of statesman and military genius, despite the fact that the Grand Duke was in fact emotionally unstable, a very poor general and no sort of liberal."[60] Nicholas's removal of the Grand Duke, despite his incompetence, was met with extreme opposition by many influential political figures. His ministers were horrified, predicting swift and terrible consequences to follow the removal of the Grand Duke; however, according to Dominic Lieven, "The Emperor's decision to assume the supreme command was not only courageous and irrevocable but also correct…The catastrophic consequences predicted by the ministers if the Grand Duke Nicholas was removed and the Duma's session prorogued seemed unconvincing to the Emperor, who in this case too proved a better and calmer judge than his advisers."[61] Nicholas II knew that because of the Grand Duke's popularity, he could not replace him with just any normal man. The only person in Russia who inspired more confidence than the Grand Duke was Nicholas II himself, and he believed that by taking command the men's morale might improve. Contrary to the arguments that charge Nicholas with being naive about his ability to be supreme commander, Nicholas was painfully aware of his own inadequacies. Because of this knowledge, Nicholas II intended to merely be the "face" of the army, and appointed General Mikhail Vasilevich Alekseev to be his Chief of Staff and direct military operations in his stead. Dominic Lieven notes,

> It would be difficult for the dynasty's prestige to replace a defeated grand duke as supreme commander with a simple mortal. In proposing himself as supreme war leader, the Emperor never expected personally to decide strategy or military operations. These were to be the responsibility of his Chief of Staff, General M.V. Alekseev, who proved

[59] W. Bruce Lincoln, "The Tsar Takes Command," in *Passage Through Armageddon: The Russians in War and Revolution 1914-1918* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1986), 165.
[60] Lieven, *Nicholas II*, 175.
[61] Ibid., 214.

> far more competent than either Nikolasha or Yanushkevich…On top of this, Nicholas's assumption of the supreme command did lead to better co-ordination of military and civilian authority.[62]

As the Tsar had hoped, and to the surprise of his ministers, in the nine months that followed Nicholas's assumption of command the military situation dramatically improved. Despite the assertions that the Tsar meddled in every area of the military, Nicholas almost never questioned the decisions of General Alekseev and this strategy yielded great results.[63] Within a year the front had been stabilized, counter-attacks took place, and the city of Kiev was saved.[64] As a result of Nicholas II's strength of leadership, improvements continued to take place militarily and by the summer of 1916 the Russian troops "were better trained and better armed than ever before."[65]Although there were definitely strategic reasons for Nicholas II to assume the role of supreme commander of the army, there were personal reasons as well. Above all else, Nicholas II felt that it was his sovereign duty to be with his army in its time of need. As Meriel Buchanan points out in her memoirs, "The Emperor himself regarded his action in taking the command as a sacred mission, a sacrifice which had been demanded of him and which he must accept in a spirit of inspired devotion, and when the Prime Minister, Monsieur Goremykin, begged him to reconsider his decision, he answered firmly: 'In the moment of danger the duty of a Sovereign is to be with his army, and if need be perish with it.'"[66] Nicholas II was clearly willing to sacrifice himself if necessary, because he believed that as Tsar he needed to lead the army during a

[62] Lieven, *Nicholas II,* 213.
[63] Lincoln, "The Tsar Takes Command," in *Passage Through Armageddon,* 174.
[64] Lieven, *Nicohlas II,* 217.
[65] Lincoln, "The Tsar Takes Command," in *Passage Through Armageddon,* 183.
[66] Buchanan, *The Dissolution of an Empire,* 129.

national crisis.[67] Despite the urging of his ministers and many other political figures, Nicholas II did what he thought was both strategically, and personally, the right thing to do.

Therefore, although Tsar Nicholas II has often been described as "an amiable incompetent" who was unable to lead because of his ignorance and weak will,[68] upon examination of the facts it is obvious that the last Tsar was far from weak willed and unintelligent. Nicholas II showed a special courage and determination in leading the country through two wars before selflessly abdicating the throne. Nicholas's keen sense of morality led him to humble himself and step down from power for the good of the country; an action that took a tremendous amount of courage and self-sacrifice.[69] Dominic Lieven summarized the Tsar wonderfully when he stated

> Nicholas II loved his country and served it loyally and to the best of his ability…He was kind, sensitive, generous and initially naïve man. Russian high politics in these traumatic years required something very different and would probably have destroyed any man who sat on the throne…With the collapse of the Soviet regime comes the moment not for whitewashing or mythologizing old Russia and its last ruler but instead for presenting a fairer, more human and more balanced judgment than that imposed on the Russian people for the last seventy-five years.[70]

It is important to recognize that the pressure to make every crucial decision rested upon the Tsar's shoulders, and that Nicholas II rose above that overwhelming pressure to make good decisions and lead the Russian people to the best of his ability. Indeed, Nicholas II, the last Tsar of Russia, was a man full of contradiction; however, he was also a man who possessed wisdom, resolve, compassion, and uncompromising faith. Robert Massie notes, "These human qualities are eternal and will survive and transcend the rise and fall of every empire. It is for these

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[67] Florinsky, "The Eclipse of the Sovereign," 59.
[68] Daniels, *Russia: The Roots of Confrontation*, 98.
[69] "Russian historian is concerned with a large-scale 'slanderous campaign' against Nicholas II," Bob Atchinson, accessed September 30, 2011, http://www.alexanderpalace.org/palace/russhistoriannicholas.html.
[70] Lieven, *Nicholas II*, 261.

qualities that Nicholas II was an exceptional man. For, in the end, he did succeed."[71] It is for these reasons that Nicholas II deserves to be recognized as much more than a weak-willed, easily influenced ruler.

[71] Massie, *Nicholas and Alexandra,* x.

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