

Why did Nicholas II abdicate in 1917?

Task: Read the extract from Orlando Figes 'A People's Tragedy' and answer the 3 questions below. Highlight any words you don't understand.

On a wet and windy morning in February 1913 St Petersburg celebrated three hundred years of Romanov rule over Russia. People had been talking about the greatest event for weeks, and everyone agreed that nothing quite so splendid would ever be seen again in their lifetimes. The majestic power of the dynasty would be displayed, as never before, in an extravaganza of pageantry. As the jubilee approached, dignitaries from far-flung parts of the Russian Empire filled the capital's grand hotels: princes from Poland and the Baltic lands; high priests from Georgia and Armenia; mullahs and tribal chiefs from Central Asia; the Emir of Bukhara and the Khan of Khiva. The city bustled with sightseers from the provinces, and the usual well-dressed promenaders around the Winter Palace now found themselves outnumbered by the unwashed masses — peasants and workers in their tunics and caps, rag-bundled women with kerchiefs on their heads. Nevsky Prospekt experienced the worst traffic jams in its history as trams and horse-drawn carriages, cars and sleighs, converged on it. The main streets were decked out in the imperial colours of white, blue and red; statues were dressed in garlands and ribbons; and portraits of the tsars, stretching back to Mikhail, the founder of the dynasty, hung on the façades of banks and stores. Above the tram-lines were strung chains of coloured lights, which lit up at night with the words 'God Save the Tsar' or a Romanov double-headed eagle and the dates 1613–1913. Out-of-towners, many of whom had never seen electric light, stared up and scratched their heads in wonderment. There were columns, arcs and obelisks of light. In front of the Kazan Cathedral stood a white pavilion filled with incense, bromeliads and palms, shivering in the Russian winter air.

The rituals began with a solemn thanksgiving in the Kazan Cathedral led by the Patriarch of Antioch, who had come from Greece especially for the occasion, the three Russian Metropolitans and fifty priests from St Petersburg. The imperial family drove out from the Winter Palace in open carriages accompanied by two squadrons of His Majesty's Own Horseguards and Cossack riders in black caftans and red Caucasian caps. It was the first time the Tsar had ridden in public view since the 1905 Revolution, and the police were taking no chances. The route was lined by the Imperial Guards gorgeously turned out in their feathered shakos and scarlet uniforms. Military bands thumped out the national anthem and the soldiers boomed 'Oorah!' as the cavalcade passed by. Outside the cathedral religious processions from various parts of the city had been converging from early in the morning. The vast crowd, a forest of crosses, icons and banners, knelt down as one as the carriages approached. Inside the cathedral stood Russia's ruling class: grand dukes and princes, members of the court, senators, ministers, state councillors, Duma parliamentarians, senior Civil Servants, generals and admirals, provincial governors, city mayors, zemstvo leaders, and marshals of the nobility. Hardly a breast without a row of shining medals or a diamond star; hardly a pair of legs without a sword. Everything sparkled in the candlelight — the silver iconostasis, the priests' bejewelled mitres, and the crystal cross. In the middle of the ceremony two doves flew down from the darkness of the dome and hovered for several moments over the heads of the Tsar and his son. Carried away by religious exaltation, Nicholas interpreted it as a symbol of God's blessing on the House of Romanov.

- 1. What impression do you get about Nicholas' reign from Figes' description?**
- 2. Why is this event important for the Romanovs?**
- 3. Is there anything in this extract that can help us to understand why Nicholas abdicated 4 years later?**

Task: You have been given 1 source to examine in pairs.

- What inferences can you make from your source?
- What is the tone?
- What is useful about its content?
- What is useful about its provenance (nature, origin, purpose)?

What questions do you have as a result of these sources?

Source 3: From the Act of Abdication of Tsar Nicholas II, issued March 1917.

By the Grace of God, I, Nicholas II, Emperor of all the Russias, to all my faithful subjects make known:

In these days of terrible struggle against the foreign enemy, who has been trying for three years to impose its will upon our country, God has willed that Russia should be faced with a new and formidable trial. Troubles at home threaten to have a fatal effect on the ultimate course of this hard-fought war. The future of Russia, the honour of our heroic army, the welfare of the people and the whole future of our dear country demand that the war should be carried to a victorious conclusion at any price. 5

This cruel foreign enemy is making his supreme effort, but we must ensure that the moment is at hand when our courageous army, working with our glorious allies, will overthrow the enemy once and for all. 10

In these days, which are decisive for the existence of Russia, I think I should follow the voice of my conscience by enabling the closest co-operation of my people and the organisation of all their resources for the speedy achievement of victory. 15

For these reasons, in agreement with the Duma of the Empire, I think it my duty to abdicate the Crown and give up the supreme power.

Source 4: From Alexander Kerensky, *The Road to the Tragedy*, published 1935. Here he considers Tsar Nicholas II's abdication.

When looking at this living mask of a ruler, I began to understand why the reins of government had slipped so easily out of Nicholas II's hands. He bore 'the burden of power' until the end. But, he would not fight for it: he had no wish to rule. Power, like everything else that was earthly and consequently humdrum, bored him, tired him, and no longer thrilled. 20

He calmly laid aside his royal sceptre to take up a gardener's spade. He gave up the throne like handing over a troop of horses. He threw aside his imperial rule just as in his youth he tossed aside one splendid military uniform to put on another. And now, he found it an interesting experience to be without a uniform at all - just an ordinary citizen, free of all duties and obligations. Without any inner drama he stepped out into private life. 'It was God's will' he said. Indeed, all those who observed him closely during his 'captivity' assert unanimously that, throughout this period, the former Emperor was generally in a calm and even happy mood. 25 30