Centenary of the Russian Revolution (1917-2017)

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Edited by

Andreu Mayayo i Artal, Alberto Pellegrini and Antoni Segura i Mas

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FOREWORD

On the occasion of the centenary of the Russian Revolution of 1917, the *Centre d'Estudis Històrics Internacionals* of the University of Barcelona (Center for International Historical Studies, CEHI-UB) has carried out a number of academic initiatives to deepen the study of the Russian revolutionary phenomenon, as well as the repercussions and the long-term consequences of that momentous event.

Among the most significant results of the collective work done by CEHI-UB members, we can mention a series of lectures about the Revolution organised by the University of Barcelona; a course for university students held throughout the spring of 2017; and the publication, in book format, of a collection of essays by a Spanish publishing house (Andreu Mayayo and José Manuel Rúa, eds., *Y el mundo cambió de base. Una mirada histórica a la Revolución Rusa*). As a conclusion of this work, the University of Barcelona has held, in October 2017, an international congress (*Centenary of the Russian Revolution, 1917-2017)*, that has been attended by leading specialists in the field, both Spanish and foreign.

This volume collects all the conference papers, expanded and revised for English publication; it is also further enriched by the inclusion of three chapters expressly written for the book, as well as an introduction and final conclusions that help contextualise the text and confer coherence.

This book is part of the research project "Spanish Civil War and three decades of war in Europe: legacies and consequences (1914-1945/2014) " (ref. HAR2013-4160-P).

INTRODUCTION

THE REVOLUTIONS OF 1917 IN RUSSIA

JULIÁN CASANOVA

Revolutions are extraordinary events that have a huge impact on the histories of nations and the world. Theda Skocpol, the author of a now classic study in comparative history on the three "major" revolutions in France, Russia and China, has defined them as "rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures (…) accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below".[1]

In contrast to the accounts of militants and activists, Skocpol argues that revolutionary processes, apart from their egalitarian dreams, entail the construction of new state forms and that "successful" revolutions end with the consolidation of a new state power. In short, revolutions may change a host of things, including the class hierarchy and social values and institutions, but above all, they create states that are more bureaucratic, centralised and repressive than the ones they replace.

No better setting exists to examine all of these profound changes than the Russia of 1917. Not a single aspect of its society, economy, politics or culture remained intact. The rule of the Romanov dynasty, which had begun three hundred years earlier with the coronation of Michael I (1613-1645), disappeared overnight. At a stroke, the entire edifice of the Russian state came down. Some months later, the Bolsheviks seized power in the most abrupt and momentous change in the history of the twentieth century. Therein lies the importance of Russia's double revolution, the first in February and the second in October of 1917, which in turn toppled the Tsarist regime and the provisional government of Alexander Kerensky.

The state that emerged from the Bolsheviks' revolution and their victory in the Civil War that followed challenged a world then under the domination of Western empires, defied capitalism, and very soon faced off

[1] Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 4.

against the other new actor on the scene, Fascism. It inspired communist movements and other major revolutions like the one in China. After the Second World War, it also exerted a strong influence on anti-colonial movements and on the design and construction of the Cold War world.[2]

Given the magnitude of events, it is no wonder that historians offered a variety of interpretations, with points of agreement and points of contention, giving rise to what Edward Acton identified in 1990 as consolidated views of the revolution or "schools of thought".[3]

While some defined the revolution from the outset as a "popular revolution" led by the Bolshevik party or a revolution of the united proletariat according to its description in Soviet propaganda, anti-Soviet and anti-Marxist historiography always identified it as a "coup d'état" that triumphed through violence and terror.

Apart from these liberal and Soviet interpretations, a new historiographical school emerged in the 1970s. It was represented basically by young British and US historians who, despite their numbers and diversity, were given the label of "revisionists". Through their research, they set out what could be called a "social interpretation of the Russian Revolution", which ran in parallel to some of the basic guideposts then orienting a swath of Western historians, from the *Annales* school to British Marxists, and which consisted in sidestepping ideological generalisations, writing the history of social groups, and applying perspectives and methods from the social sciences.[4]

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[2] The international dimension of the Bolshevik revolution and the importance of the phenomenon of power, of groups and movements competing for power, and of the conflicts unleashed by possessing or seeking power, have been the highlight of a large amount of research conducted in recent years. A fine example is the latest book by S.A. Smith, *Russia in Revolution: An Empire in Crisis, 1890-1928* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

[3] Edward Acton, *Rethinking the Russian Revolution* (London: Arnold, 1990). Although Acton cautioned that none of the schools was "homogeneous" because there had been a number of significant shifts over the past seven decades (p. 3), the British historian conceptualised them as "orthodox Soviet", "liberal" and "libertarian". In addition, since the end of the 1960s, a new generation of "Western" historians, the "revisionists", had emerged with a willingness to re-examine the schools critically and to demonstrate "their commitment to social history and quantitative methods, and their use of sources hitherto barely tapped" (p. 1).

[4] It is this new generation of "revisionists" that has substantially modified our understanding of twentieth-century Russia. A good number of its members, representatives of various national historiographies including Russia's, contributed writings to an excellent volume compiled by Edward Acton, Vladimir Cherniaev

With a shift of focus from leaders and high politics to social movements and groups, the revisionist historiography downplayed interpretations focused on the manipulation of the working classes by radical intellectuals. Following on from the research of E.P. Thompson, they brought to light the experiences of the lower classes, peasants and workers, as well as the crucial role of soldiers and sailors, and redefined the role of the Bolshevik party and its connections to popular aspirations.

The class character of these revolutions became more finely nuanced from the 1990s onwards, thanks to a new historiography on social and culture identities that looked at gender, religion, symbols and images. There was a shift in direction from the material and political domain toward the cultural and anthropological. Because the revolutions also occurred over the length and breadth of a vast multi-ethnic empire, a history began to be written "from the margins". As opposed to "Russocentrism", it acknowledged the cultural and social complexity of national and ethnic identities.[5]

A large number of the historians who published their works after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent opening of the archives stressed the constant state of crisis that existed between 1914 and 1921. Their accounts begin with the First World War and end with the closing battles of the Russian Civil War and the establishment of the Soviet Union. What many knew and studied as the Russian Revolution was, in reality, a series of simultaneous and overlapping revolutions of the intellectual elites, the middle classes, the workers, women, soldiers and peasants against the Tsarist autocracy, against the social order, against the war and the military's hierarchical system, against the landowners, and in favour of land redistribution.[6]

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and William G. Rosenberg, *Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution* (London: Arnold, 1997). It is interesting and significant to compare Acton's approach in *Rethinking* to the one in his introduction to the new volume, entitled "The Revolution and Its Historians: The *Critical Companion* in Context" (3-17), which discusses the impact of postmodernism and the new cultural history.

[5] When following this evolution, it proves highly illuminating to contrast the papers of other new historians of the recent historiography, such as Ronald Grigor Suny from the US, who wrote "Toward a Social History of the October Revolution", *American Historical Review,* 88 (February 1983): 31-52; and particularly, "Revision and Retreat in the Historiography of 1917: Social History and Its Critics", *The Russian Review*, vol. 53, April 1994: 165-182.

[6] Good examples of the new research appear in the compilation of papers previously published in different places which were brought together by Martin A. Miller in *The Russian Revolution: The Essential Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001); in E.R. Frankel et al (eds.), *Revolution in Russia: Reassessments of 1917*

The chief tendency in recent historiography, which has been enriched by dozens of local studies, microhistory and the opening of archives, is to stress that the events in Russia were part of what the US historian Peter Holquist has called a "continuum of crisis", a constant state of crisis, which passed through various stages between 1914 and 1921—world war, revolutions and Civil Wars—that lacked any clear-cut dividing lines.[7] Various authors who began to publish their works after 1991, the year in which the state that had arisen from the Bolshevik seizure of power disappeared, speak of a "kaleidoscope of revolutions" —a kaleidoscope or diverse and changing combination of causes, events and results, with flesh-and-blood people at the centre of the story.[8]

The latest accounts put an emphasis first of all on the importance of the First World War as a catalyst for revolution. The deep rift between a changing society and the Tsarist autocracy, which began to appear decades earlier in violent demonstrations from above and below, created enormous potential for the development of the conflict. However, it was the Great War, a consequence of the imperial rivalry maintained by Russia with Germany and Austria-Hungary, that led to the mobilisation of roughly fifteen-and-a-half million men between August 1914 and early 1918, with total losses of over seven million including the dead, disappeared, wounded and maimed. The war's tragedy, according to most specialists, lay at the root of the revolutions of 1917.

In this way, the war exacerbated the deep divisions in Russian society, and the army in wartime turned into an enormous group of revolutionaries, whose own unease and turmoil could not be separated from the violent unrest that shook society as a whole. The crisis devolved from rebellion into revolution when the soldiers sided with the workers and especially

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(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and in the cited *Critical Companion to the Russian Revolution, 1914-1921*.

[7] Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). For more information on the impact of opening the archives, see the analysis and numerous autobiographical notes of the Australian Sheila Fitzpatrick, one of the pioneering figures in social history since the end of the nineteen-sixties: "Impact of the Opening of Soviet Archives on Western Scholarship on Soviet Social History", *The Russian Review,* 74 (July 2015): 377-400. See also Donald J. Raleigh, "Doing Soviet History: The Impact of the Archival Revolution", *The Russian Review,* 61 (January 2002): 16-24.

[8] For a defence of the concept of a "kaleidoscope of revolutions", see Christopher Read, *War and Revolution in Russia, 1914-22* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 220, in which Read also supports Peter Holquist's chronological proposal of a "continuum of crisis".

with the women who were protesting against food shortages, and when the members of the moderate opposition abandoned the autocracy to form new bodies of power.

The key contributions on this period of the war address the decline of the imperial army; the breakdown of the food supply system at a time when there were shortages of staple goods for millions of soldiers at the front and for the general populace back in the rear-guard; the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing areas under German occupation; the role of women protesting the food shortages, and especially the soldiers' wives, the so-called *Soldatki.*[9]

Women, soldiers/sailors, peasants and industrial workers were the main actors in the strikes and demonstrations that took place in the third winter of the war, the coldest and most complicated one, in the face of a crisis of authority and lost confidence in the regime. Their actions would lead to severe disturbances of public order, desertions from the front, and ultimately a profound transformation in the power structure that had dominated Russia for centuries.[10]

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[9] A key source on the fundamental issue of the Russian imperial army and its collapse during the First World War is Allan K. Wildman, *The End of the Russian Imperial Army*, 2 volumes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980-1987); the provision of food, as Peter Holquist shows in detail in his study on how the war led to revolution (*Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921)*, became one of the most important issues of state intervention and public debate. Peter Gatrell, whose research puts the figure of refugees at six million at the beginning of 1917, draws on a phrase from F. Scott Fitzgerald's famous novel *Tender Is the Night* to refer to "a whole empire walking": *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999). For more on the *Soldatki*, see the innovative research of Sarah Badcock, "Women, Protest, and Revolution: Soldiers' Wives in Russia during 1917", *International Review of Social History*, 49 (2004): 47-70.

[10] Some years ago, Barbara Evans Clements began to comb through the world of women—women peasants and workers—and the world of the intelligentsia in order to produce biographies [*Bolshevik Feminist: The Life of Aleksandra Kollontai* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979)] and innovative studies ("Working-Class and Peasant Women in the Russian Revolution, 1917-1923", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society,* 8, 2, 1982: 215-35), which she later synthesised in her book *Bolshevik Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). For a more wide-ranging book with much more biographical material, see Anna Hillyar and Jane McDermid, *Revolutionary Women in Russia 1870-1917: A Study in Collective Biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000). For many years, the subject of the peasantry was neglected in most studies of the revolutions of 1917, with the historiography generally taking greater interest in the role of the intelligentsia and industrial workers. In recent decades,

With the fall of the Tsar and the February revolution, all legal and ethical controls and restrictions toppled. From then on, in a context of growing anarchy, Civil War and economic meltdown, a highly unstable period witnessed the search for a new political and social order. From February 1917, Russia hurtled at breakneck speed through a liberal phase, then a socialist phase that was initially moderate but turned more radical, and then Lenin and the Bolsheviks took what had been a revolution for the power of the Soviets, which had enjoyed broad popular support, and turned it into a one-party dictatorship.[11]

The two revolutions also had an enormous impact among the non-Russian peoples of the empire, approximately half of its total population. While nationalist movements had started to challenge the autocracy in 1905, they became radicalised over the course of the war as some of the empire's peripheral regions, such as Poland and the Baltic area, fell under German occupation and a portion of their populations were evacuated. The end of the authoritarian system, the abolition of censorship and a wave of political and social changes emanating from Petrograd and other major Russian cities gave the nationalists a golden opportunity to organise themselves and mobilise their fellow citizens through their bonds of national identity.

As the works of Ronald Grigor Suny effectively show, stark distinctions existed between ethnic identity, based on differing customs and languages, national consciousness, which found greater expression in the political arena, and a nationalism that sought to establish some type of state based on national homogeneity. Among eighteen million Muslims, nationalism was a very weak force, especially in Turkestan, where the majority of Muslims lived, whereas in the Baltic region, the predominance of Germans

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however, historians have put the peasantry at the centre of the narrative. The previously cited works of Holquist, Read and Smith are clear examples, as are those of Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924* (New York: Penguin, 1998) and Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005). Many avenues were opened up by the work of Teodor Shanin, *The Awkward Class: Political Sociology of the Peasantry in a Developing Society, Russia, 1900-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972). The monograph that best reflects some of the new approaches is one by Aaron B. Retish, *Russia's Peasants in Revolution and Civil War: Citizenship, Identity, and the Creation of the Soviet State, 1914-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

[11] The stages of the revolution and the speed with which it hurtled from one stage to the next are underscored by Rex A. Wade, *The Russian Revolution, 1917*, 287.

and the Tsarist state's periodic campaigns of Russification had spurred the emergence of powerful nationalist movements.[12]

The Bolsheviks' seizure of power is the other key occurrence in which the latest studies rise above the old quarrels between Soviet and anti-Soviet historiography, instead underscoring the importance of the slogan "All Power to the Soviets" and how the popular support for these grassroots institutions paved the way for the Bolsheviks.

In Wade's view, the revolution of October 1917 was a "popular struggle" for this very reason and it only later became a "Bolshevik revolution". According to Read, the Bolsheviks carried out a political coup, but it was only possible because of massive popular support for the power of the soviets, the growing movement of land seizures, war-weariness and terrible economic hardship. A coup d'état in its purest form, Read argues, is a change of personnel at the highest echelons of political power, a state that is seized by conspirators and coup perpetrators. By contrast, in October 1917, in Russia, "there was precious little state to seize".[13]

The idea that power was seized as a result of a coup against a democratic government is challenged by Smith as well: "It had all the elements of a coup (…) except for the fact that a coup implies the seizure of a functioning state machine. Arguably, Russia had not had this since February". The provisional government lacked legitimacy from the start. Since the summer, it had become bogged down in a series of successive crises—at the front, in the countryside, in the factories and on the non-Russian periphery. Few governments could have coped with such a situation, much less one lacking a reliable army.[14]

By adopting this line of research, it is possible to discard myths and misconceptions that have long clouded our understanding of such a violent transformation. Against the myths and clashing views, Wade argues that "it was neither a simple manipulation by cynical Bolsheviks of ignorant masses nor the carefully planned and executed seizure of power under Lenin's omniscient direction". Ultimately, the backing of the workers,

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[12] Ronald Grigor Suny, "Nationality and Class in the Russian Revolutions of 1917: A Reexamination of Social Categories", in Nick Lampert and Gabor Rittersporn (eds.), *Stalinism: Its Nature and Aftermath – Essays in Honour of Moshe Lewin,* M.E. Sharpe, Armonk, 1992: 211-241.

[13] The Wade quote is from *The Russian Revolution*, from which the subsequent quote on myths comes as well; the quote from Christopher Read comes from *War and Revolution in Russia*, 118.

[14] S.A. Smith, *The Russian Revolution*: *A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 38.

soldiers and peasants for the soviets, the institution dedicated to promoting social revolution, combined with the fateful decision of the provisional governments to carry on with the war. Meanwhile, the fiasco of the Kornilov putsch had already demonstrated that the right was in disarray and that counter-revolution had no prospect of victory at the time.

The Civil War helped the Bolsheviks to hold onto power because it posed a clear choice between supporting them and the revolution or siding with the Whites and counter-revolution. Many of their opponents were forced to abandon resistance and assist in the Bolshevik victory as the lesser of two evils. The war against the Whites was, thus, the perfect excuse for the Bolsheviks to crush many popular aspirations and freedoms in the name of the military imperative.

In the process of the Civil War, everything that had characterised the October revolution—active participation in a popular movement driven by a programme of peace, land and all power to the soviets—came to an end. The Bolsheviks attained absolute and uncontested power between 1920 and 1922 because, in a situation of disorganisation, the strongest was the one who was the least weak—and this was their great accomplishment and advantage.

Since 1989, it has become more difficult to look at these revolutions, particularly the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, without an awareness of the appalling violence that accompanied them. Many people today, influenced by a substantial proportion of the historical accounts and by the political uses of history in a world in which the struggles for equality and a fairer distribution of wealth have been marginalised, reduce the revolutions to violence. On that line of reasoning, the revolutions in Russia, especially the Bolshevik one, mark the beginning of a cycle of violence that leads inexorably to the horrors of Nazism and Stalinism, identified after 1945 as the chief paradigms of totalitarianism.[15]

Without forgetting the terrible social costs of these transformations, however, we historians cannot and must not avoid analysing why the revolutions took place, particularly in Russia, and why the different forms of socialism, moderate or radical, held so much appeal and promise for millions of workers, soldiers and peasants. The differing moral evaluations of communism, its utopia, the dreams and nightmares that it spawned, are of little use in explaining how and why revolution broke out in Russia in

[15] The notion that the revolution is no longer regarded with "sympathy" today, along with the implications that this idea has for the study of its history, is addressed by S.A. Smith in "The Historiography of the Russian Revolution 100 Years On", *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, vol. 16, n. 4, Fall 2015: 733, 748-749.

February 1917 or in understanding the Bolsheviks' seizure of power and the effects that all these events were to have on the shape of the world in the twentieth century.

The collapse of the Soviet Union made it possible to investigate and interpret with greater perspective the spiral of conflicts, changes, dreams, deceptions and violence set in motion by the First World War and persisting afterwards in years of revolution and civil wars. To understand the complex social and cultural situation in the Russian empire, a good number of historians have added new views on class, gender, national, ethnic and religious identities, which have been incorporated into the political and social history of the revolutions since the late 1960s.

The historiographical reckoning is diverse, exceptional, at the stature of the major debates over the French Revolution. The present collective volume is a fine example of the advancement of knowledge about this turbulent period and a good sign of the attention that has been given to the subject by a number of leading Spanish historians for some time now. Only through rigorous research of this sort, with critically minded and widely disseminated readings of the past, do we increase our understanding and strengthen the task of the historian.

CHAPTER ONE

TSARISM'S LAST ADVENTURE: RUSSIA AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR

ALBERTO PELLEGRINI

A hot summer's day is breaking in the Volhynia region in what today is western Ukraine, between the Pripet marshes and the first spurs of the Carpathian mountains. In these vast plains, populated by a few cities such as Lutsk and Ternopil,[1] tens of thousands of well-equipped, well-led Russian soldiers have been moving forward from the east, under the deafening noise of cannon fire, in a military operation of an unprecedented scale. For their part, their hapless Germanic enemies, when they are not being battered by the relentless pounding of the artillery or by gunfire, are surrendering *en masse* or are desperately fleeing westwards after suffering a defeat of catastrophic proportions.

Readers interested in twentieth-century military history might assume that the image just described corresponds to the monumental engagements of the Second World War on the Eastern Front between the Nazi Wehrmacht and the Soviet Red Army. The geographical references would point to the Lvov-Sandomierz Offensive, of July 1944, when the troops of Ivan Konev overwhelmed their enemies and reached the River Vistula.

And despite the appearances, this impression is false; the year is 1916, not 1944, and the conflict is not World War II, but World War I. The Russians moving from the East are not soldiers of the Red Army, but of the Russian Imperial Army; their leader is not Konev but Aleksei Brusilov; their adversaries are not members of the Wehrmacht but the Austro-Hungarian Army, buckling under the weight of the Russian "steamroller".

[1] In the text I have attempted to reproduce the place names in common usage during the years of the First World War: thus, I will talk of Königsberg rather than Kaliningrad.

However, within a year of this triumph over the Austrians, the same victorious army would disintegrate in the midst of revolutionary chaos, with thousands of soldiers intent on occupying the land of the aristocrats instead of continuing the fight against the Central Powers. Desertions, encouraged by the incessant propaganda of the Bolsheviks, crushed the already low morale of the combatants, and the collapse of the home front—especially in the starving imperial capital—thwarted the last attempts of the Provisional Government to keep Russia in the conflict, in the name of solidarity with its allies in the Triple Entente and of a new democratic and revolutionary conception of the war.

Inevitably, the decomposition of the Russian armed forces in 1917 is a feature of any account of the Russian Revolution, a revolution which, in many historiographical interpretations, was largely brought on by military failure and by the colossal human losses resulting from the country's tragic involvement in the First World War. As a result, the idea of a Russian army capable of obtaining significant victories, and of a state which, in spite of everything, was still able to supply and arm millions of men in 1916, clashes head on with the stereotypical view of a Tsarist Russia whose final collapse can be traced back to the country's fateful entry into the war in the summer of 1914.

The basic problem, in my view, is the fact that the Eastern Front of the Great War has aroused little historiographical interest over the past decades: the "unknown war", as Churchill famously called it, has been little understood and even less investigated.[2] In the Soviet historiography, the Tsarist war against the Central Powers, often tarred as an imperialist adventure, served almost exclusively as a prelude to the far more significant events of the Revolution; and for their part, western historians have devoted only a few pages to the great battles of Eastern Europe, focusing instead on the trenches and bloodbaths of the Western Front. Even today, the names of Verdun, the Somme and the Marne are familiar to millions of people; but who has heard of Przemysl, Gorlice-Tarnów or Gumbinnen?

Fortunately, in recent years this tendency has to some extent been reversed, and western specialists have been able to offer a more coherently argued and less stereotyped historiographical account of the Russian involvement in the First World War.[3] At the same time, Russian historians

[2] Winston Churchill, *The Unknown War: The Eastern Front* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1931).

[3] For a summary of the latest historiographic trends in Russia and in the West, see Giovanna Cigliano, "La Russia nella Prima guerra mondiale: percorsi della storiografia russa e anglo-americana sul fronte orientale," *Ricerche di storia*

have also disassociated themselves from these earlier interpretations, vigorously studying aspects of their country's participation and contributing to the international historiographical debate—for example, in the case of the controversy surrounding the origins of the conflict.[4] In the meantime, as Victor Jeifets has rightly pointed out in a recent article, the study of the Great Russian War still faces two main dangers: first, the persistent threat of oblivion; and second, the appearance of new historiographic myths—emerging either inside the academic community or in society as a whole—that make it difficult to understand the issue in all its complexity.[5]

For this reason, in the brief space of this chapter I aim to trace the story of Russian participation in the First World War—that is, its form at the outset of the conflict, and the way it developed between 1914 and 1917. I will then focus on the military operations in which the Russian armies were involved and the dynamics of diplomacy which, from the days of the July Crisis of 1914, shaped Russia's intervention in the war. I do not mean to present a detailed analysis of the evolution of the domestic situation or of the momentous social and economic consequences of the war for the population at home, since these are issues that have always attracted more attention from historians as essential elements of an introduction to the revolutionary events of 1917.

Russia and the July Crisis

One of the most widely discussed issues in the study of Russian participation in the First World War has always been the responsibility of the Tsarist government in the outbreak of the conflict and the role it played throughout the July Crisis of 1914. It is true that in the interminable debate on the causes of the Great War most historians are still inclined to point the blame at Germany and Austria-Hungary, and to a lesser extent at Serbia, in the sequence of decisions that led the continent into catastrophe. Indeed, on 6 July, barely a week after the attack in Sarajevo on June 28, the Germans extended the famous "blank cheque" to their Austrian allies for the punishment of Serbia, and it was the Germans who opened

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politica, Quadrimestrale dell'Associazione per le ricerche di storia politica, no. 3 (December 2015): 303-322.

[4] See Joshua A. Sanborn, "Russian Historiography on the Origins of the First World War since the Fischer Controversy," *Journal of Contemporary History* 48, no. 2 (April 2013): 350-362.

[5] Victor Jeifets, "Reflexiones sobre el centenario de la participación rusa en la Primera Guerra Mundial: entre el olvido histórico y los mitos modernos," *Anuario Colombiano de Historia Social y de la Cultura* 42, no. 2 (2015): 185.

hostilities against Russia and against France.[6] For its part, the Vienna government, urged on by hawks like its Chief of Staff Conrad, sent Belgrade an ultimatum that they knew to be unacceptable.[7] Finally we should not forget the machinations of Serbia and its scheming rulers during the months leading up to the crisis and, above all, in the preparation of the fateful assassination.[8]

In recent years, however—without downplaying the role played by Germans, Austrians and Serbs—other historians have stressed the responsibilities of Russian politicians in the thirty days that elapsed between the Sarajevo attack and the beginning of hostilities: responsibilities which, these historians claim, place Russia firmly among the group of suspects mentioned when the culprits of the disaster are singled out.[9] The new interpretations, though disputed and sometimes even criticised, have had the merit of putting all the ambiguities, uncertainties and misconceptions that characterised the decision-making of the Tsarist rulers in the summer of 1914 under the historiographical spotlight, as well as Russia's fundamental role in the complex dynamic that led the continent

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[6] The thesis of German responsibility at the start of the First World War has been widely studied by Fritz Fischer. See Fritz Fischer, *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1967). More recently, Max Hastings has also indicated that Germany "seems deserving of most blame" for the conflict: Max Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914: Europe Goes to War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 102.

[7] See for example David Stevenson, *1914-1918: The History of the First World War* (London: Penguin, 2005), 10-11, 15. For an exhaustive analysis of the historiographical approaches to Austrian responsibility at the start of the Great War, see Samuel R. Williamson Jr., "Austria and the Origins of the Great War: A Selective Historiographical Survey," in *1914: Austria-Hungary, the Origins, and the First Year of World War I*, ed. Günther Bischof, Ferdinand Karlhofer and Samuel R. Williamson Jr. (New Orleans: UNO Press, 2014), 21-33.

[8] Serbian responsibilities have been stressed by (among others) Christopher Clark. See Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in* 1914 (New York: Harper, 2012), 33-64.

[9] This interpretation has been developed mainly by the British historian Dominic Lieven and, more controversially, by the North American Sean McMeekin; in Spain, it has been taken up by (among other) Francisco Veiga and Pablo Martín. See Dominic Lieven, *Towards the Flame: Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia* (London: Penguin, 2016); Sean McMeekin. *The Russian Origins of the First World War* (London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 41-75; VEIGA, Francisco Veiga and Pablo Martín, *Las guerras de la Gran Guerra (1914-1923)* (Madrid: Catarata, 2014), 24-32.

to war—a war that, in the words of Dominic Lieven, "was first and foremost an eastern European conflict".[10]

If we examine the position of the Russian government during the July Crisis, it is worth highlighting a series of key points that will help to understand the dynamics of Russian actions and their causes. First, already in the final years and months of peacetime, Russian foreign policy was strikingly inconsistent. With its enormous territory, its vast natural resources, its growing population and its rapid economic growth of recent times Russia was part of the select group of great European powers, and its leaders were fully aware of this. It is no surprise that most of the Tsarist politicians had great designs for their country: the most prudent wanted to maintain the positions achieved, taking advantage of the country's diplomatically favourable status obtained through the alliance with France and Great Britain to continue strengthening the empire; while other more ambitious leaders supported an aggressive expansionist policy that would satisfy the country's traditional aspirations in key strategic areas such as the Balkans and the Ottoman Empire.

These ambitions coexisted with a persistent concern which has been a distinctive feature of Russia's foreign policy throughout its history: the fear of losing its rank as a great power and being overtaken by other rising nations (especially Germany, whose increasing penetration in the Ottoman territories seemed to confirm the Russians' worst fears). This apprehension, heightened by recent military and diplomatic failures—from the defeat against Japan in the 1905 war to the humiliation suffered in the Bosnia crisis of 1908—[11] reflected the awareness of many Tsarist leaders that the country was slipping behind its potential European rivals.

At this delicate juncture, the wavering of the devious Russian foreign minister, Sazonov, also had a decisive effect. Throughout the July Crisis, Sazonov was caught between the fear of a generalised conflict—which many politicians and Tsar Nicholas II himself wished to avoid, and for which they believed Russia was insufficiently prepared—and the ambitions of the hawks, who saw a war in Europe as a way of uniting the country around a common cause, reaffirming its status as a great power, and reviving imperial expansionism at the expense especially of the Ottoman Empire (whose capital Constantinople had for a long time been

[10] Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 2.
[11] On the Bosnian crisis and the Russian response, see Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914* (New York: Random House, 2013), 429-438.

coveted by the most avid nationalists).[12] If we add to this picture the pressure exerted on the Russian government by the most nationalistic wing of the press, which favoured the spread of anti-Western feeling among the population, and the role of the Tsar's ambassador in Belgrade, the fanatical Serbophile Nicholas Hartwig, we will see how complicated was the situation facing the men who would eventually lead Russia into the abyss: men who, like many of their European colleagues, acted so unconsciously and suicidally—like sleepwalkers, to use Christopher Clark's apt phrase—in the days that preceded the catastrophe.

Indeed, in those decisive days of the early summer, the position of Saint Petersburg was fundamental in the preparation of the disaster. Although there is no incontrovertible proof that Russia openly conspired to break the peace, there are sufficient indications of the country's contribution to the generalised collapse of European diplomacy. Russia, whose secret services had probably known about the Sarajevo plot, did not appear particularly distressed by the murder of the heir to the Austrian throne; nor did she try to reduce the tension by trying to intercede between Vienna and Belgrade, but instead gave repeated signs of inflexibility, especially after hearing the harsh terms of the Austrian ultimatum to Serbia. On the official visit of the French President Poincaré to St. Petersburg, which began on July 20, the Russians and the French adopted a defiant, aggressive tone, reaffirming the solidity of their alliance and showing very little sympathy for the demands of the Austrians, who, for their part, appeared intent on crushing their opponent.[13]

Convinced of the imminence of a conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia, and fearful of suffering a new diplomatic humiliation if they did not respond robustly to the ultimatum sent to a country which aroused great common feeling among the population, on July 24 the Russian leaders took the momentous decision to prepare for the mobilisation of its armed forces. This decision, championed by Chief of Staff Yanushkevich, and supported by a Sazonov who had overcome his previous hesitations, was ratified at the ministerial council held the following day, thus initiating the "period preparatory to war" included in the military plans, and was key to turning the Austro-Serbian dispute into an international

[12] For Russian leaders like the head of military intelligence Yuri Danilov, "the road through Constantinople passed through Vienna and through Berlin." See McMeekin, *The Russian Origins*, 26. It is worth noting that many Russian documents evocatively referred to the Ottoman capital as "Tsargrad", the city of the Tsar.

[13] Clark, *The Sleepwalkers*, 443-450. Interestingly, the official records of Poincaré's visit to Saint Petersburg have never been found.

conflict involving the Great Powers.[14] The Russian politicians, victims of the implacable military logic of mobilisation—a mechanism which, once set in motion, cannot be turned back—and torn between fear and ambition, were unaware that the resolution they had taken represented a decisive step towards the precipice, and offered a perfect excuse to Germany to present them as the aggressors.[15] At this point, as Austria and Serbia officially declared hostilities on July 28, hesitation no longer held the Russians back, and nor did the famous exchange of letters between Nicholas II and his cousin Kaiser Wilhelm: on 1 August, Russia was at war with Germany.[16]

Disenchantment: the Russian war of 1914

Despite the uncertainties, in Russia and in other European countries the beginning of the conflict was met with optimism and enthusiasm, which was also shared by the population and stimulated by propaganda.[17] To quote Orlando Figes, "in those first heady weeks of August there was every outward sign of ralliement".[18] The political and military leaders foresaw a rapid affair that would be resolved with a few decisive battles and would end before Christmas: the colossal size of the Tsarist armies forces, with its nearly four million men mobilised in the first days of war, cast a spell over both its enemies and its allies, who imagined the "Russian steamroller" opening up the heart of Europe and preparing the ground for a military parade all the way to Berlin.[19]

Unfortunately for Russia, none of its leaders (nor anyone else in the other belligerent countries) understood the nature of modern industrialised warfare, characterised by the presence of new weaponry such as machine guns that granted a decisive superiority to the defending side even when it

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[14] Peter Hart, *La Gran Guerra (1914-1918. Historia Militar de la Primera Guerra Mundial)* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2013), 47-48.

[15] For the Russian position during the July Crisis, see Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 313-342.

[16]. Although not, at the moment, against Austria-Hungary. Surprisingly, Vienna declared war on the Russian Empire only a few days later, on August 6, when the fighting had already begun throughout Europe.

[17] On the Russian war propaganda, see Hubertus F. Jahn, *Patriotic Culture in Russia During World War I* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

[18] Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy. The Russian Revolution 1891-1924* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 251.

[19] Joshua A. Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse. The Great War and the Destruction of the Russian Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 23.

was heavily outnumbered by the attackers. Nor had anyone considered the scale of the logistical problems of having to supply and feed huge masses of combatants; or the importance of having sufficient reserves of men and matériel to take advantage of any possible initial advantages derived from numerical superiority. All these oversights proved particularly costly for the armies of Nicholas II, which, in spite of its vast size, suffered from grave structural defects that severely compromised its combat ability. The feared "Russian steamroller" was composed of huge numbers of soldiers with little instruction or training and who in some cases lacked even the basic equipment for war; it was seriously lacking in heavy artillery, which was to prove decisive in the coming battles on more than one occasion;[20] the stocks of matériel were very limited, the telephone lines almost non-existent, and the rail network was too chaotic and poorly organised to transport replacements and supplies to the front line.[21] To make matters worse, the military commanders of this colossus with feet of clay were incompetent and decrepit;[22] in the words of Barbara W. Tuchman, the Russian officer class was filled with

> aged generals whose heaviest intellectual exercise was card playing and who, to save their court perquisites and prestige, were kept on the active list regardless of activity. Officers were appointed and promoted chiefly through patronage, social or monetary, and although there were among them many brave and able soldiers the system did not tend to bring the best to the top.[23]

The Russian military planners were obliged to take on Germany and Austria-Hungary simultaneously and faced a series of important strategic dilemmas. Military logic would have advised them to concentrate the bulk of their forces against the weaker Austrian army so as to strike a devastating blow in the early stages of the war, and at the same time prevent the Austrians from invading Serbia. As for the strategy against

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[20] In the years prior to 1914, under strong pressure from the Tsar himself, Russia had allocated large amounts of money to the reconstruction of its Baltic fleet; this meant that it had to postpone the planned modernisation of the artillery. See Lieven, *Towards the Flame*, 103.

[21] For an analysis of the Russian army on the eve of the war, see David R. Stone, *The Russian Army in the Great War: The Eastern Front, 1914-1917* (Lawrence: Kansas University Press, 2015), 32-53.

[22] The Tsarist officer class has been analysed in depth by John W. Steinberg, *All the Tsar's Men. Russia's General Staff and the Fate of the Empire, 1898-1914* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010).

[23] Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Dell, 1963), 78.

Germany, the initial plans suggested a defensive approach—even including withdrawal from Poland, which appeared very difficult to defend. However, military logic clashed with the diplomatic imperatives: knowing that at the very beginning of the war Germany had directed the bulk of her forces against France and had adopted defensive positions on its eastern border, the Franco-Russian Entente requested the Tsarist forces to come to the aid of their ally by launching a fierce offensive against the Germans as well. Thus, in the summer of 1914, the Stavka (the Russian High Command) chose to apply a variant of the plan drawn up in 1910, which divided its forces and sent its First and Second Armies to invade the lightly defended East Prussia, and stationed four more—the Third, Fourth, Fifth and Eighth—along the Austrian border and prepared for the attack on Galicia. Unfortunately for the Russians, this strategy would only sow the seeds for the later disasters.[24]

However, at the beginning of the operations Russia seemed to be in a position to achieve its ambitious objectives, especially in East Prussia. The German Eighth Army of Prittwitz—after a victorious initial skirmish in Stallüponen—launched an attack on the Russian First Army of Rennenkampf, which had begun its invasion of the enemy territory from the east more rapidly than expected. At the Battle of Gumbinnen on August 20, despite limited supplies of artillery munitions, Rennenkampf's 200,000 men halted the German attack, and obliged Prittwitz to carry out an improvised retreat. It was the first Russian victory of the war.[25]

This early battle had important consequences for both sides in terms of morale and also of strategy. The German military command contemplated with horror the possibility of abandoning the territory of East Prussia to the invaders, withdrawing behind the Vistula, and giving up the major city of Königsberg; as for the Russians, the victory of August 20 lifted their spirits, and seemed to reaffirm their belief in a straightforward victory. Even more significant were the strategic consequences. Faced with the awful prospect of losing East Prussia, the German chief of staff von Moltke replaced the stunned Prittwitz with the men who would become the scourge of the Russians in the following years: Ludendorff and von

[24] On Russian military planning before the conflict, see Evgenii Iur'evich Sergeev, "Pre-war Military Planning (Russian Empire)", 1914-1918-online. International Encyclopedia of the First World War, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer and Bill Nasson, (Berlin: Freie Universität Berlin, 2014), last updated October 8, 2014, https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/pre-war_military_planning_russian_empire?version=1.0 (last accessed March 12, 2018)

[25] Hastings, *Catastrophe 1914*, 271.

Hindenburg. The new commanders rejected the idea of withdrawal and prepared to take on the Russians, while Moltke decided to transfer some forces from the Western Front to aid the Eighth Army. This decision, considered for a long time as fundamental to the course of the war because it slowed down the German advance in France and ultimately allowed the Allied victory at the Marne, in fact changed little: the troops sent arrived too late to make a significant contribution to the later battle of Tannenberg, while the German failure in the West was mainly due to the excessively ambitious nature of the original Schlieffen Plan. On the Russian side, the invasion of Prussia continued, as Samsonov's Second Army advanced from the south with its 230,000 men. Though lacking the support of Rennenkampf, whose advance had practically stopped and who was now separated from the Second Army by the region of the Masurian Lakes, the commander-in-chief of the Russian North-Western Front, Zhilinskiy, pressed Samsonov—who was also vying for his share of military glory—to finish off the German forces in East Prussia.

Unfortunately for the Russians, the Second Army was sorely lacking in cohesion and organisation and was unprepared for a confrontation with the tactically more able Germans: the movements of its units were slow and cumbersome, its logistical network was deficient and its communications were often unencrypted. The Germans intercepted these communications and, aware of the lack of coordination between the invading armies, re-deployed their troops to tend a perfect trap to Samsonov, who thought that he was heading towards an easy victory.[26] The fate of the Second Russian Army was sealed between August 26 and 30, in the encounter that would become known as the Battle of Tannenberg: Samsonov and his men were surrounded and subsequently annihilated by the masterful manoeuvre devised by Hindenburg, Ludendorff and, above all, by the highly intelligent Chief of Staff of the Eighth Army, Max Hoffmann. By the end of the battle, the army of Samsonov—who committed suicide on the night of August 29/30—had ceased to exist as a fighting force after losing more than 170,000 men, and the Russians had suffered a textbook defeat that put paid to their plan to invade German territory (which they would not in fact reach again at any point during the war) and badly shook the confidence of its commanders, although they managed to conceal the news from their French and British allies.[27]

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[26] Stephen Walsh, "The Russian Army and the Conduct of Operations in 1914," *British Journal for Military History* 2, no. 2 (February 2016): 74-77.

[27] Norman Stone, *The Eastern Front 1914-1917* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1975), 63-67. On the Battle of Tannenberg, see also the recent work by John Sweetman, *Tannenberg 1914* (London: Cassell, 2002).

A few days later, to put an end to the threat to its eastern regions, the Germans prepared to face the forces of Rennenkampf, whose advances had been halted by the defences of Königsberg: in a series of battles that came to be called First Battle of the Masurian Lakes, from September 7 to 14, the Germans once again asserted their greater tactical ability and inflicted serious losses on the Russians. Faced with the possibility of being surrounded, Rennenkampf chose to withdraw completely from East Prussia and indeed only the speed of the retreat saved his forces from complete destruction. Thus, by the end of September, the Russian invasion of Germany, which had initially aroused so many fears in Berlin, had ended in abject failure: more than 250,000 casualties, the total destruction of the North-Western Front, and the daunting realisation for the Russians that they would face much stronger, faster and better trained enemies in the fighting that would follow.

If Russian morale did not collapse completely after Tannenberg, and if the Western allies continued to maintain a certain confidence in the fighting capabilities of Nicholas II's armies, this was largely due to the development of operations in the other sector of the Eastern Front, where the Tsarist forces faced the Austro-Hungarians in southern Poland and Galicia. Over a very broad front, characterised by the dispersal of the troops and the lack of adequate lines of communication, the inept Austrian Chief of Staff Conrad decided to undertake the invasion of Russian-occupied Poland with two of his armies—the First and the Fourth—without discussing his strategy with his German allies. By the end of August the Austrians had obtained some partial successes (in Kraśnik and Komarów), where they were also helped by the incompetence of the Tsarist commanders, exemplified by the contrast between the Stavka, led by Grand Duke Nicholas, and the commander in chief of the South-Western Front, Nikolai Ivanov.

However, Conrad was even less adept than his rivals: after already dividing his initial forces, ordering them simultaneously to attack Serbia and Russia, and emboldened by the first advance of his soldiers to the north, the Austrian leader forced his Third Army and the Kovess Group to move eastward, where they were massacred by Brusilov's Eighth Army and Ruzsky's Third Army at Gnila Lipa.[28] In spite of the dramatic situation on its eastern flank, with the Russians entering Lemberg (the Empire's fourth largest city) on September 3, Conrad made another colossal mistake, withdrawing his northern forces in the belief that

[28] For a detailed analysis of Conrad's strategy, and errors, see Geoffrey Wavro, *A Mad Catastrophe: The Outbreak of World War I and the Collapse of the Habsburg Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 2014).

Plehve's Fifth Army had been totally defeated. The result was another disaster: at the Battle of Rawa Russka, Plehve and his men won a decisive victory that destroyed the Austrian lines in Galicia and allowed the Russians to occupy the entire province.[29]

Thus, in the least known and least studied of the three great land campaigns of 1914 (the other two being the Marne and East Prussia), the Russians managed to obtain a victory of considerable proportions which, for a moment, diverted attention away from the disaster of Tannenberg. In the Galicia campaign, the Tsarist forces had suffered tremendous human and material losses—almost 250,000 casualties—but they had demonstrated their fighting ability and had reacted swiftly to the first difficulties, thanks especially to the skilful leadership of some of their commanders such as Plehve and Brusilov. Austria-Hungary, on the other hand, had received a devastating blow from which it would never fully recover, losing its best divisions and being obliged to yield to the Russians a large part of its national territory (with serious consequences for the civilian population and especially for the Jews, who suffered brutally at the hands of the invaders).[30]

In spite of all this, the positive results obtained against the Austrians could not dispel the general feeling of failure surrounding the ambitious Russian strategy of the first months of the war. According to the Stavka's plans, the Tsarist army was to have executed two major operations simultaneously: in the south, an attack on Galicia that would have gained access to the Hungarian plains; and in the north, with a penetration into the eastern German territory, in theory lightly defended, which would have achieved a potentially decisive victory in the initial phase of the conflict. And yet both options ended in failure—due to their excessive ambition, the insufficiency of the forces assigned to them, and the colossal logistical mistakes committed.[31]

In the combats against the Austrians, despite the creditable initial triumph, Russian attempts to penetrate the enemy lines were frustrated by the arrival of autumn. At battles like Limanowa, which took place in terrible weather conditions and in particularly difficult terrain, and cost

[29] On the fall of Lemberg and the Battle of Rawa Russka, see John R. Schindler, *Fall of the Double Eagle: The Battle for Galicia and the Demise of Austria-Hungary* (Lincoln, NE: Potomac Books, 2015), 213-244.

[30] Ian Kershaw, *Descenso a los infiernos. Europa 1914-1949* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2016), 113-117. For an overview of the Galicia campaign from the Austrian perspective, see Richard Lein, "A Train Ride to Disaster: The Austro-Hungarian Eastern Front in 1914," in Bischof, *1914*: *Austria-Hungary*, 110-119.

[31] Walsh, "The Russian Army", 87-88.

both sides thousands of casualties, the Austrians managed to halt the advance of the Tsarist soldiers in the foothills of the Carpathians and thus prevented both the capture of the strategically important city Krakow and the advance into Hungary. Further north, in central Poland, the newly formed German Ninth Army and the Austro-Hungarian First Army faced the Russians; in October, Hindenburg decided to pre-empt the enemy's plan to attack Silesia by launching an offensive in the central sector of the front. Despite the defeat at the Battle of the River Vistula, the attack managed to delay the assault on the eastern German provinces thanks above all to the destruction of the railway network around Warsaw. Later, in a bloody battle near Lodz that ended without a clear victor, the German Ninth Army once again slowed the Russians down, eventually stabilising the front line and thus forestalling any possibility of an invasion of Silesia, at least until the arrival of spring.[32]

Russia had missed the opportunity to win a decisive victory, had lost hundreds of thousands of soldiers and, above all, had revealed a characteristic that would remain constant throughout the conflict in the Eastern Front: the Tsarist forces were more than capable of defeating (even trouncing) the Austrians, but they were unable to overcome the far more skilled and faster Germans. It is no surprise that in the following months it would be precisely the forces of Hindenburg and Ludendorff that would inflict the hardest blows with a series of victories which, by the summer of 1915, were on the verge of provoking the total collapse of Russia and whose political consequences could hardly have been more profound.

A new enemy, and a new front: the Caucasus, 1914-1915

On 29 October, 1914, as part of a plan designed by Minister of War Enver Pasha and the German Admiral Souchon, the Ottoman Navy of the Black Sea launched an unannounced raid against a series of Russian cities including Odessa and Sevastopol. The bombardment marked the entry into the war of the Ottoman Empire alongside the Central Powers, which was ratified a few days later by formal declarations of war. The Ottoman attack was no surprise to the countries of the Entente, as it was a logical consequence of the diplomatic rapprochement between Berlin and Constantinople and of the policies implemented by the Turkish rulers in

[32] On the Battle of Lodz, see Prit Buttar, *Collision of Empires: The War on the Eastern Front in 1914* (London: Osprey Publishing, 2014), 356-387.