The Times, Life and Moral Dilemma of Beria

The Times, Life and Moral Dilemma of Beria

By

Andrew Sangster

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

The Times, Life and Moral Dilemma of Beria

By Andrew Sangster

This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-2805-7
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-2805-5

I dedicate this book to my wife Carol
and our family of Richard, Pandora, Robert, Jessi,
and our grandson Joshua who is enthusiastic about history

CONTENTS

Part Four: Repression of Free Will

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am most grateful to my wife Carol for proof-reading this text and offering sound advice on ensuring that the most complex situations are readable. I am also indebted to The Revd. Canon Dr Peter Doll, Canon Residentiary and Librarian at Norwich Cathedral for his observations on the difficulty of dealing with the moral issues raised in Parts Three and Four. I am equally grateful for the guidance of Dr Richard Maguire lecturer at the UEA University.

ABBREVIATIONS/ACRONYMS USED IN TEXT

GDR	German Democratic Republic
GKO	State Defence Committee
GPU	State Political Directorate
GUGB	Chief Directorate for State Security
INO	Foreign Intelligence Service
JAC	Jewish Antifascist Committee
KGB	Committee for State Security
KI	Committee of Information (foreign directories of MGB and GRU)
MGB	Ministry of State Security
MVD	Ministry of Internal Affairs
NEP	New Economic Policy
NKGB	People's Commissariat of State Security
NKID	People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs
NKVD	People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs.
OGPU	(Joint State Political Directorate) Soviet Intelligence and Security Service.
OO	(Osobye Otdel) part of NKVD
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic
SED	Socialist Unity Party
SMERSH	(Death to Spies) Counterintelligence.

PREFACE

My interest in history began as a small boy with the Christmas gift of a book called *Our Island Story.* This book caught my childhood attention because of some of the gruesome pictures of beheadings and battle scenes. As my reading progressed my history books covered events in a chronological order relating the major incidents of the past, with limited comments such as stating that "he was a tyrant" or this was a "terrible and barbarous action." My junior history reading continued in this style, but I noted that some historians occasionally stepped out of the custom of relating events to make wider comments on how a situation arose. History writing has come a long way since, but my attention was captivated by a throw-away comment by Solzhenitsyn when he wrote "*this belongs to the history of morals, which is where everything else originates as well*."[1]

In trying to understand the events and characters of the past we often neglect to account for human conduct. Some would argue that is not the point of history. However, it is a simple question at one level, but a complex puzzle once started. Describing the circumstances of the day or of a situation carries us only so far but trying to probe the minds of men is difficult, if not a seemingly impossible task. Human conduct can sometimes be explained by an adherence to an ideology which can involve forms of nationalism, ethnic bigotry, religious belief systems and a myriad of other factors, good and bad. It is possible to understand individual intentions because of the acts done by that person as related by history, but understanding the motives is another and more complex situation. In many ways it comes down to trying to understand the nature of humans and what propels them in their decision making. In his analysis of what drove ordinary German policemen to kill Jewish men, women, children and babies, Christopher Browning wrote "the behaviour of any human being is, of course, a very complex phenomenon, and the historian who attempts to 'explain' it is indulging in a certain arrogance."[2] This book does not pretend to offer an explanation, but to indicate possible pointers for serious consideration.

As one of life's perpetual students, I have had a lifelong interest in history, but have also acquired degrees in law, theology and moral

---

[1] Solzhenitsyn Aleksandr, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-56* (London: The Harvill Press, 1985) p.131

philosophy, which stimulated me to try and utilise this knowledge in this history and biographical account of a notorious historical figure from the Soviet past. I chose the infamous Soviet politician and policeman Beria, because I have travelled widely in the old Communist Eastern Bloc as a government guest and as a curious visitor, and I grew to like the Russian people very much, but always remained bemused by their political system and its ramifications. In 1970 I asked about the Katyń massacres and was hurried out of the room, and when I inquired about Beria, I gained the impression a few had heard of him, but they pretended otherwise.

This biography of Beria is basically a history, but following Solzhenitsyn's comments I have tried to ask further questions behind the historical backdrop, and looked beyond Beria's *intentions* towards his *motives*, and what made him the man he became.[3] A person so appalling that in the 1950s there was a Communist attempt to expunge his name from their history. Such an exercise also demands a wider horizon than one man and one country to provide even the merest indicators to explain such gross iniquity, an immorality on such a scale that it can only be designated as evil. Beria is the subject, but he reflects many others in history and currently. As such the book's final parts are devoted to the argument that we have free will, but under certain conditions it can be restricted if not suppressed. The biographical details of Beria explain his deeds and intentions; the final part on the question of free will examine his motives and responsibility.

[2] Browning Christopher, *Ordinary Men* (London: Penguin Books, 2001) p.188

[3] Solzhenitsyn was arrested in February 1944 by SMERSH and sent to the Gulag camps. He was rehabilitated in 1957 during Khrushchev's leadership.

BOOK OUTLINE

Part One will outline Russia's background and Soviet history during Beria's life. This is not so much in defence of Beria, but to understand the degree to which he was a man of his times, and to set him in the context of his historical background. The history of Russia and the Soviet Union needs volumes upon volumes, but this part is rigorously condensed to illustrate the overall development and nature of those days, and Beria is only occasionally mentioned in this survey to indicate his whereabouts and position during this time-slot of 1900-1953.

Part Two will look at Beria's life and the views of many historians who have written about him or made passing observations. His personal life is somewhat obscure, but what is known with some certainty will be explored, and his political machinations studied since they reveal more about the nature of this man. His actions and intentions will be outlined as well as seeking his motives.

Part Three of this study will peruse the vexed question as to whether someone like Beria was a mere product of his age, and how far an individual can be held morally responsible for his actions. The disciplines of psychology, criminology, jurisprudence, biology, bio-chemistry, theology, philosophy, environment, up-bringing and historical background will be surveyed to examine whether they can offer any form of acceptable explanation in understanding the nature of an immorality, which descends to evil. A new book by Professor Plomin (October 2018) based on the study of our genes has suggested that our inherited make-up is highly persuasive in terms of our conduct. His book is reflected on with the current writer's personal communications with Professor Plomin.[1] Part Three presents the view that humans can retain their free will, although it is sometimes constrained by automatic reflexive responses.

Part Four will illustrate that sometimes free will can be suppressed under certain circumstances, and it will address some of the issues raised about personal moral responsibility. The question of the repression of the free will relates to areas such as putative duress (coercion), cowardice, breaking ranks, a tyrannical dictator's control, ideology, obeying orders,

---

[1] Plomin Robert, *Blueprint: How DNA Makes Us Who We Are* (London: Penguin, 2018)

historical background and other factors. This part also explores the warnings of Harari's latest publication, where possible future restraints on free will, (as far as it exists according to Harari) are outlined, with the serious ramifications that humanity is in danger of becoming degraded.[2] This final part will study not just Beria, but it will provide various scholars' insights into the cause of evil under the circumstances of war and repression, and to try and understand how under certain conditions, humanity's use of free will can be repressed and used to create evil.

[2] Harari Yuval Noah, *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018)

PART ONE

RUSSIAN HISTORY DURING BERIA'S LIFETIME

Russia is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. (Churchill)
Stalin remains the central mystery within the Soviet enigma.[1]

INTRODUCTION

Three years before he died Sudoplatov "an illegal" (agent, an assassin, and later senior officer of the Soviet secret services) who was deeply involved with Soviet intrigue, stealing atomic secrets from abroad, organising the death of Trotsky, and was close to Beria quoted Russia's chief archivist Rudolf Pikoya in 1993: "Russian historians do not know postwar history. Even specialists in this period did not know much."[2] Russian historians have often had to be selective as to what they wrote, the archives have considerable evidence missing, and some of what they do have may be somewhat dubious in terms of integrity. Even some of the best Soviet historians, both Soviet and otherwise, clash over details and incidents. When Wittlin wrote his biography of Beria it became immediately apparent that it contained a strong fictional aspect as he described what Beria was thinking as a schoolboy, and he relied on "tales" and generalised myths.[3] He probably took this route because of the lack of substantive material. Alliluyeva Svetlana, Stalin's daughter is occasionally referred to but with the caution as she had her own hidden agendas.

Solzhenitsyn was an interesting source if only because he was there and experienced the suppression of freedom, as was Sudoplatov who helped create that sense of State control. Sudoplatov's memoirs appear to be truthful to a degree which is unusual in the traditional self-serving memoirs. This is because of his admissions in committing totally immoral acts of murder, and in the merciless elimination of potential enemies. His main purpose was to rehabilitate his reputation as a reliable and faithful Communist, and in doing this he revealed some interesting insights into Soviet history and the man Beria. The British spy and diplomat Bruce Lockhart lived in Russia during the early revolutionary days, and provided some interesting insights in the revolutionary period, especially when he was arrested on suspicion of trying to assassinate Lenin. If Russia is a *riddle wrapped in a mystery* this remains even more true with its recent Soviet history than with its distant past.

The "history of the Soviet Union has often been interpreted as a great tragedy; a cruel deviation of a country from the general trajectory of human history," and has been used to demonstrate that state power can sometimes lead to slavery.[4] The problem with writing history is a tendency to write it backwards. It is impossible to write about Hitler and the rise of his party

without the ever-consuming knowledge of the consequences in 1945. The same issue arises when writing about Lenin and Stalin because there is always the shadow of the purges, the Gulag, and it is especially difficult when writing from the western capitalistic world, which at times feels like another planet. Stalin who dominated this period will always be regarded as the archetypal example of the totalitarian regime. The historiography of Russian history is confusing, sometimes caused by the variety of political angles adopted by western historians, who are often trying to find a new interpretation. It is frequently the case that the various opinions are influenced between conscious and sub-conscious ideological viewpoints.

The overthrow of the Tsar has been given many interpretations from ideological grounds to the power of emerging personalities. However, the main cause of the revolution started in Petrograd with "the largely spontaneous action of thousands of hungry, angry, and war-weary women and men who had lost all confidence in the government of Nicholas II."[5] This was the power-house of the start of revolution and many interpretations have been applied; they range from the Bolsheviks organising the outburst, to utilising the moment, to grasping power, to being asked to accept power. The soldiers and workers had established their councils or soviets and they needed support and direction. They had overthrown the old order and now needed a leadership to govern, and consequently in October 1917 "the Bolsheviks came to power in the name of the soviets."[6]

This study is not about the intricacies of historiography but notes them in passing, because this is an exploration of the man Beria. It is critical to understand what influenced him, and to look briefly at the landscape of Soviet history, if only to place Beria in his natural background. His name is occasionally mentioned in Part One simply to know what he was doing as major events unfolded. This historical background analysis is sweeping and necessarily short because its sole intention is to paint the backdrop of Beria's stage, and to understand the essence of the man. Men such as Stalin, Lenin, Kerensky, and Trotsky are generally well-known; other figures appear in the short history with whom the reader may be less familiar, so they have been given brief footnotes to explain who they were in the unfolding drama. As a curious note before the history unfolds, in Part One alone, of the major actors on Stalin's stage 40% died in the purges, 20% assisted him, 5% were assassinated, 10% died from illness and only 25% died from old age: this was a risky and dangerous time and place in which to live. The very brief biographical footnotes are also contained in Appendix One in case the reader needs to jolt the memory.

Importance of Historic Background

It could be argued that some people have greater free will than others, but there can be little doubt in human experience that the family, and especially the national circumstances of the day into which we are born by fate, helps formulate our personality and the way we respond. By the time human beings become conscious of their self-identity they are already being shaped by their environment, by people of influence, other factors, and the events of the day. The surroundings in which people live is a powerful element, as must be the general nature of the society in which they are nurtured.

Some countries are more at peace than others, and there are places where violence with its brutalisation and the need for survival becomes paramount. In the need or demand for change traditional values can be challenged, emergent leaders can be overly powerful, and Marx was probably correct in claiming that economics and "lack of fairness" can sow the seeds of protest. Unfair economic factors, a sense of injustice and a powerful or charismatic leader who demands change may be good or bad, but the consequences have often proved violent. This is frequently witnessed at a tribal level, but the consequences on the modern international scenario of a breakdown in any constituent society and the consequential strife is much more far-reaching.

In the twentieth century because of the Great War of 1914-18 many hitherto long-established European countries lost not only their monarchies, but a sense of stability, and were plunged into either civil war or turmoil. Germany's Weimar Republic disintegrated in the face of Nazi fascism, mainly brought about by economic misery and the failings of the Versailles Treaty. In Italy Mussolini's rise was a combination of the Italian failure to achieve any substantial gains from the Great War (the so-called *Mutilated Victory*) and the accompanying serious economic problems. In Spain which had remained neutral in the Great War there was instability because Spain had remained feudalistic, and resulted in two dictatorships, Primo de Rivera and later Franco who lasted until 1975. In the liberal democracies France had so many governments it was described as "musical chairs," and even in the more stable Britain the problems of poverty and unfair distribution of wealth led to general strikes. In the powerful USA there was considerable economic and social distress during this period.

Economic instability, the uneven distribution of wealth, and the general injustice of any society will eventually lead to a challenge of the status quo. Russia was the first major nation in the twentieth century to defy its traditional ruling system. Such was the size of the Russian Empire and the simmering problems in Europe that the end results were enduring. At times

Russian history was conspicuous for its serious violence, severe repression, and the ramifications are still ongoing with international mutual suspicion to this day. Russia changed from a traditional monarchy to a form of bureaucratic Communism in the briefest of times, and an overview of this period is needed "to understand the mechanism of the power struggle" and to understand what happened.[7] On looking back, it gives the appearance of decades of trauma, and this was the major background with its influential elements bearing on the man Lavrenty Beria.

CHAPTER ONE

TO 1914

Tsar Nicolas II

Historians often ask the question as to whether the Tsarist regime could have survived; it was not just Russia that was facing problems, but the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires were fighting pressures they were ill-equipped to control. In the old Russian Empire, the border countries were all struggling with a sense of independence from a range of nationalities (especially the Slavs), the destabilising effect of not coping with economic modernisation, and therefore economic discontent, and the Romanov family was undoubtedly the weakest of all the European royal houses.

Nearly all histories of Russian rule in the years before Bolshevism will show without doubt that the Romanov family led a society which created a deep impoverishment for the majority, while a very small minority controlled all the wealth and influence. This is a consistent problem in human history, but it was especially severe in Russia and its territories. The sense of economic deprivation and social injustice which existed in many countries at the turn of the nineteenth century was, in Russia, reaching an early crisis point because of the extreme nature of the self-evident injustice within their social structure. As one historian noted: "It is clear that revolutions do not usually break out unless there is a situation so bad as to invite revolution."[8] When the British diplomat Bruce Lockhart arrived in Russia before the Great War his opening pages indicated he was struck by the wealth of the few, and given that it was the same in Britain and other European countries, it must have been a starker picture for this dichotomy to be noticed.[9]

The Romanovs had ruled Russia since 1613, and when Beria was born in 1899 Tsar Nicholas II was the last of this royal line. Nicholas II was not a natural leader and was despised more than Kaiser Wilhelm II and Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria-Hungary. He was noted above all for his repression of any form of political party, especially the developing Trade Unions. His secret police known as the Okhrana and his military formed a powerful and brutal defence against anyone who challenged his authority, which included the growing industrial strikes by impoverished and underpaid workers.

As with his forebears Nicholas II had a massive Empire to govern covering not less than a sixth of the planet's ground surface. Britain's empire was larger, but it was overseas, and as with previous Tsars, Nicholas II was constantly nervous about his land borders. His main attention was too often drawn to his empire's boundaries and beyond, and he ignored the growing problems within his realm. In 1904 he had declared war on Japan because he was concerned about that country's expansion, only to be humiliatingly and surprisingly beaten at sea and on land. In terms of this conflict with Japan "one of the main factors was the diversity of ideas and aims within the Russian government, which prevented the adoption of any definite policy."[10] The Tsar always managed to surround himself with incompetent and too often self-seeking corrupt advisers. This failure against Japan meant he had to change his government structure (known as the Duma) but this was only papering over the cracks of an unwieldy system and his own sense of political control. On the western borders he was equally concerned about the potential German threat and encouraged Russian treaties with France.

It was not that the Russian State was impoverished; in the fourteen years prior to the Great War some 40,000 miles of railway lines were laid, armament factories flourished, and although prone to sudden bad harvests Russia was the world's greatest grain exporter.* This wealth was not enjoyed by the masses; the peasants often led short unpleasant lives and there were marked social differences within the class system. As one example of this social disparity the workers could be given corporal punishment for breaking minor infringements.† In this social attitude Russia appeared to be more medieval than many of its European neighbours. The small nobility was exempt from such a degrading and medieval form of punishment. The vast number of workers fell into two clear categories; agriculture which in 1913 had some 4.5 million workers, and heavy industries with some 2.4 million. Russia was a divided country, and it was the majority who felt excluded from the wealth and power of the tiny minority. There were deep social problems with heavy drinking and widespread venereal disease, especially syphilis. "The Russian Empire was deeply fissured between the government and the Tsar's subjects; between the capital and the provinces."[11]

Russia was one country, but it had satellite possessions stretching from the Baltic to its far eastern boundaries, but there was no great sense of nationalism within Russia itself. Traditions and lifestyles tended to have a dependency on local tradition, and many of the intellectuals believed that the autocratic Romanov monarchy stifled any form of development of a Russian national spirit. Of the entire Russian Empire only about 44% were Russian and they were often less educated than the Polish and German constituents. Nicholas II and his predecessors (and his communist successors) regarded themselves as ruling a supranational state, but there was an extreme degree of social superiority, and anti-Semitism was rampant.

Before the Great War was a time of notable unrest and on Sunday the 9th January 1905 a peaceful procession of demonstrators, seeking some justice, was fired on by the military guarding the Winter Palace in St Petersburg.‡ This notorious incident is well-known as Bloody Sunday. It was not a good year for the monarchy since it was the same time that they had been defeated by the Japanese mentioned above, and it seemed as if the country were in

---

* Two-thirds of railway tracks were owned by the State.

† "Corporal punishment for all *meshchane* had been ended in 1906," Seton-Watson Hugh, *The Russian Empire 1801-1971* (Oxford: OUP, 1967) p.587, but the empire being so vast this punishment undoubtedly continued in places under local custom.

‡ The demonstration had been organised by a priest called Gapon who was concerned about the unfair dismissal of some factory workers; see Seton-Watson Hugh, *The Russian Empire 1801-1971* (Oxford: OUP, 1967) p.598

open revolt. At times the military had to be used to maintain not just stability but the monarchy as well; needless to note the Okhrana (secret police) were highly ruthless in tracking down dissidents, and often internally exiled them to Siberia to keep them away from the centre of political activities. The so-called advisory government was known as the Duma, and when this body suggested the common-sense solution of taking land from the gentry to assist the wider community, Nicholas II immediately dissolved the Duma.

Significantly it was during the year 1905 that Lenin proposed the possible overthrow of the Romanov dynasty to be followed by "a provisional revolutionary democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry."[12] Lenin had perceived the incipient power of the urban workers as well as the so-called rural peasants.[*] For his part Nicholas II was not in tune with his own times or his country; events were slipping from his grasp. He surrounded himself with advisors many of whom were eccentric to say the least, Rasputin became the often-quoted extreme example. "Rasputin was also a man of dissolute habits, who became involved from time to time in scandalous scenes in public places," but the Empress Alexandra was fixated on him because he seemingly helped her son with his haemophilia.[13] The critical danger with Rasputin was his close association with the Tsar and his wife.[†]

During the Great War Nicholas II was too often away to be near the front lines, and he appointed his wife to be responsible for matters at home. After the war their mutual correspondence was published in which it was revealed that she placed too much confidence in the views of the hated Rasputin, and no one dared contradict her or her advisers. It has been pertinently stated that "Nicholas and Alexandra were so obsessed with the dogma of autocracy that they subordinated everything to its maintenance."[14]

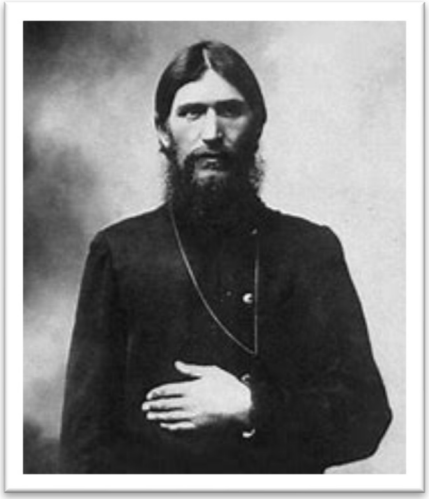
As early as 1917 an appeal from a factory committee producing shells, reminded its workers that "the worker and the soldier represent a single entity…ruthlessly and pitilessly exploited by a small group of bloodthirsty capitalists, headed by Nicholas and Rasputin, which built its happiness upon our ignorance."[15] Everyone was conscious of the injustices and aware of the man Rasputin. In reality no one knows the truth about Rasputin, but the

---

[*] **Lenin** was born in Simbirsk in 1870; his real name was Vladimir Ulyanov. Lenin was his pseudonym when he became a political activist. His background was Jewish, German, Kalmyk and with Russian elements. He spent time in Siberia and it was the Okhrana's offensive which drove him to Switzerland in 1907.

[†] Lockhart the British diplomat described a scene at the Yar, a luxurious nigh-haunt with a drunken Rasputin, and the police were called but were too scared to intervene; see Lockhart R. H. Bruce, *Memoirs of a British Agent* (London: The Folio Society, 2003) p.71

consensus was that he was an “unforgiveable stain on the Romanov throne.”[16] On the other hand it is now known that Rasputin was a man of peace who opposed the war, and who advised Nicholas II against joining the affray.



Rasputin

Russia at the time of the Great War was difficult to govern because of its size, its diverse nationalities, and a place where provincial governors created their own regulations. The various nationalities and general demography were ill-defined, and this vagueness and ill-government, locally and centrally, often resulted in serious violence.

CHAPTER TWO

END OF ROMANOV DYNASTY

Poor government was not unique to Russia, but as noted was made more problematic by the sheer immensity of the Russian Empire. Europe was itself becoming badly unstable, the Austrians annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1908, the French and Russians failed to react, which was a diplomatic embarrassment if not defeat, which had followed on rapidly from the Japanese military victories in 1905. There was trouble in the Balkans, and the Russian Tsar was widely regarded as weak and his leadership as inept. As is well-known on the 28th June 1914 Princip assassinated the Archduke Ferdinand, which acted as the catalyst for the Great War.

Russia was no different from other countries in the sudden upsurge of nationalism. Lockhart, the British diplomat, noting "here was a Russia I had never known—a Russia inspired by a patriotism which seemed to have its roots deep down in the soil."[17] It has often been suggested that Russian nationalism had always been somewhat neutered, "yet the potential appeal of nationalism to the Russian people was very great. Like German nationalism, it was most marked in the borderlands."[18] When the prohibition on the sale of alcohol was announced (which meant a serious drop in taxes) it was accepted as a sign of necessary efficiency, but did not exclude the upper classes from their alcoholic beverages; "in restaurants the only difference was that one drank one's alcohol from a teapot."[19]

Later when news of a German break-through was announced, mobs in Moscow attacked shops owned by foreigners, even those who had German sounding names, which happened in other countries. Also shared with other nations was the belief that the war would be short and victorious, but in Russia the ramifications of the war were immense and occurred rapidly. The well-known battle of Tannenberg was a Russian disaster, some claiming this battle was the prelude to the revolution. There were indications of complete political and economic disorder, and although by 1916 the Russian Imperial Army had fourteen million conscripted men, mainly from the so-called peasant stock, there was a growing resentment and significant warning

signals appeared for the more observant.* Russia's situation was made yet more precarious when Turkey entered the war having always considered Russia their major enemy. The Russian monarch was the subject of considerable antagonism and, as noted, Nicolas II did not help himself by his family's reliance on the notorious Rasputin, and the Tsar's constant attendance at distant military Headquarters at Mogilëv, which was too far away from the central political activity.† His reliance on his wife's political control continued to be a source of mockery and criticism. There was a growing discontent at the inefficiency of the leadership at the front and at home, and despite the occasional good news the censure proved relentless.

Russia was suffering the most appalling and rapid inflation, and while the war industries had to take precedence, the indispensable commodity of food was in sharp decline. There were three factors which accounted for this disaster: "decline in output of grain, reduction of railway facilities available for civilian needs, and rapid increase of city populations."[20] The economy was a critical problem, and desperate bread queues became a daily characteristic on the streets; in early 1917 there was a serious general strike in Petrograd. The opposition to the government started to unite claiming they could do without the monarchy. The Great War was shattering not only royal families but was causing destabilisation; "except for the Great War, Lenin would have remained an émigré theorist scribbling in Swiss libraries."[21] The outlawed Bolshevik committee urged its followers to ignore the Duma, to go on strike and demonstrate, and what was dubbed the February Revolution was soon in full stride. As it was Lenin returned to Russia by a train organised by the Germans leading Churchill to quip that the Germans had "transported Lenin in a sealed truck like a plague bacillus from Switzerland into Russia."[22] The news about revolution in Russia had come as "just as much surprise to Lenin as to everyone else in Europe: he read about it in the Zurich papers only on March 2nd 1917."[23]

"At the turn of 1917 there was no one in Russia, or anywhere else for that matter, who could have credibly foreseen that within the year the Russian State would have disintegrated—the Romanov dynasty swept aside," because the Tsar was weak and had no grip on the reality of all that surrounded him.[24] Nicholas II was not shrewd enough to recognise what was happening, he treated the Duma with disdain, used the ruthless Okhrana to arrest Mensheviks, Bolsheviks and any form or opposition, and utilised

* Such was the disaster that the Russian General Samsonov committed suicide.

† Rasputin was murdered on 29th December 1916 by Prince Felix Yusupov, a Right-wing Duma member called Purishkevich, and the Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich. Hollywood film producers have always embellished this incident.

his forces to break-up strikes.* This was carried through with ruthless efficiency and created a struggle with which the Tsar's administration simply could not cope. By 1917 the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries were "shaking off utopian visions and becoming political parties…but the Bolsheviks were never a conventional political party…it was first and foremost a conspiratorial organisation formed top-down and controlled by a small cohort," but it eventually succeeded.[25] Bolshevism up to this point was not identical to Leninism which was more an adaptation of Marxism, which was not at this time an official line of the Bolshevik stance.

On March 13th the Tsar's train had to turn back because news came through that the railway lines between Petrograd and Moscow were held by the revolutionaries. He had become the helpless nomadic Tsar lost on a train. Hardly with any warning and in transit on this train from Mogilëv Nicholas suddenly abdicated on 3rd March 1917. He knew it would be a mistake to hand on the problem to his young sick son, so he passed the monarchy onto his brother Michael The Grand Duke, after a brief discussion with some politicians declined, and Russia became a republic.

Beria at this stage had just turned eighteen years of age and during this same month had joined the Bolshevik wing of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party. Also, during this month there had been some violence in factories and significantly in the fleet, and it was clear that the remnants of the government needed the support or consent of the growing Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries.† By the end of 1917 the administrative structure was tottering and near to collapse.

---

* The Mensheviks were stronger in the Ukraine and almost controlled the labour movement in Georgia. See Seton-Watson Hugh, *The Russian Empire 1801-1971* (Oxford: OUP, 1967) p.648

† The Bolshevik sailors often killed or tamed their officers and in terms of the Black Sea Fleet "German intelligence estimated that its striking power had been reduced by 99%." See McMeekin Sean in Brenton, Tony (Ed), *Historically Inevitable? Turning points of the Russian Revolution* (London: Profile Books, 2016) p.102

CHAPTER THREE

1917-18 AND THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION

The year 1917 was a critical moment for Russia, and most people at home and abroad knew change was afoot. Leo Tolstoy's wife wrote in her diary on March 3rd "everyone is in a tense and expectant mood," and by August was making the entry "we read the paper avidly this evening and with great sorrow…dreadful rumours on all sides."[26] Despite the abdication of the Tsar the Republic's constitutional form of government remained contentious. The Kadets wanted to retain unitary administration, and they were somewhat divided on the issue of the nationally based territories, whereas the Mensheviks and Socialist-Revolutionaries wanted to accede to national aspirations especially in the Ukraine.* The workers had more pressing needs than political policy and wanted land, bread, peace and freedom.

Lenin

* The Kadets were the Constitutional Democratic Party who wanted a constitutional monarchy as in Britain. They had dominated the Duma in 1906 but the Great War changed this with the onslaught of revolutionary parties.