

World War One: How the Eastern front made victory possible for Canada and the West.

There is much written in Canadian history glorifying the valour of the mighty and elite Canadian Core as hundreds of thousands flocked to leave their homeland and fight for a King and empire which most had never seen. However if it were not for the allies to the East, the millions of Russian farmers and conscripts who also left their homes to engage this industrialized and determined enemy which was the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires, forcing them to split their forces and fight on two fronts it is likely that Canada along with her allies would be overrun by the strategic and manoeuvrable enemy. This is the story of Russia and how her blood allowed for the Western allies to build up, arm, deploy and supply their forces which would eventually lead to the defeat and fall of the two great empires of Germany and Austria-Hungary. In August 1914 the Russian Empire was the largest of its kind in the world, the Tsar Nicholas II ruled with virtual supreme authority as had his Romanov family for the previous three hundred years. His empire had the largest army in all of Europe numbering in the millions of men. The Empire had considered Germany to be its primary concern and threat, in response to this Russia had taken pre-emptive action by allying itself with the British and French empires to form the Triple Entente in 1907. Prior to the outbreak of World War One in August of 1914 the Russian Army Air Service (RAAS) owned 360 aircraft and 16 airships making it the largest air force in the world. The Russian navy was also sufficiently large prior to the outbreak of the war, the navy commanded 4 battleships, 10 cruisers, 21 destroyers, 11 submarines and 50 torpedo boats. With such a vast military and virtually no direct challenge to the Tsar's power how did the once vast and mighty empire suffer a complete and utter collapse as well as have its military utterly destroyed and fractured? This paper will investigate the causes of how a massive force crumbled and left the once glorious

Russian Empire in shambles. While it was the case that the Russian Tsar's enjoyed vast wealth and power in their empire and the Romanov family had ruled the country for over three hundred years, this was not to say that the Russian people's ruler who was believed to be sent from God did not have enemies. Tsar Nicholas II ruled as a supreme monarch, he was involved in every aspect of government including agricultural, land, economic matters and military. While there was some form of representative counsel made up of representatives for the common people; called the Duma, it was the word and command of the Tsar which reigned supreme, his will was the law. Enemies however were both common and organized, the power and authority of the Tsar rested with the loyalty of his massive army which enjoyed a higher political and social status than the common people under the church, the nobility and of course the royal family. However while it was the army's loyalty which guaranteed the Tsar's unchallengeable position as God's representative on Earth it was the secret police; the Okhrana who enforced it. Exile to Siberian forced labour camps was a common practice in dealing with political opposition as well as criminals, the secret police were trusted with preservation of the monarchy by liquidating all threats through exile or execution. In the years prior to the outbreak of the Great War the Tsar of Russia was Nicholas II, who succeeded his father Alexander III in October 1894 who died of liver disease, Nicholas was twenty six years old at the time of his succession. That same year Nicholas married Princess Alexandra who was the granddaughter of Queen Victoria, she was like minded to her husband in the sense of tradition of the monarchy. There had been widespread appeal from the Russian people through their representatives in the Duma to push for reforms to allow for more democratic freedoms in the empire similar to those present in Western Europe. These

calls were rejected by the royal couple and a series of crackdowns were installed early in Nicholas' reign to quell outspoken resisters to his supreme command which he demanded of his subjects. The monarchy faced a grave challenge to maintain power when in 1904 Russia went to war with Japan in the Russo-Japanese war, the smaller and technologically inferior Japanese navy launched a surprise attack on the Russian fleet bases at port Arthur and delivered a humiliating defeat. The army however was able to achieve more success in 1905 with the repulse of Japanese troops at Manchuria, the two year war however proved to be costly to Russia in both resources and reputation. Russian supply lines were notoriously poor, this made transporting materials as well as reinforcements slow, the Russian Eastern fleet had been crushed by a smaller and less equipped Japanese one and it was the first time a European power had suffered heavy losses and defeats from an Asian army largely considered by European powers to be utterly inferior. At the same time as the Russo-Japanese war was taking place in the Far East there was civil unrest in the more industrial western regions of the empire. Workers who faced long working hours and very poor working conditions were increasingly taking to the streets in protest demanding improvements and reforms to the Tsarist regime. In 1904 over 110,000 workers in St. Petersburg protested for four days over the declining value of their wages and demanded a raise in pay as well as improvement in working conditions. The situation became so tense that the Assembly of Russian Workers representative Georgi Gapon requested help from Nicholas in reducing hours, raising pay and improving conditions. A peaceful demonstration organised by a priest; Father Gapon marched on the Tsar's winter palace to present a petition to the Tsar himself to create workers organizations, demonstrators were unarmed and even carried pictures of the Tsar

to show their support for him. The Tsar however was not in the palace and the guards fearing an assault on the palace by the thousands of protesters fired in to the crowd and unleashed Cossack cavalry upon the fleeing demonstrators, over 100 protesters were killed in the event which came to be known as 'Bloody Sunday'. Although the Tsar did not order the assault on the demonstration it was the monarchy which suffered the blame and widespread protests around the country turned into a full scale revolution with large numbers of personnel in the army and the navy mutinied when ordered to put down the protests. In the 1905 Revolution as it came to be known Leon Trotsky founded the St. Petersburg Soviet in October with 50 more being established across the empire over the next month. The Soviets as they were called controlled organized and armed mobs across the country and answered to their leader in exile Vladimir Lenin who preached the socialist doctrine of the German scholar Karl Marx. Lenin was in exile in Switzerland and France after being labelled a political opponent to the Tsar and wanted by the authorities; his older brother had also been labelled a traitor to the Tsar and hanged while Lenin was only a child. After escaping a Gulag, or prison camp he fled the country but controlled his socialist movement through his Soviet comrades while in exile and published propaganda as well as organized anti Tsar protests. The 1905 Revolution forced the Tsar to heed the advice of his close advisors and made radical concessions to the Russian people by allowing them freedoms previously never tolerated. These concessions were presented to the people with the publishing of the 'October Manifesto' which granted freedom of speech, conscience, meeting and association as well as ended the policy of imprisonment without charge or trial. In addition, a new policy was adapted whereby no new law could come into practice without the approval of the Duma. The

October Manifesto was enough to halt the majority of the protests, the Duma prior to the manifesto had been seen as virtually powerless as it was virtually nothing more than an advisory council, this new limited authority brought hope to many who wished to create a counter balance to the Tsar's supreme authority through a representative body. These concessions however were not enough to satisfy Trotsky or the soviets, once the majority of the protests had ceased Trotsky as well as other prominent Soviet members were arrested and sent to prison camps in Siberia. In May 1906 with the Russo-Japanese war over and the 1905 Revolution stopped the Duma sought to exercise their new found authority from the October Manifesto by making a list of demands for the Tsar at their first council. The list included a release of all political prisoners, an establishment of trade unions similar to those in Western Europe and land reforms which would distribute the land more equally amongst the population by taking portions away from the wealthy and powerful nobility. These demands were immediately rejected by Nicholas and the Duma was promptly dissolved. Seeking a more conservative approach in governing the empire Tsar Nicholas II replaced the moderate chief minister Sergei Witte with the more conservative Peter Stolypin. Stolypin attempted to balance the will of the Tsar with the requests of the Duma, who at this time had no authority whatsoever and was not even permitted to convene as the council had been dissolved. Stolypin was unsuccessful in doing this and was ultimately assassinated by a member of the socialist revolutionary party in 1911 at the Kiev opera house. With the decision of Germany to enter into a triple alliance system with the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Italy whereby if any of the three members was attacked by France then the others would intervene, however Italy insisted that it would not be pulled into a war against Britain nor would it protect the

Austro-Hungarian Empire from a confrontation with Russia. Germany however did guarantee that should Russia attack Austria-Hungary than it would intervene. This alliance system obviously proved to be a threat to Russia and Nicholas II despite the fact that he was a cousin to the German Kaiser Wilhelm II. Germany now was seen as the main threat to the Russian Empire, this prompted Russia to join in a similar alliance structure with Britain and France whereby the three countries would come to the aid of each other should one be invaded. There were however separate alliances and agreements; Britain guaranteed the independence of Belgium as well as had an alliance with Japan, Russia was the supreme protectorate of the Slavic peoples of the Balkan territories and the kingdom of Serbia. In the early 1900s there were many indications that a war between the major powers was not only inevitable but also imminent. The Austro-Hungarian Empire was facing a series of political challenges which threatened to tear the empire apart. The Czech people wanted independence for themselves, the Slav peoples in the South West of the empire; the Croats in particular wanted their own state. The Serbs living in the South of the empire wanted to join the newly independent Serbia which was quickly becoming the major power in the Balkan region and had strong ties to Russia. In 1908 the Bosnian crisis erupted with Bulgaria declaring independence on October 6th, Austria-Hungary feared a collapse of its empire and sought to annex Bosnia and Herzegovina however Serbia to had similar plans and requested help from Russia in the affair in fear of the Austro-Hungarian army. With Germany supporting Austria-Hungary Russia withdrew support for Serbia resulting in Bosnia and Herzegovina being annexed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A large scale international crisis had been avoided however the Balkan wars of 1912-1913 still remained on the doorstep of the Austro-

Hungarian Empire in which Italy fought against the Turkish Ottoman Empire for possession of Tripoli as Italy had recently desired to follow suite of its European counterparts and establish itself as a major power with overseas colonies. Other Balkan states took this opportunity to expand their territory as well at the Turkish expense. This conflict between Italy and the German backed Ottoman Empire compiled with the fact that Italy was virtually surrounded to the south by British and French colonies and did not possess a navy capable of challenging that of the British made it likely that Italy would back out of the Triple Alliance if war did break out, this brought Germany and Austria-Hungary closer together as the two powers found that they were each other's only trustworthy allies. With dissent and aspiration for separation within much of the Empire the main objective for Austria-Hungary was to keep their multi-ethnic and highly diverse empire together. A visit to Sarajevo by the Austrian crown prince Archduke Francis Ferdinand resulted in disaster when he was assassinated in June 1914 by a Serbian nationalist. Count Berchtold who headed an Austrian military party won over the government with a harsh responding policy towards Serbia where an almost impossible ultimatum was delivered, Serbia accepted some of the demands however failed to accept some which were considered to infract upon Serbian independence. On July 28th 1914 Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia, Russia immediately began mobilization, Germany declared war on Russia on August 1st, being convinced that France would attempt to encircle Germany by attacking on the western front declared war on France two days later, with the neutrality of Belgium abused by the German Schlifffen plan Britain declared war on Germany and the Great War which the major powers anticipated had arrived as Europe and much of the rest of the world plunged into war. In 1914 once

war had arrived Russia had anticipated it for some time and had already began mobilization of its massive force, initially the problem was not with equipment or training as there were hundreds of thousands of soldiers whom were already trained and equipped and ready for war. The outbreak of war halted many protests and the vast majority of the country unified behind the Tsar and national pride surpassed political disputes over domestic issues. The real problem facing the Russian army was a very poor supply line and transportation issues which proved to be very costly, inadequate transportation systems and poor infrastructure meant that it would be nearly impossible to maintain Russian field formations in wartime establishments. The troops sent to the front were trained and had equipment such as side arms, rifles and machine guns likely equivalent to their German counter parts and superior to the Austro-Hungarian ones. Due to the logistical difficulties it was decided in 1910 planning that in the case of a war with Germany, massive offensives would immediately follow any war declaration in an attempt to control “the spirit of the offensive”. The Austro-Hungarian army was not well equipped and had many ethnic problems such as Slavic soldiers refusing to follow the orders of their Austrian officers against their Russian brethren, this became a major liability. German troops were far better organised, disciplined and equipped which made Germany the primary threat and target for the Russian army. The first Russian offensive came on August 17th 1914 when Russian General Pavel Rennenkampf's First Army invaded Eastern Prussia in a full scale offensive. In an attempt to overwhelm and surround the German Eighth Army commanded by General Friedrich von Prittwitz the Russian Second Army under General Alexander Samsonov attacked around the right

flank two days later. However because of slow Russian mobilization due to transportation problems, the Second Army was forced to fight at 66% strength.

General Prittwitz was convinced that he could not hold against the two armies facing him and informed high command that he intended to withdraw to the Vistula River. This was an early and promising victory for Russia as they forced the German abandonment of most of East Prussia including the capital Königsberg. General Prittwitz was immediately relieved of his command following his retreat and replaced by Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg and his new Chief-of-Staff, Erich Ludendorff. A counter-offensive was immediately planned and implemented on August 27th against Samsonov's weakened and undermanned Second Army, in a double envelopment the Russian Second Army was surrounded on both flanks. The battle of Tannenberg ended in tragedy for the Russian Second Army as they were surrounded and defeated in only four days; tens of thousands of casualties were suffered and 92,000 prisoners were taken by the Germans. Within the first week of September German forces under General August Mackensen defeated Rennenkampf at the Battle of Masurian Lakes, where the Russians lost another 100,000 casualties. With poor logistical support and supply against an industrialized enemy these notorious Russian shortcomings proved to be catastrophic as the First and Second Russian Armies had been completely decimated by German counter offensives. Russian troops were also put on the defensive in the southern regions of Poland; the Austrian Chief of Staff Conrad von Hoetzendorf launched his own attack northward toward Warsaw. However with four fully supplied armies the Russians were well prepared and able to hold Hoetzendorf off forcing the Austrians to retreat abandoning the province of Galicia and dealt a harsh blow to the 39 Austrian divisions by inflicting over 139,000

casualties. The Russian defence of Southern Poland was an important victory however such success against the Germans was also needed and missing. During the first winter of the war 1914-15 the Austrian Chief of Staff von Hoetzendorf was adamant on launching another attack against the Russians however this time requested German help. The aim was to force the Russians away from the crests of the Carpathian Mountains. After some debate the German high command agreed to take part in the operation and prepared to launch a major offensive which would thrust deep into Russian lines out of the German strong hold of Eastern Prussia where there was a large build up of forces. The offensive became known as "The Winter War" German troops inflicted massive losses to Russian forces inflicting some 190,000 casualties. However the Austrian forces again utterly failed to dislodge the Russian forces from their positions in Southern Poland and the offensive eventually ground to a halt as Austria-Hungary suffered another major defeat at the hands of the defending Russian forces. They even lost control of the Dukla Pass, a prime route onto the Hungarian plains. If it weren't for the extremely harsh winter as well as the poor Russian supply lines and transportation it would have been possible for Russia to drive forward into the heart of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. By May 1915 German high command had assumed command of the Eastern front and provided reinforcements to help their fragmented Austrian allies push the Russians back. Their next offensive came on May 1st with a quick and sharp attack of the Russian lines at Gorlice. This offensive proved to be very effective and had drastic consequences for the Russians; the German led offensive captured over 200 miles in the first two weeks and triggered the collapse of the entire Russian Southern defence in Poland. By August German and Austrian troops had pushed far into the north and had captured Warsaw. In

September, General Max von Gallwitz' new Twelfth Army attacked into the Courland towards Riga. Two Russian strongholds at Novo-Georgiesk and Brest-Litovsk both fell to the Germans as the entire Russian line began to collapse. Finally at the end of September Russia began to form a new line although much territory had already fallen into the hands of the enemy who could afford to hold it because of their superior supply lines and mobility. Out of desperation the Tsar Nicholas II himself appointed himself the supreme commander of Russian troops along the front. His inexperience as a military leader and strategist would lead to grave consequences as he now was seen as the one who was responsible for Russian losses and defeats. In a letter to the Tsarina Alexandra Nicholas II reveals his fears and frustration with the situation "Again that cursed question of shortage of artillery and rifle ammunition - it stands in the way of an energetic advance. If we should have three days of serious fighting we might run out of ammunition altogether. Without new rifles, it is impossible to fill up the gaps. The army is now almost stronger than in peace time; it should be (and was at the beginning) three times as strong. This is the position we find ourselves in at present. If we had a rest from fighting for about a month, our condition would greatly improve. It is understood, of course, that what I say is strictly for you only. Please do not say a word of this to any one." The German led offensive of 1915 had led the Central Allied powers to capture Poland, Lithuania and Latvia with over 1 million Russian troops being taken prisoner and another million casualties. However the Russian army had managed to inflict over 1 million casualties on their German and Austro-Hungarian enemies however they failed to stop them from seizing large portion of their territory. Domestically through this time Russia was also suffering; the war had forced the country to mobilize millions of men, taking

them away from the farms and city jobs. Agriculture suffered as a result and protests ensued over the shortage of bread. Tsar Nicholas II had aspiring dreams of leading his empire to heroic victory by snatching it away from the jaws of defeat. This however meant that the Tsar spent the majority of his time at the front leaving his wife, the Tsarina Alexandra to rule in his stead. The Tsar's son and heir Alexis suffered from haemophilia, a Siberian monk named Rasputin who claimed to have mystical healing powers provided care for the boy and his condition appeared to be improving despite the lack of faith the royal physicians had that it would. Tsarina Alexandra welcomed Rasputin into the royal palace as a result and encouraged her husband to grant him privileges and wealth for his services in apparently saving their sons life. Many nobles did not trust Rasputin and even referred to him as the "mad monk" his deep influence over the Tsarina and Tsar himself through his wife. Rasputin engaged in infamous womanising activities which deeply damaged the reputation of Romanovs, he was finally assassinated by Prince Yusipov on December 30th 1916. 1916 was the year Russia prepared for another major offensive, this time against the Austro-Hungarian Empire; the Galician territory was chosen as the target and with four whole armies resupplied and equipped under the command of General Alexi Brusilov there was high hopes and expectations for success. On June 4th the attack commenced and the Russians penetrated deep into Austrian positions capturing over 13,000 prisoners on just the first day. With the Russian offensive poised to threaten the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire Romania joined the war effort on the side of the Entente, however failed to defend its territory and was overrun by German and Austrian forces. These Russian gains however had forced upon them equally as many casualties as the defeats of the previous year had, without a sufficient supply system and

Russian manufacturing unable to keep up with the demand for ammunition and armaments equipment became scarce as well as the armies ravaged by losses and wounded, the offensives finally ground to a halt. By 1917 morale was at an all time low, although they greatly outnumbered the Germans Russian troops were not supplied well enough to support a long lasting offensive. Massive strikes back in Russia over the lack of food and other hardships which the war had only made worse caused more and more troops to ignore their orders or even worse, turn upon their officers and desert. With the Tsar having lost the support which had existed in the previous years and nationalism crumbling he abdicated his throne in March of 1917, the new intern government proved incapable of holding back the communist movement which had become stronger while the Tsar and his armies were absent from the country and politics. Once the Bolshevik revolution of 1917 was complete and power obtained by Lenin and his communist comrades Russia signed the treaty of Brest-Litovsk and withdrew from the war leaving its western allies to fight the Germans alone, Germany that year gained massive amounts of territory and was able to transfer millions of men to the Western front to combat the French resistance, Canadians, British, Australians and other imperial troops. Russia was now looking to its own borders and preparing for a civil war which was about to ensue and engulf the once unified and magnificent empire into utter chaos and bloodshed. However the years which Russia did fight in the war from 1914-1917 provided the western allies including Canada with an opportunity to force Germany to split its forces to fight on two fronts; had Russia not entered the war or rather joined with Germany than it is with almost certainty that the result of the war would have been different. Rarely is Canadian and western success linked to the brutal hardships and sacrifice suffered by

Russian soldiers on the Eastern front of World War One however the two are intertwined and it is the duty of the Western powers to recognise that at a time Russia was an essential ally and helped pave the way to a Western allied victory of which Canada was a part.

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