The fall of tsarism in Russia in 1917 was the culmination of many factors. It is perhaps widely noted that Nicholas II was not suited to his role as Tsar, mainly due to his character and personality. Resentment of his wife and her involvement with the mystical Rasputin was also widespread and helped contribute to the collapse of the monarchy. Also the state of the country during World War One left a lot to be desired and created a lot of dissatisfaction amongst the Russian people.

It could be stated that Nicholas II was responsible for tsardom’s collapse. 'He was a monarch whose capacity for hard work was not matched by outstanding intelligence. He had no clear vision for Russia’s future.’ (Service 1998: 20). Nicholas was not suited to his role as Tsar, and would rather spend his time with his family. Consequently he was out of touch with his people and could not see that whilst in theory autocracy would demand the respect he so desired, in practice, it would do the opposite. 'The pathetic figure of Nicholas did not correspond to the patriarchal ideal of the autocrat’ (Figes & Kolonitskii 1999: 17). At the beginning of his reign, Nicholas was approached by the zemstvas, who wanted their voices heard more when it came to making decisions about their country. However, Nicholas referred to these requests as ‘senseless dreams’ and made his intention clear to maintain complete autocracy, this ‘did much to increase the gulf between society and the government’ (Schapiro 1985: 7). If Nicholas had been in touch with his people and genuinely knew what they wanted, then perhaps his response to the zemstvas request wouldn’t be so unreasonable, however, it was quite clear that Nicholas knew very little of the wants and needs of his people, simply because he wasn’t suited to his role. This can be made quite obvious by the fact that in the days before the opening of the state Duma, when the whole country was tense 'Nicholas wrote: "April 14. Took a walk in a thin shirt and took up paddling again. Had tea in the balcony. Stania dined and took a ride with us. Read.” (Trotsky 1934: 74), hardly the musings of a powerful autocrat in such important times. Further evidence to bolster the claim that Nicholas wasn’t suited to his role is Robert Service’s assertion that ‘the Tsar, a devoted husband and father, was more adept at ordering repression than at mustering political support’ (1998: 29) whilst Nicholas was more suited to his role as a family man, he was better at ordering repression, probably because it required less charisma and was easier to do, especially as he could hide behind the facade of administration and autocracy. Even though Nicholas met groups of peasants, ‘he seems to have had a horror of his urban subjects’ (Service 1998: 21) which was reflected in his behaviour towards them - particularly the ease of being able to repress them. Trotsky went as far as to say that Nicholas was only at ease with people 'to whom he did not have to look up” (1934: 76), which with the autocratic nature of his ‘god-given’ power, ruled out a lot of people. Whilst his actions as Tsar can be criticised, as can his personality. Trotsky can be relied upon to give a disdainful account of the Tsar’s character- reliable as he was a key player during the period; however as a natural opponent of the Tsar, he was bound to give a negative account of Nicholas. ‘Nicholas II inherited from his ancestors not only a giant empire, but also a revolution. And they did not bequeath to him one quality which would have made him capable of governing an empire or even a province or a county” (1934: 73) he too often displayed a calmness that would translate to many as indifference, which, when ruling an empire, is not what is needed- a concern for the welfare of the empire and its people needs to be displayed- something Nicholas wouldn’t do, and even if he did it was to defend his autocratic power however, it is interesting to note that Trotsky claimed Nicholas 'inherited' a revolution, eliciting the idea that Nicholas wasn’t a cause of the revolution and was merely on the throne at the wrong time. However, Trotsky also went on to claim that ‘the Tsar kept his outlook unchanged through two wars and two revolutions. Between his consciousness and events stood always that
impenetrable medium - indifference’ (1934; 75) as ultimately, although Nicholas had been born for this role as Tsar, he wasn’t a born leader and his lack of concern for his people began to be regarded not only as indifference for the welfare of his people, but also for his role. ‘It is awe inspiring, it is frightening, but we cannot do without a Tsar’ ran a Russian proverb’ (Towster 1965: 11) however, soon enough, his people began to see that they could do without Nicholas and his autocracy and the obvious reverence with which they held him that is displayed in the proverb, soon came crashing down with the promise of ‘Peace, Bread and Land’.

Despite Nicholas II’s involvement in tsardom’s collapse, it could be stated that other factors caused its downfall. In this, the role of Tsarina Alexandra and her involvement with Grigori Rasputin comes in to play. Trotsky is careful to highlight Alexandra’s German ancestry, as this was a large cause of animosity towards the imperial family, by referring to her as ‘this Hessian Princess’ (1934: 79) (Alexandra’s previous title before she was Tsarina was ‘Alix of Hesse and by Rhine’; Hesse and by Rhine being a Grand Duchy that was part of the German Empire). Many historians elude to her strong character - something her husband lacked. Trotsky saying she had ‘a strong character and a gift for dry and hard exaltations, the Tsarina supplemented the weak willed Tsar, ruling over him’ (1934: 79). Although Russia had been ruled by a female before; Catherine the Great, some weren’t so keen on the idea and a saying spread that ‘the Tsar reigns but the Tsarina governs’ (Figes & Kolonitskii 1999: 15). It wasn’t just amongst the Russian population that this belief existed; in September 1915, Nicholas made the decision to make himself Commander in Chief of the Russian Army, resulting in Sir George Buchanan, the British Ambassador, trying to persuade the Empress to dissuade the Tsar from doing so, however she responded by declaring “The Emperor, unfortunately is weak, but I am not, and I intend to be firm.” From that time onward, so averred the British Ambassador, “the Empress....virtually governed Russia” (Coates & Coates 1942: 27) so whilst some of the rumours about Alexandra’s dominating personality were fictional, some were based on truth. Rumours played a significant role in the 1917 revolution - in particular those about Alexandra’s German ‘alliances’ and her involvement with Rasputin. Their effectiveness can be portrayed by the fact that the Temporary Committee of the Duma commissioned a survey based on the reports of its provincial agents from January to May 1917; it concluded ‘that the spread of licentious tales and rumours’ about Rasputin and the ‘German’ Empress had done more than anything to puncture the belief of the peasantry in the sacred nature of the monarchy’ (Figes & Kolonitskii 1999: 9). If the peasantry no longer believed in the Tsar’s God given right to rule, it made it harder to justify the imperial family’s existence. Rumours spread that Rasputin and the Tsarina were German spies whose aim was to bring about a separate peace with Germany, which Leonard Schapiro credits for the downfall of Tsarism saying ‘the charge was widely believed, did more than anything else to discredit the Imperial Family and hence played a vital part in the downfall of the monarchy’ (1985: 18). The Tsarina relied heavily on Grigori Rasputin, initially to help heal her haemophiliac son, however his influence eventually increased so much that rumours of an affair between the Tsarina and Rasputin began to circulate - they were ‘repeated so frequently that it became to have the status of an accepted truth’ (Figes & Kolonitskii 1999: 14). Rasputin’s immoral ways were known of widely and the power he had over the Imperial family. ‘In the beginning when he first entered the palace, Rasputin was meek and radiant. Later when he was already settling into his role of holy man, he would be by turns familiar, ferocious, mocking and threatening with the
tsarist couple’ (Radzinsky 1993: 95) this indicates that contrary to popular belief at the
time, the Imperial couple were scared into accepting Rasputin. As a result of his
womanising and gambling around St Petersburg ‘the Romanovs sank further into infamy’
(Service 1998: 20). Through Alexandra he was able to influence the selection of
ministers, although Schapiro is quick to point out that it was ‘probably not nearly to the
extent that popular imagination believed’ (1985: 18). To further illustrate Rasputin’s role
in the downfall of Tsarism, it is no coincidence that his influence ‘lasted six years, the
last six years of the monarchy’ (Trotsky 1934: 82). In short, the rumours concerning the
Tsarina served to tarnish the image of the monarchy, to strip it of its claim to divine
authority thereby desacralizing it and as a result- lost the respect of its citizens.

Finally, it could be said that World War One had a destabilizing result on the monarchy
that brought about its downfall. Five and a half million were wounded, captured or killed
and nothing could make up to the peasantry the loss of Sons, Brothers and Fathers lost
at the front. At this point it would be prudent to point out that there is a fine line
between Nicholas’ blame for the downfall of Tsarism and World War One being to blame.
Nicholas was that isolated from his people that Trotsky reported ‘the lack of bread and
fuel in the capital did not prevent the court jeweller Faberget from boasting that he had
never before done such a flourishing business’ (1934: 46). On the whole Russia was
unprepared for a war on such a grand scale. It used up all the current national income
and began to cut into the basic capital of the country. The factories weren’t sufficient
and those which Russia did have, often lacked the necessary skilled workmen and
machinery. The peasantry were majorly affected by the war- the inadequate prices for
grain, requisitioning of horses, the conscription of their young men and the unavailability
of manufactured goods. At the beginning of the war there was a surge of patriotism,
however, this soon dissipated ‘indeed it was that very patriotism that fuelled discontent
as it became increasingly apparent that the incompetent, discredited and unpopular
government of the Emperor and his ministers was incapable of prosecuting a successful
war’ (Schapiro 1985: 15), indeed, Robert Service illustrates how Nicholas may have
been unprepared for the realities of war by stating ‘Nicholas II leapt into the darkness of
the Great War without anyone pushing him’ (1998: 25) suggesting that the war
was an attempt to show how powerful Russia and Nicholas could be. The economic state of
Russia meant that the economy couldn’t handle its demands which meant that early on
‘the country was thoroughly war weary, and the colossal losses suffered by the fighting
forces coupled with the proved incapacity of the autocracy had brought Tsardom into
widespread disrepute’ (Coates & Coates 1942: 27). Sir George Buchanan noted the state
of Russia and its treatment of the army stating it was “not likely to forget or to forgive
all it has suffered at the hands of the existing administration” (Coates & Coates 1942:
27). The upper and middle classes hadn’t done well out the war, and as a result resented
the Tsar. Such a huge war demanded a great military leader, however, Nicholas had
made himself Commander in Chief of the Russian Army and ‘characteristically fumbled
the poor hand he had been dealt’ (Service 1998: 29) wasting precious time, and losing
the respect of his people. Coates and Coates portray the downfall of the administration
well, when it came to the issue of war, stating ‘it is highly improbable that the autocracy,
because of its very nature, could ever have so organised and developed the country that
it would have been in a condition to face a European war’ (1942: 23), essentially, Russia
had to deal with its internal failings before it could even think about entering a world
war.

In conclusion, autocracy and rumours were to blame for the downfall of Tsardom.
Nicholas II played his part by being a poor leader, however, his desire to maintain the
archaic system of autocracy brought about a lot of the failings of the monarchy to listen
to its people. Rumours played their part, not just because of what they contained ‘but
their ability to unify and mobilize an angry public against the monarchy. And here there
was an astonishing degree of acceptance at all levels of society that the treason
allegations were already proved’ (Figes & Kolonitskii 1999: 19) particularly against the
‘German’ Empress. Every event that happened acted as catalyst for the downfall of
Tsarism particularly Nicholas’ unsuitability for his role and as a result ‘the revolution painlessly removed him’ (Trotsky 1934: 109)

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