A. Evidence on Nicholas II


The following exercise shows one way of organising a range of evidence so as to develop a clearer picture of a topic.

i) Draw up a chart as follows to organise the following evidence from historians about aspects of Nicholas II.

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<tr>
<th>Historian</th>
<th>Aspect:</th>
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<td>a) Charques</td>
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<td>b) Stephenson</td>
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<td>c) Kennan</td>
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<td>d) Seton-Watson</td>
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<td>e) Rogger</td>
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<td>f) De Jonge</td>
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The seven aspects are as follows:
1) his upbringing 2) his character 3) his attitude towards autocracy 4) his intentions 5) his attitude to and treatment of his ministers 6) his attitude towards his people, and his understanding of them 7) his understanding of Russia's needs, and his general fitness to rule.

ii) Read the following secondary sources about Nicholas II, and select evidence from them to fill in the chart.

iii) Which historian do you consider most sympathetic to Nicholas? Explain your decision.

iv) Which do you consider most harsh? Why?

Historians' views.

a) Charques:
‘No Russian Emperor was more completely possessed by his prerogative as autocrat. In that strange region of the mind where men believe they are anointed by God, Nicholas staked faith, duty and all else upon the dogma of autocracy... He looked upon the absolute power he had inherited as an inviolable trust, to be transmitted whole and unimpaired to his successor. Through every mischance and portent of crisis in his reign, his first rule of conduct was to seek to preserve it... It was his indifference to those who served him which
blunted the edge of Nicholas's good intentions. Charles I and Louis XVI, both monarchs by similarly divine right, meant equally well. In his pathetic ineffectualness Nicholas recalls Louis; in his duplicity and obstinacy, as in the ingratitude with which he cast off those who might have saved him and set himself to digging his own grave, the likeness with Charles I is unmistakable.'
(Charques, R. (1965), Twilight of Imperial Russia pp.49-51)

b) Stephenson:
'As a deeply religious man he took literally the words which he had spoken at his coronation. He believed that even were he to agree to a constitution he would still, in the eyes of God, be responsible for what happened to his subjects. By surrendering to the politicians he would have deprived himself of the power to fulfil his responsibilities. . . . This simple, honourable, industrious, pious, obstinate and bigoted family man did not possess the intellectual equipment necessary for the analysis of the choices facing him.'
(Stephenson, G. (1969), History of Russia p.189-190)

c) Kennan:
'Poorly educated, narrow in intellectual horizon, a wretchedly bad judge of people, isolated from Russian society at large, in contact only with the most narrow military and bureaucratic circles, intimidated by the ghost of his imposing father and the glowing proximity of his numerous gigantic uncles, helpless under the destructive influence of his endlessly unfortunate wife, Nicholas was obviously inadequate to the demands of his exalted position; and this was an inadequacy for which no degree of charm, of courtesy, of delicacy of manner, could compensate. . . . Time and again, in the record of his reign, one finds the evidences of his short-sightedness and his lack of grasp of the realities of the country.'
(Kennan, G. (1979), The Breakdown of the Tsarist Autocracy, in Ed. Emsley, C. Conflict and Stability in Europe p.220-1)

d) Seton-Watson:
'If one tries to see the reign of Nicholas in perspective, one can hardly maintain that he had made so conspicuous a success of affairs for the last twenty years as clearly to justify the belief that he and his immediate circle could best rule Russia alone, without the help, and in direct conflict with the wishes of the great majority of the politically conscious Russians, and indeed of the whole educated part of the nation. . . . The truth is that the insuperable obstacle was his dogmatic devotion to autocracy, which had been deeply implanted in him.'
(Seton-Watson, H. (1967), The Russian Empire p.717-8)

e) Rogger:
'If Nicholas was weak-willed and devious, if he had so little confidence in his own judgement that he distrusted his ministers and failed to back them up, was this not as much an indictment of autocracy as of the autocrat? . . . Nicholas was not lacking in firmness or, depending on one's view, obstinacy . . . when it came to the integrity of his power or the defence of cherished prejudices . . . The problem was rather an excess than a want of firmness; more precisely, an inability to distinguish between flexibility and weakness, strength and nullishness. Even more poorly prepared than his father for the burdens of kingship, Nicholas had no knowledge of the world of men, of politics or government to help him make the difficult and weighty decisions that in the Russian system the tsar alone must make. His training was adequate only for the one role he would not play, the ceremonial one of the constitutional monarch. The only lodestars he recognised were an inherited belief in the moral rightness and historical necessity of autocracy, and a religious faith, bordering on fatalism, that he was in God's hands and his actions divinely inspired . . . A simple man himself, he was convinced until the very end that the simple people were on his side and that this made him the best judge of the country's mood. Protest and dissent were temporary aberrations traceable to agitators, Jews or selfish politicians.'
(Rogger, H. (1983), Russia in the Age of Modernisation and Revolution p.16-19)

f) de Jonge:
'It is hard to imagine anyone less well equipped to steer Imperial Russia into the twentieth century than Nicholas II. A family man first and foremost . . . as an autocrat he was hopeless. He had not even had the benefit of proper preparation for his task. His education had essentially been that of a cavalry officer . . .

Nicholas's personality did not help him overcome the limitations of his education. A short, neat figure of a man, five feet seven inches tall, he was timid, introverted and weak, in the sense that he was incapable of making up his mind and sticking to his decisions. However, it must be said that he always commanded great love and loyalty in his immediate entourage, together with a considerable amount of respect. He had great charm . . .
Yet despite his considerable majesty of manner, as an emperor he lacked stature and that taste for power which is . . . vital for an autocrat . . .
Yet weak though he may have been as a ruler, he possessed that peculiar dogged obstinacy that sometimes accompanies weak men in power. On the rare occasions on which he made up his mind definitely he was impossible to move; no argument, however convincing, could reach him . . .

Nicholas sincerely believed that he had received Russia from God, and was personally responsible for her well-being. This meant he did not have the right to delegate or dilute his power in any way. It also meant that when he heard the voice of conscience advise a certain course nothing could dissuade him from taking it. Obstinacy, mysticism, and weakness combined to shape perhaps the most disastrous of all his characteristics: a deadly fatalism.'
(De Jonge, A. (1983), Life and Times of Rasputin p.118-121)
g) Keep:

The acute tensions which had (by the 1890s) developed in Russian society posed a formidable threat to the absolutist regime. It could overcome them only by showing extreme foresight and flexibility. But the throne was next occupied by a monarch deficient in such qualities. Nicholas II . . . inherited his father's faults without his modest virtues. Though a stubborn advocate of firm government, he was weak in character and intellect. He mistrusted ministers whose abilities surpassed his own, preferring to rely on backstairs advisers, often of unsavoury reputation . . . By his own actions he helped isolate the monarchy from the whole of Russian society, not excluding even the most moderate elements who were its natural allies against revolution.


A.2. Primary Evidence. Contemporaries' comments on Nicholas.

Read the following primary sources on Nicholas II.

i) What further evidence do they provide about the seven aspects identified in exercise A.1.1?

ii) Are there any conflicts of evidence? Give examples.

iii) Choose any four of the contemporary sources, and comment on each one's reliability.

iv) How does the last extract suggest why Croce has argued that 'all history is contemporary history'?

a) Witte:

'His character is the source of all our misfortunes. He is incapable of steering the ship of State into a quiet harbour. His outstanding failure is a lack of willpower. Though benevolent and not unintelligent, this shortcoming disqualifies him totally as the unlimited autocratic ruler of the Russian people. The Emperor's character may be said to be essentially feminine . . . His Majesty would not tolerate about his person anyone he considered more intelligent than himself or anybody with opinions differing from those of his advisors.'

(Witte describes Nicholas' view of ruling?)

'I do what I please, and what I please to do is good. If people do not understand it, that is because they are ordinary mortals, while I am God's appointed.'

(Quoted in Elliot, J. (1974), Fall of Eagles p.124, and Floyd, D. (1969), Russia in Revolt p.6)

b) Kaiser Wilhelm II:

'The way to deal with him is to be the last to leave the room.'

(Quoted in Elliot, J. (1974), Fall of Eagles p.149)

c) Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich:

'He was always timid, almost painfully so, and when by a strong effort of will he conquered that timidity, he came out with what he wanted to say in an almost brutal manner . . . He never had an opinion of his own . . . his want of mind making him always endorse the judgement of the last person he speaks to.'

(Quoted by de Jonge, A. (1983), Life and Times of Rasputin p.121)

d) Former Interior Minister Prince Sviatopolk Mirsky:

'One could never trust him. What he approved today will be cancelled by him tomorrow.'


e) Rasputin:

'The tsar can change his mind from one minute to the next; he's a sad man; he lacks guts.'

'Papa understands nothing and cannot cope.'

(Quoted in de Jonge, A. (1983), Life and Times of Rasputin pp.318,337)

f) Empress Alexandra:

'My poor Nicky's cross is heavy, all the more so as he has nobody on whom he can thoroughly rely and who can be a real help to him. He has had so many bitter disappointments, but through it all he remains brave and full of faith in God's mercy. He tries so hard, works with such perseverance, but the lack of what I call 'real' men is great . . . On my knees I pray to God to give me wisdom to help him in this heavy task.'

(Quoted by de Jonge, A. (1983), Life and Times of Rasputin p.126)

g) Courtier Count Paul Benckendorff:

'His real affection was for his family, with which he was identified, and which was always the object of his unique adoration. Intelligent, good, well-meaning, his character did not allow him to respond to the gigantic events of the closing years of his reign. Weary and overburdened as he was, these events crushed him.'

(Quoted by Lyons, (1974), Nicholas II, the Last Tsar p.216)

h) Kerensky, socialist member of the 3rd and 4th Dumas, and Prime Minister August to October 1917.

He describes Nicholas in his memoirs Crucifixion of Liberty. (1934):

'He merely believed what his father and Pobedonostsev has instilled into him; there would be no Russia without autocracy; Russia and the autocracy were one; he himself was the impersonations of the autocracy. So the magic circle closed. There was no way out, unless it was into disaster and void . . . Living in the twentieth century, he had the mentality of the Muscovite Kings . . .

The daily work of a monarch he found intolerably boring. He could not stand listening long or seriously to ministers' reports, or reading them. He liked such ministers' reports, or reading them. He liked such ministers as could tell an amusing story and did not weary the monarch's attention with too much business . . .

When it came to defending his divine right his usual indifference left him; he became cunning, obstinate, and cruel, merciless at times.'

Kerensky (in his 1929 book, The Catastrophe), describes a visit to Nicholas after his abdication:
A 3. Comments by Nicholas II

Read the following comments by Nicholas II.

i) Which aspects identified in exercises A 1 and A 2 are reinforced by Nicholas’ statements?

ii) What evidence do they provide of how Nicholas viewed the Duma?

iii) Discuss the three extracts which you consider most powerfully help explain the tragedy of Nicholas II.

a) ‘I have a firm, and absolute conviction that the fate of Russia — that my own fate and that of my family — is in the hands of God who has placed me where I am. Whatever may happen to me, I shall bow down to His will with the consciousness of never having had any thought other than that of serving the country which He has entrusted to me.’

(Quoted in Massie, R. (1968), Nicholas and Alexandra p. vi)

b) Nicholas on becoming tsar after the surprise death of his father aged 49, 1894:

‘What is going to happen to me ... to all Russia?. I am not prepared to be the Tsar. I never wanted to become one. I know nothing of the business of ruling. I have no idea of even how to talk to ministers.’

(Quoted by Massie, R. (1969), Nicholas and Alexandra p. 329)

c) Addressing Zemstva representatives Jan 1895:

‘Let it be known to all that I, while devoting all my energies to the good of the people, shall maintain the principles of autocracy just as firmly and unflinchingly as did my unforgettable father.’

(Quoted by Seton-Watson, H. (1967), The Russian Empire p.549)

d) Nicholas’s address to first Duma, April 1906:

‘With ardent faith in the radiant future of Russia I greet in you those best men whom I ordered my beloved subjects to choose from their midst ... May this day be henceforth remembered as the day of the rebirth of the moral fibre of the Russian land, the day of the rebirth of her best forces.’

(Quoted by Riha, T. Constitutional Developments in Russia, in ed. Stavrou T. (1969) Russia under the Last Tsar p.87)

e) Nicholas to his mother March 1907:

‘I have been constantly receiving messages from True Russian Men all over Russia expressing their indignation at such disrespectful behaviour in the Duma ...

I am getting telegrams from everywhere petitioning me to order a dissolution; but it is too early for that. One must let them do something manifestly stupid or mean, and then, slap! And they are gone!’

(Quoted in ed. Bing, E. (1937), Letters of Tsar Nicholas and Empress Marie. p.229)

f) Nicholas in November 1905:

‘Nine tenths of the trouble-makers are Jews; the people’s whole anger has turned against them.’

(Quoted by Kochan, L. (1970), Russia in Revolution p.63)

g) Nicholas to Stolypin rejecting a proposal to relax restrictions on Jews:

‘I pondered on the matter night and day. Despite the most convincing arguments in favour of my approving the matter, my inner voice tells me more and more insistently that I should not take the decision myself. Up to now my conscience has never deceived me. Therefore, in this case I intend to follow its guidance.

I know that you believe that the ‘Tsars’s heart is in God’s hands.’

Let it be so.

I bear a fearful responsibility to God for all the powers granted to me and I am ready at any time to give account of them to Him.’

(Quoted by Mccault, M. (1984), From October to Bolsheviks p.53)

h) Nicholas’ reply to Alexandra in 1916 who had urged him to ‘be the emperor, be Peter the Great, Ivan the Terrible’:

‘Tender thanks for the severe written scolding. Your poor little weak-willed hubby’.

(Quoted by de Jonge, A. (1983), Life and Times of Rasputin p.333)

i) Nicholas to Grand Duke Paul’s request for political reform, December 1916:

‘The day of my coronation I took my oath to absolute power. I must leave this oath intact to my son.’

(Quoted by Kochan, L. (1970), Russia in Revolution p.191)

j) Nicholas to Buchanan, the British Ambassador in January 1917:

‘Do you mean that I am to regain the confidence
of my people or that they are to regain my confidence? 
(Quoted by Kochan, L. (1970) Russia in Revolution p.18)

k) Nicholas just before his abdication, January 1917: 
‘Is it possible that for 22 years I have tried to act for the best, and that for 22 years it was all a mistake?’ 
(Quoted by Grey, L. (1970), The Romanovs p.348)

l) Nicholas’s comment on the Duma president’s request for a government possessing the confidence of the country, February 1917: 
‘That fatty Rodzianko has sent me some nonsense, which I shan’t even answer’ 
(Quoted by Seton-Watson, H. (1967), The Russian Empire p.725)

m) His letter of abdication, March 1917: 
‘In these decisive days in the life of Russia we have considered it our duty to make it easier for our people to unite and organise all their forces for the swift attainment of victory, and in agreement with the Imperial Duma we have decided for the good of the country to abdicate the throne of Russia and lay down the supreme power.’
(Quoted by Mazour, A. (1960), Rise and fall of the Romanovs p.179)

**B. Nicholas II. An overall assessment**

B.1. Make a list, in descending order of importance, of Nicholas’s six greatest faults. Briefly explain your choice. What can be said in his defence?

B.2. Write a speech that you think Nicholas might have written after the February Revolution of 1917 defending his previous policies.

B.3. Construct an analytical chart (similar to those on Alexander I, Nicholas I, Alexander II and III) on the reign of Nicholas II.

**C. Concluding Essay**

Re-read chapters five and six, and pages 107, 109-113. Then write one of the following essays:

i) ‘Nicholas II was totally unfitted to deal with the problems facing his country and dynasty.’ To what extent do you agree with this judgement?

ii) ‘Nicholas II wished the best for his country, but made a series of stupid mistakes, and failed to understand the grave problems Russia faced.’ Discuss this comment.

**Advice.** Both these essays cover similar material, but each essay needs to be structured around the precise title set. They both concentrate on Nicholas’s fitness to rule, the latter giving some assistance as to how this might be assessed. Both also involve consideration of the problems facing Russia. This might serve as an introduction.

In the first essay the phrase ‘totally unfitted’ is a very strong one, and might be modified. The ‘problems facing the dynasty’ need distinct treatment as they are highlighted in the title; these might be largely covered in general problems, but particular reference could be made to maintaining the three hundred year old Romanov dynasty, and the problem of Alexis (for when Nicholas finally produced a son, he was a haemophiliac).

This essay might be best approached by developing an argument demonstrating Nicholas’s unfitness, then modifying it. The former might be easier, but counter points, perhaps stressing the greatness of the problems rather than Nicholas’s inadequacies, could be made.

The second essay might be most effectively approached by discussing in turn the three particular aspects about Nicholas in the title. This is more likely to ensure a direct response. The issue of motivation is a difficult but interesting one. How does the historian assess what inspired Nicholas’s policies? One would need to consider his statements about his beliefs, but such evidence needs to be treated cautiously. One could look at comments by contemporaries who had access to the inner discussions of the government, such as Witte, but he in particular illustrates the need to be critical of evidence. One could also look at Nicholas’s actions, which ought to suggest whether high sounding statements of intent actually meant much. However, it is still possible genuinely to wish something, but be unable to achieve it.

One must also be careful not to assume that Nicholas’s determination to uphold the autocracy is necessarily evidence against his good intentions. He may well have been misguided in his belief that the autocracy was vital for Russia’s well-being, but that does not disprove good intent. Reference back to Alexander II (p29) might be illustrative of this point.