

Optimised Study Guide — World War I & the Leadership of Tsar Nicholas II

Optimised, exam-focused study guide for the impact of World War I on Russia and the leadership of Tsar Nicholas II (Unit 3, Elective 2, Component C02-U3E2). Grounded in the 2020–2025 SCSA exams and marking keys, especially the 2020 essay on the Tsar's autocratic rule after 1914 as a cause of the February Revolution. Leads with exam priorities, the marking-key expectations, detailed content (war aims, military defeats, home front, the Tsar's personal command, Rasputin/Alexandra, loss of support), perspectives and recurring question patterns.

If Russia in 1914 is the "before" picture, the First World War is the accelerant. This is one of the most heavily examined topics in the elective: the war's impact and the Tsar's wartime leadership sit at the heart of the recurring essay on the causes of the February Revolution. Learn this material as a chain of cause and effect — war pressures plus the Tsar's choices equals the collapse of the monarchy.

The marking-key steer that defines this topic. The 2020 essay asked candidates to *"Evaluate the proposition that the autocratic rule of the Tsar after 1914 was the most important factor in bringing about the February Revolution of 1917."* The marking key is unusually explicit about what earns marks: assess the Tsar's **actions and their consequences** (and how they *weakened* autocracy), then weigh a **counter-argument of short-term factors** (collapsing army morale, the soldiers' role, the women's protest) before concluding. Do not drift into pre-1914 narrative.

How this content is examined

- **Essays (Sections Two/Three).** The dominant question type asks you to weigh the Tsar's wartime autocracy against other factors as a cause of the February Revolution. The content here gives you both halves of that argument.
- **Source analysis (Section One).** WWI-era sources (recruitment, the home front, the war's unpopularity) require you to explain context and purpose using precise knowledge of the war's course and the regime's failures.

Answer the verb. **Evaluate** = judge value, weighing the counter-case first. **Analyse** = break into factors and show their relationships. **"To what extent"** = reach a measured judgement on how far the claim holds.

1. Russia goes to war (1914)

- **Why Russia entered.** Obligations to Serbia and Pan-Slavism, alliance with France, rivalry with Austria-Hungary and Germany over the Balkans, and the desire to restore prestige after the humiliation of the 1905 defeat by Japan.
- **Initial unity.** War was met with a surge of patriotism that briefly rallied the country behind the Tsar — making the later collapse of support all the more striking. St Petersburg was renamed the less German-sounding Petrograd.

2. Military catastrophe

Russia's army was vast but under-equipped and poorly led. Know the touchstone battles:

- **Tannenberg (Aug 1914)** and the **Masurian Lakes (Sept 1914)** — catastrophic early defeats by Germany; enormous casualties shattered the myth of the "Russian steamroller."
- **The Brusilov Offensive (1916)** — a rare major success against Austria-Hungary, but at a crippling cost in casualties that further drained morale and manpower.
- **Cumulative effect:** millions dead, wounded or captured; shortages of rifles, shells and boots; collapsing morale and rising desertion — the soldiers who would refuse to fire in February 1917.

3. The home front in crisis

- **Economic dislocation.** War spending and the loss of workers to conscription wrecked the economy. Inflation soared; real wages fell.
- **Food and fuel.** The railway system, overwhelmed by military needs, failed to move grain to the cities. Petrograd faced acute bread and fuel shortages by the winter of 1916–17 — the immediate trigger of the February protests.
- **Social strain.** Refugees, overcrowding and falling living standards turned the urban population against the regime.

4. The Tsar's fatal choices

This is the analytical core of the topic — the Tsar's *actions* and their *consequences*:

- **Taking personal command (Sept 1915).** Nicholas left Petrograd for army headquarters (Stavka) to lead the army personally. The consequence was twofold: he became *personally* blamed for every subsequent defeat, and he left government in the hands of the Tsarina.
- **Alexandra and Rasputin.** In the Tsar's absence, the unpopular German-born Tsarina Alexandra effectively ran the government, heavily influenced by the disreputable "holy man" [Rasputin](#). This produced "ministerial leapfrogging" — the chaotic, frequent sacking and replacement of capable ministers — paralysing the government. Rasputin's murder (Dec 1916) by nobles showed even the elite had turned against the court.
- **Rejecting reform.** When liberal Duma members formed the **Progressive Bloc** (1915) seeking a "government of public confidence," Nicholas refused, alienating the moderate politicians who might have saved a constitutional monarchy.
- **Loss of traditional support.** By early 1917 the Tsar had lost the confidence of the army high command, the nobility and the Duma — the very pillars of the autocracy. When the crisis

came, no one with power was willing to defend him.

5. Historical perspectives

The examinable debate maps onto the essay directly: **deep/structural causes versus the contingency of the war.**

- One view: the war merely *exposed and accelerated* the autocracy's structural flaws — the regime was doomed and the war was the occasion, not the cause.
- The other: the Tsar's *specific wartime decisions* (personal command, Rasputin, refusing the Progressive Bloc) were the decisive blows — a better leader might have survived the war.
- A third strand stresses **short-term contingency**: the specific events of February 1917 (the bread crisis, the women's marches, the garrison's refusal to fire) were what actually toppled the throne.

6. Recurring exam question patterns & what high answers do

- **"Evaluate / To what extent was the Tsar's autocratic rule the most important factor in the February Revolution?"** High answers: set out the Tsar's wartime failures and their consequences, then weigh the short-term and structural factors as counter-argument, then judge. They use the war as live evidence, not background.
- **"Analyse the impact of WWI on Russia."** High answers: organise by military, economic, social and political impact, and link each to the erosion of the regime.
- **Source questions** on the war's unpopularity: use precise knowledge of defeats, shortages and the Rasputin scandal to explain a source's purpose and reliability.

Recall self-test. Can you:

- Give Russia's reasons for entering the war in 1914?
- Name and date Tannenberg, Masurian Lakes and the Brusilov Offensive, and state their significance?
- Explain the home-front chain: war spending → inflation → transport failure → bread shortages → February protests?
- Explain *why* taking personal command in 1915 was such a damaging decision (two consequences)?
- Explain "ministerial leapfrogging" and the role of Alexandra and Rasputin?
- State what the Progressive Bloc wanted and why the Tsar's refusal mattered?
- Argue both that the war was the *cause* and that it was merely the *occasion* of the autocracy's fall?