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The February Revolution in Russia Transcript

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A vast literature exists about the First World War in general and about the war's causes in particular. Can there possibly be anything new to say? In my view there can, especially if one looks at the war from an East European and Russian perspective. That is why I returned to the theme of my first book, *Russia and the Origins of the First World War* (published in 1983) in my most recent publication, *Towards the Flame: Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia*, which was published by Penguin in 2015. So in one sense this lecture is a comment on my academic career: what new evidence or new ideas had I gathered between 1983 and 2015 that convinced me that a new book on Russia's First World War was worth writing?

But before addressing this question I ought to note one very important old reason for thinking about Russia's role in the international relations of the early twentieth century. The study of diplomacy and war is unfashionable in academic circles. That does not mean that it is unimportant. This year, for example, is the centenary of the Russian Revolution and already many books have been published to commemorate the anniversary. Many of them will fail to note the crucial importance of the international context. In the revolution of 1905 the Russian monarchy almost collapsed. Had this happened, the revolution would almost certainly have taken a very radical turn. In that case massive international intervention on the side of the Russian counter-revolution would have been inevitable and would almost certainly have triumphed, at least in the short - to - medium run. In peacetime the European great powers would never have allowed Russia to secede from the international system, set itself up as the headquarters of international socialist revolution and expropriate the contemporary equivalent of trillions of dollars of foreign debt. The decisive factor in international intervention would have been Germany, which was Russia's neighbour and which possessed Europe's most formidable army. The need to rescue the sizeable German community in Russia would have been an additional and powerful incentive for massive German intervention.

Compare this to what happened in 1917-18. In peacetime Germany would have been the spearhead of international intervention in the cause of counter-revolution. In war-time it did everything possible to support the revolution in order to undermine the Russian state, end the fighting on the eastern front and thereby win the First World War. Lenin returned to Russia through German assistance. After the Bolsheviks came to power in November 1917 they enjoyed a year's respite from international intervention because the European Great Powers were engaged in an all-out war against each other. During this year the Bolsheviks were able to consolidate their hold over Russia's geopolitical core where most of the population, industry and arms stores were concentrated, as well as all the key communications hubs. It was above all for this reason that they were able to win the subsequent civil war.

Granted that the international context was so crucial, what is there new to say about Russia's role in international relations in the years preceding the Great War? The answer falls into two parts: new evidence and new ideas. Let me start by addressing the question of evidence. When I wrote my book in 1983 Russian diplomatic and military archives were closed to foreigners. Soviet historians were constrained in what they could write. One crucial reason for returning to the subject was therefore that I now had the run of the diplomatic, military and naval archives. In all I worked in seven Russian archives but this was not the only source of new material. A number of memoirs written in emigration by key tsarist officials had become available since 1983: above all this meant the memoirs of Russia's charge d'affaires in Belgrade in 1914 (in New York's Bakhmetev Archive) and two volumes of memoirs written by Prince Grigorii Trubetskoy, the head of the Near Eastern Department of Russia's Foreign Ministry in the pre-war years.

The amount of new archival material available was so immense that I can only discuss it very briefly here. If I had to choose the single most revealing document that I found then it would probably be the speech made by the new Foreign Minister, Alexander Izvolsky, to the State Defence Council in February 1907. The Council was created to coordinate diplomatic, military and naval policy. Most of its members were generals or admirals. In early 1907 they were obsessed by the Japanese danger to Russia's East Asian possessions in the wake of Russia's recent defeat in the war against Japan. The senior admiral on the Council also advanced the arguments on which Russian foreign policy in the 1890s had been based: namely that the Asia-Pacific region would be the key area of twentieth-century global power and that Russia's over-riding objective must be to develop its Siberian territories as the basis for its future role as a superpower.

Izvolsky opposed the military leaders' views. He argued that Europe was more important to Russia because most of the empire's people, wealth and political and cultural centres were in Europe. He also argued that foreign policy could not be divorced from questions of identity, and that the Russians were a Christian and European people. He stressed that in East Asia Russia could control events and could come to a reasonable compromise with the Japanese. On the contrary, he argued, developments in Eastern Europe and the Near East were vital to Russian interests and security but could not be controlled by Russia. In Izvolsky's view the crisis of the Ottoman and Austrian empires was rooted in internal factors but complicated by great power rivalries. The collapse of both empires was very possible in the next twenty years. So great were the issues involved that Russia could simply not afford to remain uninvolved. To do so, in his words, would be to turn Russia into a country like Persia.

This would be a humiliating insult to Izvolsky's perception of Russian identity but also immensely dangerous to Russian interests. In the era of high imperialism, weak countries went to the wall and were dominated, even partitioned, by stronger neighbours. At the very moment that Izvolsky made his speech the British and Russians were busily carving up Persia into spheres of influence. In my opinion, Izvolsky's speech sums up the dilemma facing tsarist statesmen, as they perceived matters, before 1914. None of them wanted war and most of them feared the consequences of crisis and collapse in the Ottoman and Austrian empires, which together covered a vast area on Russia's borders. But they believed this crisis was inevitable and that Russia could not stand aside.

In general the new archival evidence provides a much more balanced view of Russian foreign policy than what we had before. Previously we relied to a great extent on the published memoirs of Izvolsky, his successor as Foreign Minister, Serge Sazonov, and the ambassador in London, Alexander Benckendorff. All three men were strong supporters of Russia's alliance with France and entente with Britain. Now the archives provide the often contrasting views of the embassies in Berlin, Vienna and Rome. The series of published documents on Russian foreign policy in the pre-war years has a large and frustrating hole: the series stops on the eve of the First Balkan War in September 1912 and only resumes in January 1914. Working in the archives allows one to fill this gap. This is crucial because Russian behaviour in July 1914 owed much to the Russian leadership's perception of what had happened in the two Balkan wars. Our understanding of Russian policy in 1912-13 was previously very biased, not least because it relied far too heavily on the published memoirs of the then "Prime Minister", Vladimir Kokovtsov. The archives allow a much more balanced view which, inter alia, allows one to understand the fears and perceptions of the Russian military leadership. Fascinating too are the new materials covering Russo-Serb relations. Since it was Russian support of Serbia that led directly to the outbreak of war in 1914 these new sources are obviously vital. I read all the diplomatic correspondence and all the remaining military correspondence between Petersburg and Belgrade. In addition, I was able to read a mass of private correspondence and memoirs of key diplomats in both Russian archives and in archives and family holdings in the West.

One very important question concerns how the Russian leaders perceived and planned for a future European war. Here the archive of the Council of Ministers in Petersburg contains crucial evidence. Nicholas II and his "Prime Minister", Peter Stolypin, in 1908-10 required all ministers to report in detail on the likely impact of a European war for the area of Russian life for which they were responsible, as well as to provide plans to reduce the harm caused. These reports make fascinating reading, especially when read together with the debates within the civil and military elite surrounding the famous book of Ivan Bloch about the disastrous consequences of a future European war. Together these materials show what kind of war the leadership expected, why they came to this view, and how they planned for a future war with this expectation in mind. The evidence is clear, powerful and very striking.

In my opinion, looking at this material makes it easier, for example, to understand and even sympathise with the thinking of Russian (and other) military leaderships. The generals were by no means always as blind as popular legend suggests. They usually understood only too well the devastating impact of modern defensive firepower. They obsessed about how conscripts drawn from civilian life could attack and achieve victory in the face of this firepower. Pointing to the Japanese infantry in 1904-5, they argued that this could be done given sufficient patriotic indoctrination. They also stressed that wars could only be won on the offensive, that victory could be won at acceptable cost, and that war always had and always would be the decisive judge of which peoples, states and ideas dominated the globe.

Our knowledge of what happened in 1914-18 makes such claims seem both false and terrifying but the military thinkers had good historical grounds for advancing them. Not just the German wars of unification but also the Russo-Japanese War and the Balkan wars of 1912-13 justified the generals' perceptions. Nor is it true that (at least in the Russian case) the military leaders ignored the lessons of the American Civil War. Some did study it. But the Civil War actually supported their basic arguments. The North won the Civil War because millions of Northern men were willing to risk death in the cause of American nationalism. The war was won on the offensive since this was the only way to force the South back into the Union. Moreover it was won at a price that most contemporary Americans and Europeans would think well worthwhile. The geopolitical basis for the world in which we live and the values we maintain was the alliance between the British Empire and a continent-wide USA. Had the Confederacy achieved independence the result would have been a divided North American continent with the rump USA almost certainly at daggers' drawn with the British. The consequences would have been immense. Among them would have been near-certain German domination of Europe.

Of course the generals got things wrong. The First World War did not result in a decisive and lasting victory. Few among the "victors" believed the price of the war to have been worthwhile, especially since the peace of 1918 turned out to be a mere truce, leading to an even more devastating war in 1939-45. But it is important to remember just how close-run the First World War was. If in the winter of 1916-17 the Germans had not brought the USA into the war at the very moment when revolution undermined Russian power then Germany would almost certainly have won the First World War. Without America or Russia the French and British could never have defeated Germany. A German victory did not require outright defeat of France and Britain on the western front. All that was needed was stalemate in the west and a peace in the east along the lines of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk which ended the Russo-German war in March 1918. As a result of Brest-Litovsk Russia lost all its western borderlands which became nominally independent but in practice German satellites. The lost territories included the core of Russian export agriculture and of its mining and metallurgical industries. Had Germany been

able to sustain and consolidate the gains it made at Brest-Litovsk then its leadership on the European continent would have been assured.

Here however, I am moving away from the realm of new evidence and into that of new ideas. In the decades since 1983 I have written many books on a variety of subjects. *Towards the Flame* was heavily influenced by many of the ideas I developed in the process. I will mention only a handful. My understanding of the geopolitical context in which the First World War occurred was, for example, influenced by my previous book called *Russia against Napoleon*. The basic reality of European geopolitics from 1763 to 1945 was that it was difficult but possible for a would-be pan-European emperor to conquer France, Germany, the Low Countries and northern Italy – in other words Charlemagne's old empire and the core territories of the European Union. Then came the biggest challenge in the form of the two great peripheral centres of power represented by Britain and Russia. To defeat simultaneously these two power-centres was very difficult and all the more so since it required a naval capability to conquer Britain and a military-logistical capability to destroy Russian power in the vast regions east and south of Moscow. Napoleon and Hitler both faced and failed this challenge. But in 1917 Imperial Germany came nearer to success because the revolution destroyed the Russian state. For that reason, in my opinion, the Kaiser came closer than Napoleon or Hitler to becoming Europe's hegemon. Of course this runs against British folk memory that compares the stalemate on the Western front to the Blitzkrieg warfare of Napoleon and Hitler. But this is to view the wars through British myopia as well as to concentrate on tactics and operations rather than on the more crucial realm of grand strategy.

Undoubtedly the single most important new idea that I had developed since 1983 revolved around empire. In 2000 I published a book entitled *Empire: the Russian Empire and its Rivals*. I do not believe that the First World War had a single cause but I do believe that the single most important reason for the war was the crisis of empire. The Great War was first and foremost an East European conflict. A big element causing the war was the growing disintegration of the Ottoman Empire. Even more important and immediate a cause was Austrian determination to show the world that they had no intention of following the Ottomans into the grave. But at the same time that the crisis of empire was pushing Eastern Europe into war in 1914 it was – in the form of the Ulster Crisis – paralysing British domestic politics. The imperialist assumptions and policies that drove Austria into war with Serbia in 1914 were common to European imperialism of that era. The key difference was that imperialism was much safer and easier outside Europe than on the continent. But to my mind the Suez Crisis of 1956 was in many ways the “Austrian moment” of the British and French empires: facing geopolitical decline and growing nationalist challenges French and British elites showed a rather Austrian mixture of desperation, arrogance and miscalculation. The big difference was that in 1956 big brother in Washington said “no” whereas in 1914 big brother in Berlin not just said yes but gave the Austrians a push.

Beneath the surface of international politics before 1914 there existed a fundamental clash between the logic of international relations and of domestic politics. For many reasons that I will explain in my talk the logic of international power pointed towards empire since this was the only way in which European countries could acquire the continental-scale resources that would enable them to become global superpowers. But within countries nationalism, usually with an ethnic core, seemed the best way to consolidate communities and legitimise rulers in the modern era. The conflicts caused were much more complex than a simple struggle between empire and nationalism. Sometimes the two were allies. Least of all was the conflict between “archaic” empire and “modern” nationalism. The ferocity of the tensions and conflicts was caused by the fact that both imperialism and nationalism were widely perceived to be the wave of the future. Thinking in these terms helps to spot the essential and exclude the marginal in pre-1914 international relations. It also helps to link the outbreak of war in 1914 to one of the great themes of twentieth-century history, namely the questions of empires and nationalisms. The outbreak of war in 1914 was not inevitable but nor was it accidental.