Screenplay for the film "1914 — Nicholas II. Historical Chronicles with Nikolai Svanidze"
written by Marina Zhukova, translated by AI, and preceded by a summary also written by AI

Screenplay Summary:
The text describes how the First World War emerges from an explosive mix of economic rivalry, an arms race, and the vanity of a few unstable leaders, above all Kaiser Wilhelm II and Count Berchtold.
The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand is only the spark; European armies are already swollen, tense, and convinced that war will be short and glorious.
In Russia, Tsar Nicholas II, steeped in mysticism and convinced he is God's anointed, sees the empire grow richer and stronger militarily and lets himself be seduced by the vision of a great military Russia.
Moderate ministers like Kokovtsov, opposed to war and to the arms race, are dismissed amid tears and embraces, but with little political foresight.
Russia pours massive funds into the army, aims at parity with Germany, and eagerly absorbs the flattery of allies who call her the European "steamroller".
Yet the military machine is badly coordinated, riddled with personal rivalries (Samsonov–Rennenkampf), archaic communications and logistical incompetence.
The first campaigns in East Prussia end in disaster: one Russian army is encircled and destroyed, hundreds of thousands of men are killed or captured.
In the hospitals, chaos reigns: shortages of everything, half-naked wounded, arbitrary orders — despite the remarkable devotion of many upper-class women, including the empress and her daughters.
The regime refuses to face the scale of defeat, hiding catastrophe behind optimistic reports and selective victories on southern fronts.
Military medical services remain under incompetent protégés, protected in part by the empress, sometimes out of sheer contrariness.
At the same time, Russian society is swept by a nationalist wave: anti-German pogroms, renaming of St Petersburg as Petrograd, banning the Christmas tree as a "German enemy custom".
Business circles also welcome war, hoping to drive out German capital, and briefly align themselves with the monarchy.
Officers on both sides assume the war will last only weeks; those who dare to predict six months are labelled defeatists.
Clear warnings — like Durnovo's memorandum foreseeing revolution and collapse if war comes — are read but essentially ignored by Nicholas II.
The author dismantles the central myth of Nicholas as a loving family man: had he truly loved his children, he argues, he would have done everything possible to avoid war.
The text suggests that by his passivity, his personnel choices, and his inability to link foreign and domestic policy, Nicholas bears heavy responsibility for the war, the revolution, and the fall of imperial Russia.
The patriotic intoxication of 1914, and the illusion of being loved by the people, blind the tsar further to the fragility of his regime.
As the war drags on, Nicholas deteriorates physically and mentally; when he receives Kokovtsov again in 1917, he appears thin, aged, with a wandering gaze, almost on the verge of breakdown.
Doctor Botkin refuses to recognise the seriousness of the tsar's condition; in tragic irony, he will be shot together with him in 1918.
The documentary ends on the idea that Russia paid dearly for the blindness of its rulers and for not having produced, in sufficient numbers, a responsible, self-confident bourgeois elite like that of Victorian England.

Screenplay :

It is commonly believed that the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914 was merely a pretext for the world war. The real causes of the war lay in the fierce economic rivalry between England and Germany, the struggle for markets, and the internal contradictions of capitalism.

But the good Russian writer and brilliant historian Mark Aldanov says: “By chance, in 1914 the fate of the world lay in the hands of two neurasthenics.” The first of them was the German Emperor Wilhelm, the second — the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Austria-Hungary, Count Leopold Berchtold von und zu Ungarschitz. When the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand was killed in Serbia, Count Berchtold, famous for his ambition, personally wrote an ultimatum to Serbia. And he did not show it to his superior, the Austrian Emperor Franz Joseph, who was 84 years old, who feared above all a fire from a short circuit, and who did not want to hear anything about war. Berchtold’s ambition was clearly satisfied, because it was his ultimatum that became the first step toward the world war.

As for the ambition of the first European neurasthenic, Kaiser Wilhelm, everything was going well without a war. Germany was flourishing, he had married off his daughter, and an English admiral and the Russian tsar had attended the wedding. The celebration passed cheerfully and without political disagreement.

On 28 June 1914, while Wilhelm was attending a regatta in Kiel, a boat approached his yacht. Admiral Müller, who stood in it, held a paper in his hand, but as he could not dock, he placed it in his cigarette case and tossed it aboard. It contained the message of the archduke’s assassination.

Wilhelm loved the archduke and his wife; moreover, he was all-powerful and, compared to the Austrian foreign minister, could allow himself anything. He was also told that twelve Serbian terrorists were travelling to Vienna to kill him during the archduke’s funeral. The Kaiser did not attend the funeral. He said that the Serbs must be dealt with immediately. That went without saying. Nobody told him that it did not quite go without saying, and that a war with Serbia would not stop the actions of Serbian terrorists. But perhaps there was no one who wished to tell him so. Many educated people in Europe believed at the time that nothing terrible would happen if a war broke out. The generals were another matter : they thought disaster would strike if the war did not occur — not only German generals but also the French allies of the Russian generals. Moreover, the German chancellor told the British ambassador that the treaty on Belgian neutrality was a scrap of paper. And therefore the way to France was open. The ambassador reported this to London, adding that the Kaiser “was greatly agitated by wine and spoke for twenty minutes without stopping.”

A joke circulated during those days : the gatekeeper of the other world, the Apostle Peter, meets Archduke Ferdinand : “Your Highness, a large retinue is expected to arrive after you.” Many were expected particularly from Russia.

In the film The House I Live In there is a famous scene — the main characters walk down a street, and at its end appear the numbers “1941.” We always react emotionally to this scene. In fact, the numbers “1914” may lay claim to our tragic memory with no less, perhaps more, justification. In 1914 began the events after which the vast country of Russia collapsed. The First World War begins and heads this chain of events.

The First World War is also called the Great War. In this name lie the scale of the tragedy, the number of victims, the redrawing of the map of Europe, the terrible chain of consequences — Bolshevism, Fascism, and ultimately the Second World War.

There is something mystical in the very combination of the numbers “1914” and “1941.”

Emperor Nicholas Alexandrovich Romanov, already twenty years reigning over Russia by 1914, was inclined toward mysticism. The number of contemporaries testifying to his mysticism can be rivalled only by those who write of him as a deeply religious man. Mysticism and Christian faith would seem incompatible. But their point of intersection in the soul of the Russian emperor turned out to be his incomprehensible conviction that he, Nicholas Alexandrovich, was indeed God’s anointed on Russian soil.

For twenty years of Nicholas’s rule, Russia refused to accept this. The Khodynka tragedy, the defeat in the Russo-Japanese war, 1905, a fright leading to complete powerlessness, the total Socialist-Revolutionary terror — none of this strengthened Nicholas’s authority. Then Stolypin ruled the country for six years in place of the tsar as a crisis manager. Then Stolypin was assassinated. Nicholas did not take this as a tragedy, much less a national tragedy. But the disappearance of such a strong figure as Stolypin from the Russian political scene did not raise Nicholas’s self-esteem either. His personal impressions of the first decade of the Russian twentieth century were nightmarish and so crushing that the thought of himself as God’s anointed had to retreat.

But temptation came from the most unexpected side. Thanks to the coherent economic and financial policies of the Prime Ministers Witte, Stolypin, and Kokovtsov — whom Nicholas disliked — Russia was experiencing a powerful economic rise. It turned out that economic growth was an incredible test for a leader weighed down by complexes born of his own failures. Especially when the autocrat rules a vast country with a rapidly growing population. Women give birth to children, meaning soldiers; the country’s income grows; the instinct of state self-preservation weakens. Moreover, the sovereign is above all a military man. He values his military education and says that he feels most free among the military.

At 11 a.m. on 29 January 1914, a courier arrived to Prime Minister Vladimir Nikolaevich Kokovtsov — two years in the post, and ten years already minister of Finance — and handed him a small-format letter from the sovereign.

It was a dismissal, formulated as follows :

“Vladimir Nikolaevich!
It is not a feeling of aversion, but a long and deeply understood state necessity that compels me to tell you that I must part with you.
The rapid course of internal life and the astonishing rise of the economic forces of the country require a series of decisive measures, which only a fresh man can manage.”

As for freshness : replacing Kokovtsov was Goremykin, who had just turned 75, and Nicholas was installing him as Prime Minister for the second time. The first time, he had replaced him with Stolypin. Thus, if sturgeon, according to Bulgakov, has only one degree of freshness, a Prime Minister may royally have two or more. Goremykin was known as an extremely dependent official, constantly awaiting instructions from Nicholas.

But let us return to Kokovtsov’s dismissal.
At 11 a.m. on Friday, 31 January 1914, he entered the sovereign’s office.

The sovereign, just returned from a walk, quickly moved toward Kokovtsov, extended his hand, and, without letting go, stood silently looking him straight in the eyes.

Contemporaries noted that when Nicholas was agitated, he smoked constantly and looked at his feet. But at Kokovtsov he looked directly. Then he embraced him, kissed him twice, and granted him the title of count. Then kissed him again. Then the sovereign announced that he was granting the former Prime Minister a one-time allowance of 300,000 rubles out of concern. Kokovtsov refused. “Well, what can be done,” said the sovereign, walked around the desk, again took Kokovtsov’s hand. His eyes were full of tears. Kokovtsov kissed his hand, he kissed Kokovtsov on the lips and added : “Thus do friends part.”

This is the emotional side of Kokovtsov’s recollections of the farewell audience. Now for emotions of another kind. The Prime Minister, also the minister of Finance, was a convinced opponent of war and the only obstacle to the growing influence of the military establishment. When Nicholas dismissed Kokovtsov with tears and embraces on 31 January 1914, he could not fail to understand what he was crying about. Otherwise he would not have lost his composure. And his composure had become legendary during his lifetime, provoking talk of an “Asiatic fatalism.”

In reality it was self-restraint acquired by upbringing. A seemingly inappropriate comparison : but in Stalin’s times, the graduates of the Smolny Institute, standing with parcels for their husbands in prison queues, knew how to conceal their emotions in public. Probably for this same reason, Nicholas’s photographs do not leave a definite impression. He looks well, is neat, one cannot imagine him raising his voice. It seems he must have been a pedantic man, loving fresh air and order. Against this background, Nicholas’s habit of drinking port wine not only with cheese and dessert, but also with hot dishes seems somewhat extraordinary.

Thus, tears at the dismissal of the Prime Minister were clearly an emergency. Nicholas’s mother, the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna, read in the newspaper on 30 January about Kokovtsov’s dismissal. That same evening, meeting her son at the theatre, she asked him : “Why did you do this ?” And received his reply : “And you think it was easy for me ? Someday I will tell you everything in detail, but for now I myself see that it is not difficult to dismiss a minister, but very hard to admit that one should not have done so.” Maria Feodorovna recounted this conversation to Kokovtsov and added : “We are going with steady steps toward catastrophe. The sovereign listens only to flatterers. I feel it instinctively, though I cannot clearly picture what awaits us.”

The head of the Russian government considered the arms race dangerous to the highest degree. The arms race implants into mass consciousness the idea
that war is inevitable. A wave of nervous agitation rises so high that it overwhelms even the most convinced opponents of war. All this the Russian Prime Minister had already explained in June 1912 to the German chancellor Bethmann-Hollweg during a summit between the Russian and German emperors. The chancellor in turn remarked that Russia, back in 1910, had adopted the so-called mobilization plan no. 18, which viewed Germany as a potential enemy. This was pure truth. The sovereign had signed this plan at the urging of the minister of War, and the probable enemy had been approved at the highest level.

The essence of the plan was as follows. We do not strike the enemy immediately. We lure him deeper and deeper into our territory; there, in the depths of Russia, the army is reinforced by reservists, and then advances and drives the enemy from our native soil. Such a plan, first of all, clearly shows that the Russian tsar rules a vast territory — he has plenty of space in which to lure the enemy.

Secondly, Kutuzov’s laurels, with his forced manoeuvre of 1812, give no one any peace. And no one cares to remember that this involved surrendering Moscow to Napoleon. Thirdly, in 1911 Germany responded by introducing an extraordinary war tax and a new, powerful armament programme. In 1911 Germany allocated half of its total imperial budget to preparations for war; by

1913, already 62 percent.

In 1912, the Russian Minister of War, for his part bypassing the prime minister and the Duma, which approved the military budget, went directly to Nicholas with a demand for money. In view of Germany's rapid rearmament, we need a one-off loan of 350 million roubles plus an additional 100 million roubles annually for the ministry. The name of the Minister of Finance, Kokovtsov, who believed that the arms race was undermining the country's financial stability, became a synonym for "enemy of the people". The Minister of Finance replied to the Minister of War: "All right, I have 450 million roubles free, I will give them, but I shall ask the sovereign for help. Let the sovereign order, in his own name, that all civilian ministers shall not ask for money." This meant: all the money would go to war. The sovereign answered very simply: "Submit to me tomorrow the draft of my order to all the ministers about this, and I shall sign it with great pleasure."

A year later, in Saint Petersburg, during a meeting between the chiefs of the Russian and French general staffs, General Joffre, in a social conversation with the Russian Minister of Finance Kokovtsov, remarked, not without sarcasm, that he envied the Russian Minister of War, Sukhomlinov, because he could always get as much money as he wanted. In response, Kokovtsov showed Joffre a financial document, and the general saw with his own eyes that the Russian Minister of War had at his disposal 200 million roubles, that is, 500 million francs, in unused credits. Taking his leave of General Joffre, Kokovtsov remarked: "If an official does not steal money, that is not yet an achievement. To spend it in time and on the right purpose — that is the art."

In 1913, at a meeting with the sovereign on questions of domestic and foreign policy, attended by the prime minister, the foreign minister, the interior minister, the chief of the General Staff and a couple of grand dukes, the Minister of War raised the question of increasing the draft. The prime minister, who was also head of the Ministry of Finance, objected: "Our draft stands at 570,000 men. An increase of 120,000 will not pass smoothly." Then, from among the "power ministries", the Interior Minister Maklakov rose. His speech amounted to the following: one should not be afraid to increase the draft; on the contrary, one should strive to have all young men pass through the army, because the army educates them and returns to the people men strengthened physically and morally.

By the summer of 1914, that is, at the start of the war, Russia had a peacetime army of 1,423,000 men. After mobilisation it rose to 5,338,000. Germany, before the declaration of war, had an army of 761,000 men; after mobilisation — 2,415,000. At the moment war broke out, Russia had 7,088 artillery pieces, Germany 6,528. Rifles: Russia — 5 million, Germany — the same. Russia had 263 aeroplanes and 4,100 motor vehicles; Germany — 232 and 4,000. If we compare the more exotic instruments of war, Russia had 14 airships and Germany 15. True, Germany had 12,000 machine-guns and we 4,100, and Germany had 2,076 heavy guns to our 240. But these are trifles. We shall catch up.

The idea of military parity with Germany created a sense of state well-being. There was a craving for something bold and grand. The allies kept adding fuel to the fire: "Russia is the European steamroller." The cavalry line of the Cossacks made a powerful impression on European minds. Newspaper artists drew Cossacks in meticulous detail. "Russian resources are so great that Germany will be exhausted without our helping Russia," said the British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey in April 1914 to the French President Poincaré.

It must be said that at this time Sir Edward Grey was already losing his sight at a catastrophic pace and, in addition, was in deep depression after his wife's death. The Russian leader Nicholas Romanov, by contrast, was in good health, his wife at his side, but his political sight was worthless. Out of all possible aims he had focused it on the idea that Russia was a great military power. This

idea had been obvious to his father, Emperor Alexander III, as well, but during his fourteen years on the throne Alexander did not drag the country into military conflicts. Once, while Alexander III was fishing on the shore of the Gulf of Finland, an aide-de-camp brought him a telegram from Europe, to which the sovereign replied briefly and aptly: “When the Russian tsar is fishing, Europe can wait.” Together with the throne, Alexander did not pass on to his son the patience of the fisherman.

The former prime minister Witte voiced a heretical thought: “In Russia’s interests, we should not attempt to play a leading world role; it is more expedient to step back into the second rank of the world powers, organising the country in the meantime and restoring internal peace.” But what Nicholas lacked above all was any link between domestic and foreign policy. In other respects, everything was simple:

26 June — in Sarajevo the Austrian Archduke Ferdinand is assassinated.
20 July — in France officers’ leave is cancelled.
23 July — Austria-Hungary presents an ultimatum to Serbia.
25 July — Serbia declares mobilisation.

Everyone still hopes for a peaceful outcome, while Lenin, on 25 July, is already writing to Inessa Armand: “My dear, very dear friend, all my thoughts are of the revolution that is beginning in Russia.” On that same day when Lenin wrote this letter, and the French President Poincaré was on a visit in Petersburg, Nicholas II’s son Alexei, grandson of Alexander III, wrote his own letter to his grandmother Maria Feodorovna: “Dear Grandmother, President Poincaré gave me a wonderful writing set. Today everyone — Mama, Papa, my sisters — is at the parade. Loving you, Alexei.”

28 July — Austria-Hungary declares war on Serbia.
29 July — bombardment of Belgrade.
29 July — Russia declares partial mobilisation.
31 July — general mobilisation begins in Russia and Austria-Hungary.
31 July — Germany presents Russia with an ultimatum: if you do not stop mobilisation, there will be war. The ultimatum expires on 1 August at noon. Nicholas gives Wilhelm no answer.

On 1 August 1914, Nicholas and his sister, Grand Duchess Olga, attend a review of troops at Krasnoye Selo. Olga asks her brother whether she should stay so that, in the event war is declared, she can personally see off to the front the Akhtyrka Hussar Regiment, of which she is honorary commander. “Don’t worry, darling,” the emperor replies. “There will be no war. Go home.” Grand Duchess Olga goes back to Petersburg. She is taking a bath when a courier arrives from Nicholas and informs her that Germany has declared war.

At 19:10 the German ambassador, Pourtalès, comes to the Russian Foreign Minister Sazonov and, in his agitation, hands him two versions of the German reply: if Russia stops mobilisation — peace; if she does not — war. The Russian Foreign Minister responds: “I have the courage to take upon myself the responsibility for a war that will make Russia stronger than ever.”

In the night of 1 to 2 August, Nicholas summoned the British ambassador Buchanan and worked with him from 11 p.m. to 1 a.m. In his presence he composed a very long telegram to King George of England. Closer to half past one, Nicholas went in to see the empress for tea, then took a bath and headed for his bedroom when his valet, Teteriatnikov, caught up with him with a telegram from Emperor Wilhelm. A few hours after declaring war on Russia, Wilhelm was still making a last attempt to persuade Nicholas not to drag Russia into the war.

Fate, under the guise of the valet Teteriatnikov, called out to Nicholas at the moment when he reached for the handle of his bedroom door. Why did Nicholas the fatalist not listen to fate when it

took him by the sleeve? He was obliged to know that the armies of Samsonov and Rennenkampf, which were to go into East Prussia to draw German forces away from the Western Front — that is, to save Paris — would go forth without coordination, without communications. Radio messages would be sent in plain text, which greatly surprised the Germans and allowed them to draw full information from them. Generals Samsonov and Rennenkampf had not spoken to each other since the Russo-Japanese War. Nicholas had personally stopped a duel between them.

Nicholas ought to have known that communications between the commander of the North-Western Front, Zhilinsky, and the army commanders would be carried on in an incredible fashion: from Zhilinsky, an aide-de-camp would drive by car to the post office in Warsaw, send a telegram to General Samsonov, then once more drive the hundred kilometres back to collect the answer. Grand Duke Oleg Konstantinovich, who was fighting under Rennenkampf, wrote in his diary: “The supply train is far away. Everyone is left without a field kitchen, without anything. Fourteen days in the same underwear. (And this is a grand duke!) I myself have killed twenty chickens. The soldiers have no tobacco, no cigarettes. I share with them what they send me from home.” From home — that is, from Grand Duke Konstantin Konstantinovich. Besides Oleg, two other of his sons were fighting in a hussar squadron — Gavriil and Igor. From Gavriil’s memoirs: “The horses are plodding with the water up to their bellies in the sticky marsh, falling, being sucked under by the bog, disappearing. Hussars without horses crawl through the swamp, some no longer visible on the surface. Igor is sucked down to his very chin, above the mire only his head and raised arms can be seen. I barely managed to pull him out. The Germans, seeing that we are drowning, moved on.”

Grand Duke Oleg would be mortally wounded and die at the age of twenty-two. He is buried at Ostashevo, on the high bank of the Ruza River.

Many who come back from the front speak of looting. Soldiers are flogged for looting. Rennenkampf has marauders shot without mercy. To the newspaper Kiev Thought a report was sent about Cossack outrages in Galicia. It was printed, but everywhere the word “Cossacks” was replaced by “Germans”. When the editor was asked about this, he replied: “We live in Russia, and everyone knows that under ‘Germans’ one must understand ‘Cossacks’.”

Samsonov’s army in East Prussia would be encircled and crushed by 30 August. Thirty thousand soldiers would be killed, 92,000 captured. Sixty trainloads of trophies would be sent to Germany. General Samsonov would commit suicide, although war offers other opportunities to part with life. Rennenkampf all this time would remain inactive. The front commander, Zhilinsky, would not coordinate the actions of the armies. Rennenkampf would begin a retreat on his own. He would lose 145,000 men, though he would still save a significant part of his army. Samsonov and Rennenkampf were the best generals the Russian army could put forward. From August to December 1914, Russia would lose 1,350,000 men killed, wounded and taken prisoner.

In October Nicholas and the heir, ten-year-old Alexei, would leave Petersburg for a month-long trip along the near-front zone. Awarding St George crosses, visiting dressing stations. Near Rovno, standing in front of a line of soldiers, Nicholas asked those who had been at the war from the very start to raise their hands. A few hands were raised. There were entire companies in which not a single hand went up. This meant: those who had gone to war in August — all were dead.

In 1914 Nicholas would award the third St George Cross to the famous Cossack hero Kuzma Kryuchkov. Incidentally, in Russia a full holder of the St George order received 136 roubles in gold per year, 100 dessiatinas of land, hereditary nobility, the first officer’s rank and exemption from taxes. The Soviet regime would not provide such social protection to its heroes. Having fought throughout the First World War, after the Revolution, in early 1918, Kryuchkov formed a White

partisan detachment. His last battle, Cornet Kryuchkov fought as part of the Don White Army. The Red Army in this battle, near the stanitsa of Ostrovskaya, was represented by Chinese mercenaries. The St George cavalier Kryuchkov was wounded by a Chinese machine-gunner. And at night, into the hut where Kryuchkov lay dying, there came the drunk army commander Budyonny, shouting: “Get up, you white vermin!” Kryuchkov spat in his face. Budyonny jauntily hacked down the mortally wounded Kryuchkov lying before him.

From late August 1914, a hospital was opened in the Great Palace of Tsarskoe Selo, called “Her Majesty’s Own Hospital”. The Empress and her elder daughters, Olga and Tatiana, underwent training as wartime nurses. Their instructor was the chief physician of the Tsarskoe Selo hospital, a decorated surgeon and specialist in abdominal operations, Princess Vera Ignatievna Gedroits. The female members of Nicholas’s family were responsible for dressing and cleaning wounds, changing the bed linen of the wounded; they were present at operations and carried away amputated arms and legs.

Later, a hospital for the severely wounded was opened in the Winter Palace. All the state rooms were given over to it, except the St George Hall. Some of the paintings and statues were removed, the floors covered with linoleum. The wounded were brought in up the Jordan Staircase. In the Nicholas Hall — those with head and spinal wounds. In the Eastern Gallery — wounds to the limbs. In the Heraldic Hall — wounds to the abdominal cavity and hip joint. The gravest cases — in the Peter the Great Hall, behind screens. The operating theatre — in the room behind the Alexander Hall. The dressing room — in the Field-Marshal’s Hall. Up to 200 men were in each hall. Excellent specialists worked there. The nursing sisters were headed by Baroness Ikskül. Most women of the Russian high society honestly bore all the hardships of work in the hospitals. Afterwards they said that a life of poverty in emigration, after working in the hospitals, no longer seemed frightening.

Honour and praise to them. But in the state military-medical administration there reigned complete chaos. In 1914 the supreme commander-in-chief, Grand Duke Nicholas Nikolaevich, insisted on the removal of the head of this service, a certain Evdokimov. He was not dismissed, as he enjoyed the favour of the Minister of War, Sukhomlinov, and of the Empress. It was said that Alexandra Feodorovna simply wanted to act contrary to her mother-in-law.

On 23 August, 9,000 wounded were brought to Moscow. They were dumped on straw in the hospital of the Shanyavsky University (now RSUH). Without food. Without doctors.
In the military hospitals there was a total shortage of everything, the wounded lay half-naked. The Zemstvo Union sent linen — the military authorities forbade its use.

When the tsar came to a hospital, complete confusion arose. At the Lefortovo Hospital, during the tsar’s visit, a wall was built, separating off the severely wounded so that the tsar would not see them. The hospital was overcrowded. The surplus were evacuated in haste; several thousand men lay for a week in railcars on sidings.

Order of the military authorities: if a Russian officer did not manage to be in his ward in time, his trousers were to be taken off. The “trouser measure” took root. In some hospitals, the trousers were taken off even the prisoner-of-war doctors who were helping our own doctors. They walked around in their long underwear. The nursing sisters took pity and sewed them warm trousers at their own expense.

No one would offer a sober assessment of the defeat in East Prussia. The catastrophe on the Eastern Front would be covered over by reports of victories on the Southern and South-Western Fronts. Minister Sukhomlinov would give optimistic interviews. The British liaison officer at the headquarters of Samsonov’s army, an eyewitness of its tragedy, reported to Churchill — then First

Lord of the Admiralty: “Russia’s main misfortune lies in its desire to embellish the situation in every possible way.”

Nicholas was a very poor judge of men, but he was obliged to know this trait in his entourage. Sergei Yulievich Witte put it very bluntly: “The sovereign knew this and allowed it.” And further: “A tsar who does not have a tsar’s character cannot bring happiness to the country.”

A year before the war, the former chairman of the State Duma, Alexander Ivanovich Guchkov, was interviewed as a specialist in public opinion. The questions were: Should we begin a war or not? If there is a war, will a revolution break out? Guchkov replied that war means an inevitable revolution. The sovereign can rely only on the loyalty of the Guards regiments.

In February 1914, the former Minister of the Interior in Witte’s government, P. N. Durnovo, sent Nicholas a memorandum in which he wrote that war would be fatal both for Russia and for Germany. “In the defeated country, a social revolution is inevitable. It will inevitably spread to the victorious country as well, because Germany and Russia are too closely and long bound together. The war will create particularly favourable conditions for revolution in Russia.” P. N. Durnovo saw it all as if looking into water (and about Russia, and about Germany). Nicholas read his memorandum. But even this is not the main point.

Nicholas could have spared Russia both the First and the Second World Wars, as well as the revolution, on the very night before the war began, if at the moment when he took hold of the handle of the bedroom door he shared with his wife, he, the Russian emperor, had thought of his children — of his four girls and his sick boy. If, at that instant, he had let his emotions run free and, with the full force of a father’s feelings, had imagined their possible nightmare end. Then, through the bloody veil of the coming four years, he would have seen himself going down into the cellar with his son in his arms, would have seen his son taken from him and himself and his daughters lined up against the wall. He would have clearly heard the sounds of bullets hitting his children, heard the cry and moan of beloved voices, would have seen how his daughters were finished off with bayonets and rifle butts, and how two more shots were fired into the ear of his fourteen-year-old son.

The main myth about Nicholas does not withstand criticism — the myth that he was a man who loved his family more than anything in the world. If he had known how to love his children, he would have saved not only them but also Russia.

On the morning of 2 August 1914, Nicholas told the French ambassador Maurice Paléologue: “I slept exceptionally soundly. When I woke up, I felt as though a stone had fallen from my soul. I felt that everything between Wilhelm and me was over forever.”

On 2 August 1914, at 3:30 p.m., a thanksgiving service was held in the St George Hall, attended by about five thousand people — mostly officers. They were in field uniform. At the end of the service, Nicholas announced the beginning of the war:
“Officers of my Guard, in your persons I greet my whole army and bless it. I solemnly swear that I will not conclude peace as long as there remains a single enemy on our native soil.”

This statement is an exact repetition of the words spoken by Alexander I in 1812.

Then the sovereign went into the rooms overlooking Palace Square and stepped out onto the balcony.

At the sight of the sovereign, the gigantic crowd filling Palace Square fell to its knees and began to

sing “God Save the Tsar”. The tsar wanted to say something, but he was drowned out by thunderous cries of “Hurrah!” The chairman of the State Duma, Mikhail Vladimirovich Rodzianko, forcing his way through the crowd, asked some workers he ran into what would now happen with the strikes. “That was our family affair; now we have come to our tsar as to a banner, and we will go with him for the sake of victory over the Germans.”

The war was greeted everywhere with a kind of intoxication. In the country estates, peasants came to take leave of their masters — that is, to receive a parting tip. The peasants in bright shirts, in holiday dress, some, on a clear summer day, in shiny patent galoshes. The future head of the Provisional Government, Alexander Fedorovich Kerensky, testified: “Considering the enormous expanse of the country, the results of the mobilisation are impressive — only 4 percent of those liable for service failed to arrive on time at their place of registration.”

For Russia, the war began with the smashing of shops belonging to Russian Germans. On the third day, they sacked the German embassy; the porter fled to the roof and was killed there, the crowd flooded into the mansion, smashed the windows, threw furniture, marble, and Renaissance bronzes out of the windows. By the morning of 5 August, Colonel of Gendarmes Sizov reported to the Interior Minister Maklakov: “In short, Your Excellency, the Germans have been burned out completely.”

On 31 August, by Nicholas’s decree, St Petersburg was renamed Petrograd. Some people with German surnames appealed to Nicholas with a request to russify their names. Nicholas did not give his consent.

Once, Princess Zinaida Nikolaevna Yusupova remarked to the sovereign that society was irritated with the “Germans” at court. “My dear princess,” the sovereign replied, “what can I do? They love me. It’s true that many are old and have lost their wits, like poor Fredericks. The other day he came up to me, slapped me on the shoulder and said, ‘You here too, old chap? Also invited to dinner?’”

On 8 August, a historic session of the State Duma took place. All the ministers were present, as well as diplomats from the friendly powers. The speech of the Foreign Minister Sazonov was greeted with an ovation; there were tears in his voice. The Finance Minister Barn reported to the Duma on the brilliant state of the finances and that the money kept in Berlin had been removed in time.

At that time, Lenin sent a telegram to Kamenev. He gave clear instructions. The Bolshevik deputies were to declare, in complete isolation at the Duma session, that they were against the war and wished for Russia’s defeat, because this would lead to civil war and the victory of the working class.

Along with Lenin, the war also aroused enthusiasm in Russian business circles. They had their own economic reasons. German capital dominated the Russian market in key industries. Even before the war, business had tried to influence the authorities with a view to closing the Russian market to Germany. Such an economic policy was welcomed by the British.

Queen Victoria of England, grandmother of the Russian Empress Alexandra Feodorovna, wife of Nicholas II (the English called her Alix), ruled England from 1837 to 1901. Translated into Russian realities, that is from Nicholas I to Nicholas II. Or from Pushkin to Blok. And her reign formed a whole epoch in Britain, the Victorian era.

On Montpellier Square, one of the old, respectable areas in London, the English writer John Galsworthy placed his Forsyte, a classic figure of the Victorian age. Forsyte and men like him are owners. Sober, self-assured, they have already shed the complexes typical of the newly enriched

coming up from below. Their legendary common sense makes them despise windbags and radicals, value stability, respect work and money. By the end of the Victorian era, that is by the early twentieth century, these people had become the main support of England. Russia had not produced such people in sufficient numbers. And it paid dearly for that.

In 1914 a short period of political unity began between Russian business and the Russian monarchy. The writer Mikhail Prishvin notes that, with the outbreak of war, hooligans and Black Hundreds disappeared from the countryside. The fact was that in 1914 Russia in an instant became nationalist from top to bottom. To complete the picture of general patriotic upsurge, by Christmas the Holy Synod would ban the Christmas tree “as an enemy German contrivance, alien to the Orthodox people.”

It is to be said with regret that even before everything started turning, before Austria declared war on Serbia, on 26 July a gigantic street demonstration had already taken place in Petersburg. The crowd shouted: “Long live the war!” 1905 was forgotten, Nicholas felt that he was loved.

Russian officers assumed that the war would last six weeks; they pondered whether to take their full-dress uniform with them at once for the entry into Berlin, or whether it would be sent to them at the front with the first courier. German officers, for their part, were planning to have breakfast in Paris on 2 September. A very well-informed British military attaché in Brussels declared that there were financial reasons why the great powers would not be able to hold out for long. He had heard this from the prime minister, who had said that this was Lord Haldane’s view. In Petersburg, pessimists who said that the war would last six months were accused of defeatism.

A year before the start of the First World War, Field Marshal Alfred von Schlieffen, the leading military theorist and chief of the German General Staff until 1905, died. He was the author of the theory of blitzkrieg, or lightning war. Schlieffen’s idea was to rapidly defeat France’s main forces by a flanking strike through Belgium and then fall upon Russia. It was precisely this Schlieffen Plan that the German army tried to realise in both the First and the Second World Wars.

In 1914, the lightning-war plan was being carried out by the chief of the German General Staff, Helmuth von Moltke. Colonel General von Moltke was convinced that the war would be long and exhausting.

On 19 January 1917, at 11 a.m., the former prime minister Vladimir Nikolaevich Kokovtsov, dismissed in 1914, came to Tsarskoe Selo for an audience with Nicholas. When he entered the study, the sovereign was standing by the window right by the door. He did not invite his visitor to sit down. Nicholas’s appearance was such that Kokovtsov asked about his health.

He had grown terribly thin, his face had become gaunt and covered with fine wrinkles. His eyes had faded, having completely lost their dark brown shade, and the whites were entirely yellow. His gaze constantly flitted from one object to another.

Kokovtsov said: “Your Majesty, those who see you often obviously do not notice the change in you.”

The sovereign replied, with an expression of helplessness: “I am healthy and vigorous, I simply have to sit a great deal without moving. Perhaps I did not sleep
very well last night. I shall walk in the park and I will look better again.”

The sovereign could not remember why he had summoned Kokovtsov. With a strange, unconscious smile he looked at his interlocutor as if seeking support from him. He was completely at a loss, and

the silence dragged on too long. Still smiling, the sovereign said: “I am not ready for a conversation today; I shall think it over, write to you, and at our next meeting we will discuss everything in detail.” With the same smile, the sovereign offered his hand to Kokovtsov and himself opened the door into the anteroom.

In the anteroom stood Doctor Botkin. Kokovtsov addressed him: “Do you not see that the sovereign is on the eve of a mental illness, if he is not already in its grip, and that you will bear heavy responsibility if you do not take measures?” Doctor Botkin replied that the sovereign was simply tired.

This was five weeks before the February Revolution. In 1918, Doctor Botkin would be shot together with Nicholas.