

# The Russian Revolution: Importance and Causes

Like the First World War that sparked it, the Russian Revolution helped define the political and ideological issues of the 20th century. Historians often compare it with the earlier French Revolution. Both revolutions proceeded through several phases, appealed to those outside their borders, and forced philosophical divisions throughout the world. One difference, however, was that France stood as Europe's leading nation in 1789 when their revolution began, whereas Russia lagged behind in 1914. Russia's revolution did prove more immediately successful, though, as the Bolsheviks secured power and held it for three-quarters of a century. In France, the Old Regime returned to control in 1814, just 25 years after the struggle began. Without the Russian Revolution, the history of the 20th century – including the Second World War, the Cold War, decolonization, and the nuclear arms race – would be a different story.

## Long-Term Causes, 1861-1905

Throughout its history, Russia faced two perennial and irresolvable problems: (1) its technological and economic backwardness vis-à-vis the other European powers and (2) its inability to develop a form of government that successfully harnessed the will of its people. The Russian Revolution can be viewed as a drastic solution to these problems.

Following Alexander II's (r. 1855-1881) reforms, Russia seemed to be moving in the right direction. However, each top-down move by the government engendered a new set of problems. Following the abolition of serfdom, former serfs were forced to continue living on the *mir*s (rural communities practicing subsistence agriculture) until they had paid for their lands. Moreover, large landholders (the gentry) garnered most of the best lands for themselves, sticking former serfs with the rest. Rural overcrowding and a shortage of land led to continual unrest in the countryside, which served as a magnet for revolutionary groups.

Russian intellectuals were divided between those who lauded the unique features of Russia's Slavic culture (called Slavophiles) and those who believed the nation needed to become more like the West to survive (Westernizers). As Russia industrialized after 1880 under the leadership of Finance Minister Sergei Witte (1849-1915), these divisions deepened. Many of the worst

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problems of industrialization previously experienced by western European nations seemed accentuated within Russia's undemocratic political system. Moreover, the rapid pace of advance proved problematic. Industry and the resulting urban problems of overcrowding, pollution, and poor working/living conditions were concentrated in two cities-Moscow and St. Petersburg. Russian manufacturing enterprises tended to be large, making it easy for workers to organize politically. As such, large cities and factories emerged as centers of proletarian unrest and revolution in subsequent decades.

Reform only seemed to fuel the growth of movements that wished to take things further. Among the Slavophiles, an anarchist movement known as the People's Will succeeded in assassinating Alexander II in 1881, causing a brutal suppression of revolutionary groups by his successor, the reactionary Alexander III (r. 1881-1894). Anarchists succeeded, in fact, in assassinating thousands of Russian officials between 1870 and 1914. Less violent but also radical were the Social Revolutionaries, who favored a socialism led by the peasants-that stressed Russia's rural tradition. Westernizers divided strongly between the Constitutional Democrats (Cadets), who favored the development of a capitalist economy and a parliamentary democracy like Britain's, and the Social Democrats, a Marxist party founded in 1898 in exile. Even within the Social Democrats, divisions existed; the Mensheviks wished to establish a mass-based political party like the SPD in Germany, and the **Bolsheviks** claimed that only a conspiratorial group of professional agitators could survive in Russia's autocratic political climate.

## Revolution of 1905

The divisions in Russian society burst to the fore under the ongoing pressure of the country's repeated military defeats. Russia's poor showing in the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) produced an economic crisis and a breakdown of the nation's infrastructure. Revolutionary groups looked to exploit the situation to foment change. Strikes broke out in the major cities, the small number of university students rallied, and a group of peaceful protestors marched on the tsar's Winter Palace to request reform. Though unprovoked, the Tsar's troops fired on the crowd, killing hundreds, in an event known as Bloody Sunday. To calm the furor that followed, Tsar Nicholas II (r. 1894-1917) issued the October Manifesto promising the creation of a legislative assembly, known as the Duma, and further reforms. For the moment, these actions appeased the moderate reform parties. Any

moderate efforts toward the evolution of a constitutional monarchy were undermined by the actions of Nicholas II. Much like Louis XVI, Nicholas appeared a well-meaning and religious family man who, while espousing divine right rule, proved incapable of upholding what this ideal entailed. Nicholas's prime minister, Peter Stolypin (1862-1911), offered the last chance to pull Russia through its difficult transition. Stolypin introduced a series of far-reaching reforms in the decade before WWI designed to move Russia toward a functioning parliamentary democracy and a modern economic system. Peasants were finally allowed to sell their land shares to the *mir* and move to cities; property rights were advanced; and the provincial *zemstvos* (government councils) were strengthened. Unfortunately, Nicholas thwarted Stolypin's attempts to work with the Duma in creating parliamentary coalitions, exercising his royal prerogative to suspend the legislative whenever its policies annoyed him. When Stolypin was assassinated in 1911, it marked the end of Russia's chance for a peaceful transition to modernity.

## The March Revolution and Provisional Government

World War I served as the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back of the Romanov Dynasty. Russia did not fare well in the conflict, experiencing a lack of supplies, poor morale among troops, and numerous casualties. Once again, war had exposed Russia's economic and technological weakness in comparison with the western European powers. As political divisions deepened, Tsar Nicholas II in 1915 dissolved the Duma. Following failures at the front, Nicholas then took personal control of the troops, a task for which he was woefully unprepared. Many soldiers were sent into battle with inadequate clothing and weapons. Meanwhile, public opinion turned against the monarchy, as it became increasingly viewed as distant and corrupt. Discontent toward the royal family centered on the mysterious figure of Rasputin (1869-1916), a dissolute monk who exercised sway over the tsarina (tsar's wife) because of his supposed ability to cure her son, Alexis, of hemophilia. Nobles at the court decided to end Rasputin's corrupting influence by assassinating him in December 1916.

Only a crisis was needed to topple the tsarist regime. On March 8, 1917, International Women's Day, a food riot broke out over the high cost of bread in an event eerily similar to the women's march on Versailles during

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the French Revolution. Revolutionary agitators pushed the crowd toward a political insurrection. When nearby troops refused to fire on the crowd, the Romanov Dynasty collapsed like a house of cards. Two new governments came to the fore as the result of the March Revolution. First, the **Provisional Government** replaced the deposed tsar and was led by constitutional democrats and moderate socialists. Second, more radical groups founded councils of workers, sailors, and soldiers known as soviets, the most important of which was the Petrograd Soviet (the city of St. Petersburg had been changed to Petrograd because it sounded less German). The Petrograd Soviet played much the same role as the Paris Commune during the French Revolution, pushing the government further to the left.

The Provisional Government opted to continue the war effort and honor its treaty commitments. Meanwhile, peasants seized land from the gentry, and discipline among troops dissolved. The Petrograd Soviet aided the latter development by passing Army Order No.1, which provided for democratically elected committees to run the army, causing the breakdown of all discipline. In April 1917, the German army sent Lenin through their lines in a sealed train to Petrograd in the hope that he would further undermine the Provisional Government.

## The Bolshevik Revolution

### The Role of Lenin

V.I. Lenin (1870-1924) provided the intellectual and organizational energy behind the Russian Revolution. From an upper middle-class family, Lenin became radicalized when his brother was executed for indirect involvement in an assassination attempt against Tsar Alexander II. Unable to find work and arrested for his revolutionary affiliations, Lenin went into exile in Switzerland, where he joined the Social Democratic Party and urged a hard line against capitalism. Lenin's writings, such as the *April Theses* issued upon his arrival in 1917 in Russia, adapted Marxism to the experience of Russia. His contributions to socialist ideology include:

**Imperialism** – As noted in Chapter 12, Lenin incorporated the phenomenon of imperialism into Marx's critique of capitalism. Lenin claimed that imperialism represented the highest stage of capitalism's concentration of power into fewer and fewer hands and signaled an imminent crisis.

**Vanguard Party** – Lenin insisted, in contrast to the Mensheviks, that only a small group of professional revolutionary conspirators could operate successfully in Russia’s undemocratic political climate.

**“Weakest link in the chain”** – Orthodox Marxism held that the revolution would occur first in the most developed capitalist nation, such as Britain or Germany. Lenin countered that because capitalism operated as a worldwide system, revolutionaries should concentrate on the weakest link—Russia—enabling the spread of revolution to the other links.

**Telescoping** – Many Russian socialists cooperated with the Provisional Government, believing Russia unready to enter into a socialist phase of development before its complete industrialization. Lenin rejected this notion and claimed that the time was ripe for revolution. He further claimed that Russia’s rapid industrialization could occur under the dictatorship of the proletariat.

**Revolutionary tactics** – To stir the masses, Lenin and the Bolsheviks focused on simple slogans and uncompromising opposition to the Provisional Government. “Peace, bread, and land” and “power to the soviets!” indicated clearly the thrust of the Bolshevik message.

## **Bolshevik Consolidation of Power**

By November 1917, Lenin judged that the hour for action had arrived. Troops in Petrograd voted to support the Bolshevik-controlled soviets. The Bolsheviks easily seized key communication, transportation, and utilities, while the Provisional Government fled for lack of support. Lenin and the Bolsheviks timed their takeover to coincide with the Congress of Soviets, which elected Lenin the head of the Council of People’s Commissars, an executive body. Bolshevik leaders quickly moved to consolidate their power by confirming peasant seizures of land and worker control of factories. More importantly, the Bolsheviks in January 1918 disbanded the recently elected Constituent Assembly, which had produced majorities for the Social Revolutionaries and Mensheviks. This action plunged Russia into civil war. Claiming to speak on behalf (of) the proletariat, the Bolsheviks (now the Communist Party) proclaimed a dictatorship in their name.

## **The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk**

Now preoccupied with a civil war, Lenin desperately needed to end Russia’s involvement in the First World War. In March 1918, the Bolsheviks signed the harsh Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany. By the

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agreement, Russia recognized the independence of the Baltic provinces, Poland, and Ukraine. In the process, the Bolsheviks lost the most densely populated regions of their nation, important mineral resources, and some of Russia's best farmland. Bolshevik leaders gambled that Russia would regain these lands amid the inevitable socialist revolution accompanying the collapse of the war effort all around.

### **Russian Civil War, 1918-1922**

To fight the civil war, the Bolsheviks formed the Red Army. Led by the brilliant organizer and former head of the Petrograd Soviet, Leon Trotsky (1879-1940), the army faced a motley collection of former tsarists, Cadets, Mensheviks, and Social Revolutionaries known as the White Army. Organizing the war effort was accomplished through war communism. The Bolsheviks nationalized key industries, allowing workers to run factories but dealing harshly with peasants who hoarded grain and refused to surrender their crops and livestock for the Reds' worthless paper money. Bolshevik policies, exacerbated by economic problems, produced class warfare, especially between wealthy peasants on one side and landless laborers and urban dwellers on the other. Complicating the situation, Allied governments landed armies under American, Japanese, and Czech control to aid the Whites and bring Russia back into World War I.

Despite being outnumbered, the Bolsheviks were able to survive. Several factors account for this. First, the Bolsheviks were united in a common vision, in contrast with their enemies who could only agree that they hated the Bolsheviks. Second, intervention by foreign powers allowed the Bolsheviks to paint their opponents as traitors. Third, efforts by the White Army were hindered by exterior lines of communication, making it difficult for them to coordinate their attacks and allowing the Bolsheviks to travel on the inside of the circle they controlled to meet any incursion. Finally, the Bolsheviks simply exhibited a more ruthless willingness than their opponents to maintain their newly won power. Soon after their revolution, the Bolsheviks formed a secret police to infiltrate and eliminate centers of opposition.

Though the situation remained fluid, by 1922 the Bolsheviks had secured control of the nation. In fact, the Red Army recaptured some of the lands lost in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and from ethnic minorities that had declared independence since 1918. Once the Bolsheviks had secured power, they engaged in a Red Terror designed to eliminate class enemies. Under the

influence of the Cheka (security police), thousands of former bourgeoisie, gentry, and White Army collaborators were shot summarily without trial. The Bolsheviks determined not to repeat the mistakes of French revolutionaries who allowed supporters of the Old Regime to survive or escape. Estimates run to over 2 million for those killed by the Bolsheviks; no Russian after 1922 would openly call for a return to traditional or even antisocialist government.

## The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)

By 1922, the Bolsheviks felt secure enough in their power to create the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), also known as the Soviet Union. Eventually the new nation consisted of 15 such republics. It is important to remember that only about 50% of the citizens in this new USSR claimed Russian ethnicity and language. In that sense, the USSR acquired an international character. During the 1920s, many communists continued to hold out hope for the imminent overthrow of capitalism. To this purpose, the Bolsheviks in 1919 created the Third International of communist parties, or Comintern, to replace the Second International, which had divided over entry into the First World War. Supposedly an alliance of socialist parties, in actuality, the Comintern represented a Soviet effort to control the international communist movement.

### Party-State Structure

The political structure of the Soviet Union reflected a unique party-state dualism. For each function of government, there existed both a party and a state organ. Because the party acted as the driving force of the revolution and direct representative of the proletariat, it played the primary policymaking role. State organs essentially worked to carry out policies. Constitutions were created in 1924 and 1936 to outline the complex workings of a strongly centralized government. Elections featured only one party, the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union), and authority worked according to the principle of democratic centralism, a feature of Lenin's political philosophy. Elections and discussion flowed upward to the top, where decisions were made and adhered to by all party members. At the top of this centralized structure stood the Politburo (policy bureau) of a dozen individuals who dominated the decision-making process. Once Stalin came

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to power, the position of General Secretary (of the CPSU) took on an important role in maintaining strict discipline, selecting members to key positions, and enacting policy.

### The Nationalities Issue

For centuries, the Russian tsars had unsuccessfully attempted to Russify the 50 different ethnic groups of their empire, in which over a hundred languages were spoken. To address the nationalities issues, the Bolsheviks adopted a federal structure of government whereby the various republics, and less important autonomous regions, could theoretically secede. In fact, the dominance of the Communist Party, many of whose officials were appointed by Russian leaders of the CPSU, prevented any movement away from the Soviet Union's centralized structure. However, the minority issue never died, and under Mikhail Gorbachev's rule (1985-1991) once again came to the fore in the form of national independence movements, leading to the disintegration of the Soviet empire.

### The New Economic Policy (NEP)

As a result of the ravages of the First World War, civil war, and resulting famine, the Soviet economy stood at only a small fraction of its prewar productivity. To jump-start production, Lenin introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921, a strategic retreat from communism and compromise with capitalism. Under the NEP, peasants were allowed to sell their grain themselves, and middlemen in towns and cities began exchanging goods for profit. A new class of wealthy peasants, called kulaks, arose in the countryside, often resented by landless laborers. Though the NEP did help to revive production, the Soviet economy by 1928 had just returned to its prewar level. Moreover, the policy provoked a split in the Politburo between those who favored continuing the NEP and those who wished to move further toward communism.

### Social and Cultural Changes

The 1920s were a decade of experimentation in the Soviet Union. Legal changes provided women with a measure of equality—the vote in 1918, the right to divorce, and access to birth control and abortion. Such reforms did not always translate into immediate changes in the daily lives of women, especially as families struggled to rebuild after a disastrous decade of violence. One of the more prominent women involved in the building of a socialist society was Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952), appointed People's



Commissar for Social Welfare. Kollontai helped found Zhenotdel, a women's bureau designed to fight illiteracy and educate women about the new marriage laws. Sparking controversy, Kollontai argued that as a natural instinct, sexuality should be freed from oppressive traditions, which mainly harm women. As for children, the Soviet Union created the Communist Youth League, or Komsomol, to promote socialist values and promote membership in the CPSU.

Artists and intellectuals eagerly assisted in the government's efforts to promote literacy. The great filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein pioneered new techniques of portraying action and political themes. Soviet leaders sponsored Eisenstein's famous film about the revolution, *Potemkin* (1925), critically acclaimed by film critics for its innovations. Radical artists incorporated the style of futurist art with a socialist message. Eventually, Stalin ended this period of experimentation, enforcing a cultural orthodoxy of socialist realism in the arts, celebrating factories and tractors, and reversing many of the provisions regarding women's equality.

**• THEME MUSIC**

The Russian Revolution initially promoted women's rights (e.g., granting suffrage); however, the end of social experimentation after 1928 coincided with a harsher time for women. Take note of how revolution and total war in the first half of the 20th century altered attitudes and practices toward women and other social groups (IS), such as workers, peasants, and ethnic minorities (e.g., Jews).

**Stalin versus Trotsky**

Soon after the Russian Civil War, Lenin fell ill from a series of strokes. Behind the scenes, General Secretary Josef Stalin (1879-1953) and Leon Trotsky – a true intellectual force in socialism and the organizer of the Red Army – battled for control of the party. Trotsky condemned the NEP as a sell-out to capitalism, calling for “permanent revolution” and protesting the bureaucratization of the communist party. Stalin proved the more organized and ruthless. With his control of patronage in the CPSU and by wrapping himself in the mantle of Lenin, Stalin engineered Trotsky's dismissal from the party and then his exile. By 1928, Stalin had secured his absolute hold on power and moved to implement his plans to modernize the Soviet Union.

**Results of WWI and the Russian Revolution**

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It would be difficult to overestimate the combined impact of the First World War and Russian Revolution on European and world history. In 1914, Europe stood at its zenith of power. Less than a decade later, total war and revolution had altered that situation. First, violent and extreme forces liberated by the war and revolution would bear full fruit with the totalitarian movements of the 1920s and 1930s. Second, laissez-faire ideas regarding the economy were abandoned under pressure of the war effort, and the Versailles settlement laid the seeds for the Great Depression. Third, World War I and the Russian Revolution both radically altered diplomatic structures and destroyed the balance of power. Fourth, prewar cultural trends toward irrationality and alienation gained currency from a decade of upheaval and dominated ideas during the interwar period. Though the Treaty of Versailles attempted to remake a stable world order, the task proved too much given the extreme circumstances facing Europe in 1919. The 20th century achieved its violent birth amid the chaos of the First World War and Russian Revolution.