

Revolution

The war brought misery to everyone, at home and on the front lines. As the death toll mounted, angry citizens openly challenged the status quo. In Russia the discontent led to full-scale revolution.

Russian dissatisfaction with tsarist rule had been felt long before World War I. But the war proved a catastrophe for Russia, whose huge army had been ineffective, as had Nicholas II and his wife, Alexandra, who ruled while Nicholas was at the front. Led by resentful top government officials, disenchantment with the monarchy grew. With working-class mothers leading the way, tens of thousands marched through Petrograd protesting the war and the near-starvation that many Russians faced. The army refused to put down the protest. On March 15, 1917, Nicholas II abdicated.

A liberal provisional government was established but was challenged at the outset by councils of workers and soldiers, divided between two factions: the moderate Mensheviks and more radical Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, called for the complete destruction of the capitalist system.

During the summer of 1917, the provisional government decided to remain in the war, launching an offensive that failed significantly. The Bolsheviks seized power and made good on their earlier promises: land was given to the peasants, factories were turned over to the workers, and civil rights were accorded to women. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk ended Russia's involvement in the war.

AP Tip

The Russian Revolution is often paired with the French and American Revolutions in compare-and-contrast questions in the AP exam. Be sure you understand how the fear and distrust that grew out of the rivalry between Russia and the West emerged during this time period. These attitudes shaped much of twentieth-century history.

Success did not come easily for the Communists (as the Bolsheviks were soon called), as various groups challenged Soviet rule. This culminated in a bloody three-year civil war. Across Russia, the Red Army fought against fragmented anti-Communist forces unable to effectively unite (the White Army). Strongly united behind a common purpose that allowed for coherent military strategy, the Communist forces won.

The Communists also had success with a policy of “war communism” that allowed them to nationalize industry, control agricultural production, and centralize government. A secret police force, the Cheka, was called on to eliminate

all opposition. Thousands were executed, including the entire royal family.