
The Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

World War I precipitated a political crisis in Russia that had been building during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The last Romanov tsars clung to absolutism despite the growing number of dissidents in the country, and for many, the inability of Tsar Nicholas II to manage the war was the last straw. As the Germans threatened, the Russian army lacked food and essential equipment, and officers were unable to stop the large-scale mutiny of troops. Of all the countries involved in the war, Russia sustained the greatest number of casualties – 7.5 million by 1917. Fighting on the Eastern Front drove peasants into the Russian interior, where they remained as hungry, homeless, and diseased reminders of the catastrophic war efforts.

The Revolutions of 1917

In March 1917 (February in the rest of Europe) crowds of working women marched in the streets of Petrograd (St. Petersburg) protesting harsh living conditions. Looting began, and factory workers and other civilians joined them. Chaos descended as street riots broke out under pressure from a council of workers called a soviet. The tsar abdicated his throne when his army deserted him, leaving the government up for grabs. A provisional government briefly took control under the leadership of revolutionary leaders eager to institute parliamentary rule based on western liberalism. The most prominent of these leaders was Alexander Kerensky, who supported religious and other freedoms, but he resisted the major land redistribution expected by the peasants, and serious popular unrest continued even as the war effort faltered badly. Conflict emerged between the aristocratic and middle-class government officials and the workers councils (soviets) over just how conservative, liberal, or radical the government should be. Kerensky used his considerable oratory skills to arouse patriotism, but his wartime government faltered as he – like Tsar Nicholas II before him – lost control of the army, and soldiers became some of the biggest agitators for radical change.

In April, V. I. Lenin arrived from exile in Switzerland to lead his Bolsheviks in a second revolution that toppled the provisional government. His transportation home was provided by Germany, which hoped to further destabilize Russia, its war enemy. Upon his return to Petrograd, Lenin issued

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the April Theses, a radical document that called for Russia to withdraw from the war, and for the soviets to seize power on behalf of the proletariat. His aim was to topple the provisional government and replace it with Bolshevik rule. Using his interpretation of Marxism, the “vanguard of the revolution” forced its way to the top by dismantling other parties and declaring the victory of the proletariat. In November (October) 1917 he seized power, but in January 1918, elections for a legislative assembly failed to give the Bolsheviks a plurality. Lenin used troops to disrupt the assembly and take over the central government, and then he seized town and city administrations and closed local councils (*zemstvos*). True to Marxist doctrine, Lenin’s government abolished private property and relocated the capital to Moscow.

Examining the Evidence: The Outbreak of the Russian Revolution

The tsarist government of Russia collapsed after a revolution in March 1917, when a soviet of workers joined with a Duma committee to seek a provisional government. An important key to the tsar’s abdication was the failure of his army to oppose the dissidents, as documented in the accounts below. The French ambassador to Russia, Maurice Paleologue, described the dramatic scene when the army confronted the mob on the morning of March 12, 1917. “I heard a strange and prolonged din which seemed to come from the Alexander Bridge. I looked out; there was no one on the bridge which usually presents a busy scene. But almost immediately, a disorderly mob carrying red flags appeared at the end...on the right bank of the Neva [River] and a regiment came towards them from the opposite side. It looked as if there would be a violent collision, but on the contrary, the two bodies coalesced. The army was fraternizing with the revolution.” Later in the morning, Alfred Knox, a British general, heard “that the troops of the garrison had mutinied and were coming down the street. We went to the window... Craning our necks, we first saw two soldiers – a sort of advance guard – who strode along the middle of the street, pointing their rifles at loiterers to clear the road.... Then came a great disorderly mass of soldiery...led by a diminutive but immensely dignified student. All were armed and many had red flags fastened to their bayonets...”

The Creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Lenin's assertion of power resulted in a newly named "Union of Soviet Socialist Republics," but many elements inside and outside of Russia did not support his rule. Britain, France, the United States, and Japan all sent troops and supplies to defeat the communist threat, but their efforts to reinstate the provisional government failed. Internal resistance was even more serious, with aristocrats, army generals, faithful Russian Orthodox peasants, and many minority nationalities united in their efforts to unseat the new government. Lenin's decree to redistribute land to peasants and the nationalization (state takeover) of industry sparked major protests from land-owning peasants, creating even more opposition to the government. Civil war raged throughout the country from 1918 to 1921 before Lenin finally regained stability through the effective use of the Red Army, led by his second-in-command, Leon Trotsky. Lenin's willingness to promote army officers from humble backgrounds and his ability to make recruits believe in the brave new regime of communism helped him to control the dissidents. He also put in place a New Economic Policy, which promised small business owners and land-owning peasants the retention of their rights and freedoms, while the state set basic economic policies. The economy responded, and food production recovered from its precipitous fall during the civil war period. By 1923 Lenin's democratic centralism – centralized policy-making for the good of the people – was firmly in place, yet each of the "soviet socialist republics" was set up in recognition of different ethnic minorities within the country's borders. The central government was controlled by ethnic Russians, and despite a new constitution and the promise to respect human rights, competitive elections were prohibited, and the Communist Party established an authoritarian system under central party bureaucracy.