“The Russian Revolution (1917–1918)”

Overview

The Russian Revolution took place in 1917, during the final phase of World War I. It removed Russia from the war and brought about the transformation of the Russian Empire into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), replacing Russia’s traditional monarchy with the world’s first Communist state. The revolution happened in stages through two separate coups, one in February and one in October. The new government, led by Vladimir Lenin, would solidify its power only after three years of civil war, which ended in 1920.

Although the events of the Russian Revolution happened abruptly, the causes may be traced back nearly a century. Prior to the revolution, the Russian monarchy had become progressively weaker and increasingly aware of its own vulnerability (and therefore more reactionary). Nicholas II—the tsar who led Russia in the years leading up to the revolution—had personally witnessed revolutionary terrorists assassinate his grandfather and, subsequently, his own father respond to the assassination through brutal oppression of the Russian people. When Nicholas II himself became tsar in 1894, he used similarly severe measures to subdue resistance movements, which were becoming bolder and more widespread every year. As Nicholas’s newly imposed oppressions in turn incited still more unrest, he was forced to make concessions after each incident: it was in this manner that Russia’s first constitution was created, as was its first parliament. These concessions continued gradually until Nicholas II’s grip on power became very tenuous.

As Nicholas II grew weaker, Vladimir Lenin rose to prominence as the most powerful figure in Russia. Although this famous leader of the October Revolution was not even in Russia for the February Revolution—he had lived in self-imposed exile in Europe since 1900 and returned to Russia only in April 1917—he nonetheless exerted tremendous influence. Whatever history’s judgment of him, few other Russian revolutionaries possessed Lenin’s decisiveness and strength of vision for Russia’s future. Born in 1870 in the provincial town of Simbirsk as Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov, the young Lenin was profoundly affected by his older brother Alexander’s 1887 execution for being involved in a plot to assassinate the tsar. As a young adult, Vladimir joined the
resistance movement himself and took the pseudonym Lenin but swore that he would never engage in the sort of “adventurism” that had ended his brother’s life. Nevertheless, his actions would one day become very adventurous indeed.

The revolution that Lenin led marked one of the most radical turning points in Russia’s 1,300-year history: it affected economics, social structure, culture, international relations, industrial development, and most any other benchmark by which one might measure a revolution. Although the new government would prove to be at least as repressive as the one it replaced, the country’s new rulers were drawn largely from the intellectual and working classes rather than from the aristocracy—which meant a considerable change in direction for Russia.

The revolution opened the door for Russia to fully enter the industrial age. Prior to 1917, Russia was a mostly agrarian nation that had dabbled in industrial development only to a limited degree. By 1917, Russia’s European neighbors had embraced industrialization for more than half a century, making technological advancements such as widespread electrification, which Russia had yet to achieve. After the revolution, new urban–industrial regions appeared quickly in Russia and became increasingly important to the country’s development. The population was drawn to the cities in huge numbers. Education also took a major upswing, and illiteracy was almost entirely eradicated.

The Russian Revolution also had considerable international consequences. Lenin’s government immediately pulled Russia out of World War I, changing the balance of forces for the remaining participants. During the ensuing civil war in Russia, several nations, including the United States, sent troops to Russia in hopes of keeping the chaos from spreading beyond Russia’s boundaries. Over the next several decades, the Soviet Union actively sponsored and assisted Communist movements and revolutions around the world in an effort to broaden its sphere of influence. The country also played a fundamental role in the defeat of Nazi Germany during World War II.

Threatened by the possibility of revolutions in their own lands, the governments of many Western nations viewed Communism as a spreading threat and moved to isolate the Soviet Union as much as possible. Following
World War II and the advent of the nuclear age, a confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States took center stage. As this Cold War got under way, the two countries emerged as superpowers with much of the rest of the world falling in behind one or the other. A protracted nuclear arms race between the United States and Soviet Union would last until the USSR finally collapsed in 1991.

Summary of Events

The February Revolution

The Russian Revolution of 1917 centers around two primary events: the February Revolution and the October Revolution. The February Revolution, which removed Tsar Nicholas II from power, developed spontaneously out of a series of increasingly violent demonstrations and riots on the streets of Petrograd (present–day St. Petersburg), during a time when the tsar was away from the capital visiting troops on the World War I front.

Though the February Revolution was a popular uprising, it did not necessarily express the wishes of the majority of the Russian population, as the event was primarily limited to the city of Petrograd. However, most of those who took power after the February Revolution, in the provisional government (the temporary government that replaced the tsar) and in the Petrograd Soviet (an influential local council representing workers and soldiers in Petrograd), generally favored rule that was at least partially democratic.

The October Revolution

The October Revolution (also called the Bolshevik Revolution) overturned the interim provisional government and established the Soviet Union. The October Revolution was a much more deliberate event, orchestrated by a small group of people. The Bolsheviks, who led this coup, prepared their coup in only six months. They were generally viewed as an extremist group and had very little popular support when they began serious efforts in April 1917. By October, the Bolsheviks’ popular base was much larger; though still a minority within the country as a whole, they had built up a majority of support within Petrograd and other urban centers.
After October, the Bolsheviks realized that they could not maintain power in an election-based system without sharing power with other parties and compromising their principles. As a result, they formally abandoned the democratic process in January 1918 and declared themselves the representatives of a **dictatorship of the proletariat**. In response, the **Russian Civil War** broke out in the summer of that year and would last well into 1920.

**A Note on the Russian Calendar**

Until February 1918, Russia used the **Julian calendar**, while the Western world used the **Gregorian calendar** in use today. This convention was dictated by the Russian Orthodox Church, which continues to follow the Julian calendar to this day. During the twentieth century, the Julian calendar fell thirteen days behind the Gregorian calendar. Generally, historians writing about pre-revolutionary Russia today cite dates according to the calendar of the time; this book follows the same method. Dates prior to February 1, 1918 use the Julian calendar; dates after that point follow the Gregorian calendar.

**People**

**Vladimir Lenin (a.k.a. Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov)**

The founder of the **Bolshevik Party**, organizer of the **October Revolution**, and the first leader of the Soviet Union. Lenin spent most of the early twentieth century living in exile in Europe (primarily Britain and Switzerland). He was a devout follower of **Marxism** and believed that once a Communist revolution took place in Russia, Communism would spread rapidly around the world. Though not involved in the February Revolution, he returned to Russia in April 1917 and orchestrated the October Revolution that turned Russia into a Communist state.

**Nicholas II**

The last Russian tsar, who ruled from 1894 until 1917. Nicholas II, who assumed the throne with trepidation upon his father **Alexander III**’s death, was a clumsy and ineffective leader whose avoidance of direct involvement in government caused resentment among the Russian people and resulted in violence in 1905. Nicholas II abdicated on March 2, 1917, as a result of the
February Revolution. In July 1918, the Bolsheviks executed Nicholas along with his wife, Alexandra, and their children.

Grigory Rasputin

A Russian peasant and self-proclaimed mystic who gained significant influence over Tsar Nicholas II’s wife, Alexandra, in the years immediately prior to the revolutions of 1917. Rasputin’s sexual escapades in the Russian capital of Petrograd caused scandal, and the Russian people began to believe that the tsar himself was under Rasputin’s influence. Aware that Rasputin’s presence was damaging Nicholas II’s credibility, supporters of the tsar had Rasputin killed in late 1916.

Joseph Stalin (a.k.a. Joseph Dzhugashvili)

A Bolshevik leader who became prominent only after Lenin’s return to Petrograd in April 1917. Although Stalin was very much a secondary figure during the October Revolution, he did gain Lenin’s attention as a useful ally, and following the October coup, Lenin gave him a position in the government as commissar of nationalities. As Stalin was a member of an ethnic minority—he was from the central Asian region of Georgia, not Russia proper—Lenin felt he would be an effective ambassador of sorts to the many ethnic minorities within the former Russian Empire. After the revolution, Stalin became increasingly powerful and eventually succeeded Lenin as leader of the Soviet Union upon Lenin’s death in 1924.

Leon Trotsky (a.k.a. Leon Bronstein)

A Bolshevik leader and one of the most prominent figures of the October Revolution. Trotsky, who was in exile abroad during the February Revolution, returned to Russia in May 1917, closely aligned himself with Lenin, and joined the Bolshevik Party during the summer. Trotsky headed the Revolutionary Military Committee, which provided the military muscle for the October Revolution. After the revolution, he was appointed commissar of foreign affairs and led Russia’s negotiations with Germany and Austria for the armistice and subsequent peace treaty that made possible Russia’s exit from World War I.
Terms

April Theses

The ideas for Russia’s future that Vladimir Lenin expressed upon his return to Russia in April 1917. They were published in the newspaper Pravda on April 7. In short, Lenin called for the overthrow of the provisional government and its replacement with a communist form of government led by the working class. He believed that other countries would follow Russia’s example.

Bolsheviks

A radical political party, led by Vladimir Lenin, that split from the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party in 1903. The Bolshevik Party favored a closed party consisting of and run by professional revolutionaries and supported the idea of a dictatorship that would accelerate the transition to socialism. It placed an emphasis on the working class, from which it drew much of its support.

Cadets

A political group (an acronym for Constitutional Democrats) that wanted to see Russia established as a democratic republic governed by a constitution and an elected parliament. This stance put the Cadets at sharp odds with the Bolsheviks, who favored a dictatorship of the proletariat. The Cadets drew support primarily from professional workers and the bourgeois class.

Constituent Assembly

An elected body of representatives from around Russia, created in November 1917, that was meant to decide on the country’s governmental structure. When Nicholas II abdicated in February 1917, the provisional government that took power made plans for the formation of this Constituent Assembly in order to choose a more permanent government for Russia. After Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks took power in the October Revolution, they initially allowed elections for the assembly to go forward as scheduled but changed their minds after receiving less than 25 percent of the vote in those elections.

Dual Power
A term referring to the two governments that Russia had following the February Revolution—the **provisional government** and the **Petrograd Soviet**.

**Duma**

The Russian legislature from 1905–1917. The term, an ancient Russian word referring to small village councils that existed in early Russia, was resurrected when Tsar **Nicholas II** agreed to allow the formation of a legislature after the uprising of 1905. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the term has once more come into use, this time specifically referring to today’s lower house of the Russian parliament.

**Mensheviks**

A political group that, like the **Bolsheviks**, split from the **Russian Social Democratic Labor Party**. The Mensheviks, less radical than the Bolsheviks, supported the idea of a socialistic party that was open to all who wished to join and that would be ruled and organized in a democratic manner.

**Petrograd Soviet**

A body that existed prior to the February Revolution as a sort of underground revolutionary labor union for workers and soldiers in the Petrograd area, containing members of a number of different political parties. During the February Revolution, members of the Petrograd Soviet saw an opportunity and declared themselves to be the government of Russia. However, they quickly found themselves competing with the **provisional government**.

**Provisional Government**

A government that members of the **Duma** formed following the **February Revolution**. The provisional government was meant to be temporary and would rule Russia only until the **Constituent Assembly** decided on a permanent government later.

**Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP)**

A party that formed in 1898 and was among Russia’s earliest revolutionary movements, though by no means the first. In 1903, the RSDLP split into two factions, the **Mensheviks** and the **Bolsheviks**.
**Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs)**

A Russian political party during the revolutionary years that was more moderate than the **Bolsheviks** but less so than the **Mensheviks**. The SRs drew their support primarily from the peasantry and thus had a much larger base than the other parties in Russia. Before and during the **October Revolution**, the SRs were probably the Bolsheviks’ closest allies among Russia’s many political movements. After the revolution, however, the Bolsheviks abandoned the SRs after the SRs enjoyed a major victory over the Bolsheviks in the elections for the **Constituent Assembly**.

**Soviet**

A Russian word literally meaning “council.” In the early twentieth century, Soviets were governing bodies, similar to labor unions, that existed primarily on the local/municipal level and collectively made policy decisions for their respective regions. The idea of Soviets was popular among the various socialist parties of the time, including the Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, and Socialist Revolutionaries. When Tsar **Nicholas II** abdicated in early 1917, the powerful **Petrograd Soviet** wielded significant political power in Russia.

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