Russian Revolution

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The Russian Revolution stretched from February to October 1917 (Julian calendar), and it was one of the most significant events of the 20th century. The overthrow of the Czarist (i.e., imperial) regime in February and the chaos that followed set the stage for the Bolshevik uprising in October. The result was the creation of the world’s first communist state based on workers' and soldiers' councils (soviet), a geographically sizable state initially dedicated to Marx’s vision of social justice, and a society without classes and private property, which in theory would lead to full human emancipation. The creation of a communist state in a hostile capitalist world set the stage for later developments, especially the rise of anti-communist fascism in Europe during the 1920s and 1930s, the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941, the beginning of German genocidal warfare in World War II, and the U.S.-led Cold War against the Soviet Union from 1945 to 1991.

Russia in 1917 witnessed a two-stage revolution: the overthrow of the Czarist regime and formation of a liberal Provisional Government during the February Revolution and the overthrow of the Provisional Government by the Bolsheviks and Petrograd Workers’ and Soldiers’ Soviet in the October Revolution. The causes of these two revolutions are found in the deep structure of Russia’s economic, social, and political development in the first decades of the 20th century.

Russia’s economic problems stemmed from its structurally uneven economic development. The agricultural sector was inefficient and relied on outdated techniques that kept production stagnant. This was not a problem in itself, as long as population remained stable and mostly in the countryside, but farms and rural communes could not keep pace with the increased demand for food caused by urbanization. Even if enough food were available, the lack of a modern infrastructure of roads and railroads created problems in supplying growing administrative and industrial centers with food and raw materials. During World War I (1914–1918), deficient infrastructure became a massive problem, as general conscription removed skilled workers from railroads and food-processing industries and peasants from their farms, which only aggravated poor wartime harvests and created widespread famine. Factory workers had to endure terrible working conditions, including 12- to 14-hour days and low wages, as Russia’s industrial captains sought to catch up with Western European industry. Riots and strikes led by labor activists in the industrial centers of Moscow and St. Petersburg (the country’s capital) for better conditions and higher wages were frequent after 1900. Any wage increases were more than rescinded by the scarcities and inflation caused by the mobilization of economic resources for World War I. By 1916, declining real wages, scarcity of fuel, and starvation threatened Russia’s largest cities.

The social causes of the Russian Revolution had deep roots in centuries of the Czarist regime's oppression of the peasantry, its more recent oppression of working-class aspirations, and its inability to prosecute Russia’s wartime mobilization successfully. Rural peasants ceased to be serfs bound to the soil in 1861, but they had to make redemption payments to the state, something they resented deeply, and they wanted village or communal ownership of the land they worked. In the latter part of the 19th century, peasant disturbances and occasional revolts, often inspired and directed by young urban activists of the Social Revolutionary and Populist (narodnik) parties, lit up the countryside; the goal was to securing small-scale peasant land ownership from the extensive holdings of the state

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and from the large estates of aristocratic landowners. In the cities, rapid industrialization led to urban overcrowding, slums and unsafe working conditions for the Russian proletariat. In 2 decades (1890–1910), the populations of Moscow and St. Petersburg nearly doubled. The cities were unable to accommodate such growth: apartments were overcrowded, hygiene was nonexistent due to lack of running water or toilets, and disease and death were common. World War I only exacerbated the social problems. The vast demand for war supplies caused even longer hours and worsening working conditions, which resulted in many more labor riots and strikes during the war. Conscription pulled skilled workers from the cities, and their unskilled peasant replacements could not keep production flowing. When urban famine became unbearable, workers left the cities in droves to look for food, and industrial production fell even further. Soldiers were ill-equipped to fight, had incompetent officers, died by the tens of thousands in battle, and finally deserted toward the end of 1916 to return home angry, hungry, and wanting to settle accounts with Russia’s autocratic leaders.

Russian peasants, workers, and middle classes had additional reasons to be dissatisfied with the despotic Russian political system. These classes had no representation in the government; Czar (or Emperor) Nicholas II (1868–1918) was an absolute ruler accountable to no one, and he remained intellectually and emotionally detached from the nation’s problems. Dissatisfaction with Russian autocracy culminated in the 1905 Revolution after the Bloody Sunday (January 9) massacre, in which the Czar’s troops shot thousands of unarmed protestors as they approached the Winter Palace to petition him to help end their strike on terms favorable to the picketing workers. Popular anger at the massacre crippled the nation with strikes and insurrections led by activists from workers’ soviets who wanted to overthrow the autocracy and create a socially just and democratic state. To placate the populace, Nicholas promulgated an October Manifesto, which promised a representative parliamentary government (Duma). After the urban working-class radicals were defeated and civil order restored, the Czar felt safe enough in 1906 to weaken his promises of representative government with Article 47 of the Fundamental State Laws, which restricted voting rights. Even with a weakened franchise, the parliament proved too radical for the Czar, and as head of state, he dissolved the first two Dumas.

By the eve of World War I, the Czarist government’s failure to solve the country’s economic backwardness and the people’s physical suffering, along with their unfulfilled desire for democratic institutions as Russia industrialized and moved toward a capitalist economy, led Russians to a more revolutionary idea for achieving social justice: the overthrow of the Czarist regime. The pressure of World War I was the catalyst for undoing Russian autocracy. Though the Russian army enjoyed some initial successes against Austria-Hungary in 1914, it was no match for the German army which easily encircled and defeated the Russians at the Battle of Tannenberg in eastern Germany in late August 1914. As the war continued, Russia’s inadequacies in equipping and training soldiers, designing appropriate and reliable weapons, and replacing equipment losses speedily became more and more evident. Soldiers could not be supplied with food, shoes, munitions, or weapons due to Russia’s small and underdeveloped industrial base and poor infrastructure. By 1915, the Russian war effort was in danger of crumbling when Germany finally went on the offensive. German forces, with the efficient industrial might of Germany at their backs, their highly trained officer corps, machine guns, and heavy artillery, cut through the badly equipped, poorly trained Russian forces. Despite his complete lack of actual military experience, Nicholas no longer trusted the competence of his generals and insisted on taking direct command of the warfront in 1915, hoping that his semi-divine presence would inspire soldiers to fight more effectively. Despite her complete lack of political or
administrative experience, he left his wife, the Czarina Alexandra (1872–1918), in charge of the government. Such a decapitation of the political power center and the exposure of the Czar’s incapacities simply compounded Russia’s paralysis, and reports of corruption, dissolution, and incompetence in the Imperial government circulated widely.

Nicholas’s presence at the front did not change Russian or German strategy or the arithmetic of war. By the end of October 1916, around 1.7 million Russian soldiers had been killed, 2 million had become prisoners of war, and 1 million were missing. The army’s morale broken by the continuing string of military defeats, mutinies became common, and Russian soldiers refused to fight. The elites represented in the Duma warned Nicholas in November 1916 that disaster would befall the country unless a constitutional form of government, like the one he promised in 1905, was put in place. By this point, most of the Russian people were losing patience with the pace of change; constitutional questions were only important insofar as they bore on existential ones. Nicholas and his Romanov dynasty came to represent failed and inept policies and were the obvious targets for popular discontent. The overthrow of the Romanov dynasty and the popular seizure of power were on the horizon.

The February Revolution was the result of an acute economic and political crisis caused by an ossified political and economic system that was incapable of responding to the rigors of modern, industrialized warfare. The revolution, an unplanned event, was the outcome of years of strikes and street protests that had weakened the regime. When the people of the capital, Petrograd, staged huge rallies against the war and protested the massive food shortages in the city in February 1917, the demonstrations turned violent. Large numbers of city residents demanded change and clashed with police and soldiers. Reconstituted soviets called a general strike, the majority of soldiers garrisoned in Petrograd defected to the strikers, and the citizenry occupied the city’s most strategic places. Without the loyalty of his troops, people, and advisors and the legitimacy of his regime shattered, Nicholas abdicated, and the mighty Russian autocracy disintegrated overnight.

In a nearly bloodless transition of power, a provisional government was formed. Its members believed that their main task was to rule as an interim government until a constitutional convention could establish a new democratically based governmental system for Russia. By June 1917, the driving personality behind the provisional government was a social revolutionary (i.e., agrarian socialist) named Alexander Kerensky (1881–1970). He continued Russian participation in a war it could never win, refused to redistribute large estates to land-hungry peasants, could not supply the cities with food, and would not expropriate factory owners to permit workers’ control. Between February and October, Bolshevik activists worked to foment change through the Petrograd and Moscow soviets and other mass organizations. In his April Theses, N. Lenin (1870–1924), the leader of the Bolsheviks, opposed the government’s policies with the slogans “All Power to Soviets” and “Land, Bread, and Peace.” These catchphrases appealed to Russia’s peasantry, urban proletariat, and soldiers. “All Power to Soviets” was Lenin’s way of making grassroots participatory democratic organs the font of political power in Russia, rather than the Provisional Government, which was based on a Duma elected by restricted franchise under the old autocracy. Lenin recognized that there were two parallel systems of government operating (dual power) and encouraged Russian activists in the soviets to challenge and ultimately take state power away from the elite classes and put it in the hands of the urban and rural working classes for the benefit of the Russian people. “Land, Bread, and Peace” referred to specific Bolshevik proposals to end people’s suffering, exploitation,
and oppression: organize the distribution of land tied up in large aristocratic estates to the peasants who worked them (and were already seizing the land), give urban workers bread (food), establish workers' control in industry, and withdraw Russia from an imperialist war so soldiers could return home in peace. These proposals resonated deeply with the Russian people in mid-1917, and they hastened the political transformation of the soviets from institutions supporting liberal parliamentarianism into institutions promoting revolutionary socialism. In July, massive Bolshevik-inspired demonstrations that called for the overthrow of the Provisional Government were brutally suppressed by loyal army troops. Lenin and much of the Bolshevik leadership went into hiding. They recovered when an army under General Lavr Kornilov (1870–1918) moved to attack Petrograd, and Kerensky offered amnesty and arms to those who would defend the city. Bolsheviks recruited a militia of 25,000 to defend Petrograd and persuaded Kornilov's troops to desert and join the revolution. As a consequence, the Bolsheviks' prestige with the citizenry grew, and they and their allies in the military were well armed and in a stronger position than ever before.

In early October, after much internal debate, the Bolshevik Central Committee decided to seize control of the state apparatus by means of an insurrection directed against the Provisional Government and so end the situation of dual power. Leon Trotsky (1879–1940) and others made preparations for the uprising, however, a date was not set. Kerensky was also interested in ending the situation of dual power and moved against the Bolsheviks on October 22, ordering the arrest of their Military Revolutionary Committee, banning their press, and cutting the telephone lines to their headquarters at the Smolny Institute. The Bolshevik Central Committee decided to put its plan to overthrow the government into action on October 24. Bolshevik Red Guards occupied key locations in the city and surrounded the Winter Palace, where the Provisional Government had its headquarters. Sailors on warships in the harbor supported the Bolsheviks' land forces, and the Provisional Government collapsed. The uprising was a success, and Bolshevik-led forces were in control of Russia's capital by October 26. The Russian Revolution was over, but it took the Bolsheviks 3 more years and a bloody civil war to consolidate their power in the former Russian Empire.

See also
Bolsheviks; Lenin, V. I.; Marx, Karl; Marxist Theory; Trotsky, Leon

Further Readings