

# Revolutions in Russia

The Russian Revolution was like a firecracker with a very long fuse. The explosion came in 1917, yet the fuse had been burning for nearly a century. The cruel, oppressive rule of most 19th-century czars caused widespread social unrest for decades. Army officers revolted in 1825. Secret revolutionary groups plotted to overthrow the government. In 1881, revolutionaries angry over the slow pace of political change assassinated the reform-minded czar, Alexander II. Russia was heading toward a full-scale revolution.

## **Czars Resist Change**

In 1881, Alexander III succeeded his father, Alexander II, and halted all reforms in Russia. Like his grandfather Nicholas I, Alexander III clung to the principles of autocracy, a form of government in which he had total power. Anyone who questioned the absolute authority of the czar, worshiped outside the Russian Orthodox Church, or spoke a language other than Russian was labeled dangerous.

## **Czars Continue Autocratic Rule**

To wipe out revolutionaries, Alexander III used harsh measures. He imposed strict censorship codes on published materials and written documents, including private letters. His secret police carefully watched both secondary schools and universities. Teachers had to send detailed reports on every student. Political prisoners were sent to Siberia, a remote region of eastern Russia.

To establish a uniform Russian culture, Alexander III oppressed other national groups within Russia. He made Russian the official language of the empire and forbade the use of minority languages, such as Polish, in schools. Alexander made Jews the target of persecution. A wave of pogroms - organized violence against Jews - broke out in many parts of Russia. Police and soldiers stood by and watched Russian citizens loot and destroy Jewish homes, stores, and synagogues.

When Nicholas II became czar in 1894, he continued the tradition of Russian autocracy. Unfortunately, it blinded him to the changing conditions of his times.

## **Russia Industrializes**

Rapid industrialization changed the face of the Russian economy. The number of factories more than doubled between 1863 and 1900. Still, Russia lagged behind the industrial nations of western Europe. In the 1890s, Nicholas's most capable minister launched a program to move the country forward. To finance the buildup of Russian industries, the government sought foreign investors and raised taxes. These steps boosted the growth of heavy industry, particularly steel. By around 1900, Russia had become the world's fourth-ranking producer of steel. Only the United States, Germany, and Great Britain produced more steel.

With the help of British and French investors, work began on the world's longest continuous rail line - the Trans-Siberian Railway. Begun in 1891, the railway was not completed until 1916. It connected European Russia in the west with Russian ports on the Pacific Ocean in the east.

## **The Revolutionary Movement Grows**

Rapid industrialization stirred discontent among the people of Russia. The growth of factories brought new problems, such as grueling working conditions, miserably low wages, and child labor. The government outlawed trade unions. To try to improve their lives, workers unhappy with their low standard of living and lack of political power organized strikes.

As a result of all of these factors, several revolutionary movements began to grow and compete for power. A group that followed the views of Karl Marx successfully established a following in Russia. The Marxist revolutionaries believed that the industrial class of workers would overthrow the czar. These workers would then form "a dictatorship of the proletariat." This meant that the proletariat - the workers - would rule the country.

In 1903, Russian Marxists split into two groups over revolutionary tactics. The more moderate Mensheviks (MEHN•shuh•vihks) wanted a broad base of popular support for the revolution. The more radical Bolsheviks (BOHL•shuh•vihks) supported a small number of committed revolutionaries willing to sacrifice everything for change.

The major leader of the Bolsheviks was Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (ool•YAH•nuhf). He adopted the name of Lenin. He had an engaging personality and was an excellent organizer. He was also ruthless. These traits would ultimately help him gain command of the Bolsheviks. In the early 1900s, Lenin fled to western Europe to avoid arrest by the czarist regime. From there he maintained contact with other Bolsheviks. Lenin then waited until he could safely return to Russia.

### **V. I. Lenin 1870–1924**

In 1887, when he was 17, Lenin's brother, Alexander, was hanged for plotting to kill the czar. Legend has it that this event turned Lenin into a revolutionary.

Though Alexander's execution influenced Lenin, he already harbored ill feelings against the government. By the early 1900s, he planned to overthrow the czar. After the revolution in 1917, Russians revered him as the "Father of the Revolution."

Following Lenin's death in 1924, the government placed his tomb in Red Square in Moscow. His preserved body, encased in a bulletproof, glass-topped coffin, is still on display. Many Russians today, though, favor moving Lenin's corpse away from public view.

### **Crises at Home and Abroad**

The revolutionaries would not have to wait long to realize their visions. Between 1904 and 1917, Russia faced a series of crises. These events showed the czar's weakness and paved the way for revolution. The Russo-Japanese War In the late 1800s, Russia and Japan competed for control of Korea and Manchuria. The two nations signed a series of agreements over the territories, but Russia broke them. Japan retaliated by attacking the Russians at Port Arthur, Manchuria, in February 1904. News of repeated Russian losses sparked unrest at home and led to a revolt in the midst of the war.

### **Bloody Sunday: The Revolution of 1905**

On January 22, 1905, about 200,000 workers and their families approached the czar's Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. They carried a petition asking for better working conditions, more personal freedom, and an elected national legislature. Nicholas II's generals ordered soldiers to fire on the crowd. More than 1,000 were wounded and several hundred were killed. Russians quickly named the event "Bloody Sunday."

Bloody Sunday provoked a wave of strikes and violence that spread across the country. In October 1905, Nicholas reluctantly promised more freedom. He approved the creation of the Duma (doo•muh) - Russia's first parliament. The first Duma met in May 1906. Its leaders were moderates who wanted Russia to become a constitutional monarchy similar to Britain. But because he was hesitant to share his power, the czar dissolved the Duma after ten weeks.

### **World War I: The Final Blow**

In 1914, Nicholas II made the fateful decision to drag Russia into World War I. Russia was unprepared to handle the military and economic costs. Its weak generals and poorly equipped troops were no match for the German army. German machine guns mowed down advancing Russians by the thousands. Defeat followed defeat. Before a year had passed, more than 4 million Russian soldiers had been killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. As in the Russo-Japanese War, Russia's involvement in World War I revealed the weaknesses of czarist rule and military leadership.

In 1915, Nicholas moved his headquarters to the war front. From there, he hoped to rally his discouraged troops to victory. His wife, Czarina Alexandra, ran the government while he was away. She ignored the

czar's chief advisers. Instead, she fell under the influence of the mysterious Rasputin (ras•PYOO•tihh). A self-described "holy man," he claimed to have magical healing powers.

Nicholas and Alexandra's son, Alexis, suffered from hemophilia, a life-threatening disease. Rasputin seemed to ease the boy's symptoms. To show her gratitude, Alexandra allowed Rasputin to make key political decisions. He opposed reform measures and obtained powerful positions for his friends. In 1916, a group of nobles murdered Rasputin. They feared his increasing role in government affairs.

Meanwhile, on the war front Russian soldiers mutinied, deserted, or ignored orders. On the home front, food and fuel supplies were dwindling. Prices were wildly inflated. People from all classes were clamoring for change and an end to the war. Neither Nicholas nor Alexandra proved capable of tackling these enormous problems.

### **The March Revolution**

In March 1917, women textile workers in Petrograd led a citywide strike. In the next five days, riots flared up over shortages of bread and fuel. Nearly 200,000 workers swarmed the streets shouting, "Down with the autocracy!" and "Down with the war!" At first the soldiers obeyed orders to shoot the rioters but later sided with them.

### **The Czar Steps Down**

The local protest exploded into a general uprising - the March Revolution. It forced Czar Nicholas II to abdicate his throne. A year later revolutionaries executed Nicholas and his family. The three-century czarist rule of the Romanovs finally collapsed. The March Revolution succeeded in bringing down the czar. Yet it failed to set up a strong government to replace his regime.

Leaders of the Duma established a provisional government, or temporary government. Alexander Kerensky headed it. His decision to continue fighting in World War I cost him the support of both soldiers and civilians. As the war dragged on, conditions inside Russia worsened. Angry peasants demanded land. City workers grew more radical. Socialist revolutionaries, competing for power, formed soviets. Soviets were local councils consisting of workers, peasants, and soldiers. In many cities, the soviets had more influence than the provisional government.

### **Lenin Returns to Russia**

The Germans believed that Lenin and his Bolshevik supporters would stir unrest in Russia and hurt the Russian war effort against Germany. They arranged Lenin's return to Russia after many years of exile. Traveling in a sealed railway boxcar, Lenin reached Petrograd in April 1917.

### **The Bolshevik Revolution**

Lenin and the Bolsheviks soon gained control of the Petrograd soviet, as well as the soviets in other major Russian cities. By the fall of 1917, people in the cities were rallying to the call, "All power to the soviets." Lenin's slogan - "Peace, Land, and Bread" - gained widespread appeal. Lenin decided to take action.

### **The Provisional Government Topples**

In November 1917, without warning, armed factory workers stormed the Winter Palace in Petrograd. Calling themselves the Bolshevik Red Guards, they took over government offices and arrested the leaders of the provisional government. Kerensky and his colleagues disappeared almost as quickly as the czarist regime they had replaced.

### **Bolsheviks in Power**

Within days after the Bolshevik takeover, Lenin ordered that all farmland be distributed among the peasants. Lenin and the Bolsheviks gave control of factories to the workers. The Bolshevik government also signed a truce with Germany to stop all fighting and began peace talks.

In March 1918, Russia and Germany signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Russia surrendered a large part of its territory to Germany and its allies. The humiliating terms of this treaty triggered widespread anger

among many Russians. They objected to the Bolsheviks and their policies and to the murder of the royal family.

### **Civil War Rages in Russia**

The Bolsheviks now faced a new challenge - stamping out their enemies at home. Their opponents formed the White Army. The White Army was made up of very different groups. There were those groups who supported the return to rule by the czar, others who wanted democratic government, and even socialists who opposed Lenin's style of socialism. Only the desire to defeat the Bolsheviks united the White Army. The groups barely cooperated with each other. At one point there were three White Armies fighting against the Bolsheviks' Red Army.

The revolutionary leader, Leon Trotsky, expertly commanded the Bolshevik Red Army. From 1918 to 1920, civil war raged in Russia. Several Western nations, including the United States, sent military aid and forces to Russia to help the White Army. However, they were of little help.

Russia's civil war proved far more deadly than the earlier revolutions. Around 14 million Russians died in the three-year struggle and in the famine that followed. The destruction and loss of life from fighting, hunger, and a worldwide flu epidemic left Russia in chaos. In the end, the Red Army crushed all opposition. The victory showed that the Bolsheviks were able both to seize power and to maintain it.

### **Comparing World Revolutions**

In its immediate and long-term effects, the Russian Revolution was more like the French Revolution than the American Revolution. The American Revolution expanded English political ideas into a constitutional government that built on many existing structures. In contrast, both the French and Russian revolutions attempted to destroy existing social and political structures. Revolutionaries in France and Russia used violence and terror to control people. France became a constitutional monarchy for a time, but the Russian Revolution established a state-controlled society that lasted for decades.

### **Lenin Restores Order**

War and revolution destroyed the Russian economy. Trade was at a standstill. Industrial production dropped, and many skilled workers fled to other countries. Lenin turned to reviving the economy and restructuring the government.

**New Economic Policy** In March 1921, Lenin temporarily put aside his plan for a state-controlled economy. Instead, he resorted to a small-scale version of capitalism called the New Economic Policy (NEP). The reforms under the NEP allowed peasants to sell their surplus crops instead of turning them over to the government. The government kept control of major industries, banks, and means of communication, but it let some small factories, businesses, and farms operate under private ownership. The government also encouraged foreign investment.

Thanks partly to the new policies and to the peace that followed the civil war, the country slowly recovered. By 1928, Russia's farms and factories were producing as much as they had before World War I.

### **Political Reforms**

Bolshevik leaders saw nationalism as a threat to unity and party loyalty. To keep nationalism in check, Lenin organized Russia into several self-governing republics under the central government. In 1922, the country was named the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), in honor of the councils that helped launch the Bolshevik Revolution.

The Bolsheviks renamed their party the Communist Party. The name came from the writings of Karl Marx. He used the word communism to describe the classless society that would exist after workers had seized power. In 1924, the Communists created a constitution based on socialist and democratic principles. In reality, the Communist Party held all the power. Lenin had established a dictatorship of the Communist Party, not "a dictatorship of the proletariat," as Marx had promoted.

## **Stalin Becomes Dictator**

Lenin suffered a stroke in 1922. He survived, but the incident set in motion competition for heading up the Communist Party. Two of the most notable men were Leon Trotsky and Joseph Stalin. Stalin was cold, hard, and impersonal. During his early days as a Bolshevik, he changed his name to Stalin, which means “man of steel” in Russian. The name fit well.

Stalin began his ruthless climb to the head of the government between 1922 and 1927. In 1922, as general secretary of the Communist Party, he worked behind the scenes to move his supporters into positions of power. Lenin believed that Stalin was a dangerous man. Shortly before he died in 1924, Lenin wrote, “Comrade Stalin . . . has concentrated enormous power in his hands, and I am not sure that he always knows how to use that power with sufficient caution.” By 1928, Stalin was in total command of the Communist Party. Trotsky, forced into exile in 1929, was no longer a threat. Stalin now stood poised to wield absolute power as a dictator.

Answer the following questions on another sheet of paper:

Define/identify the significance of each of the following:

proletariat

Rasputin

Communist Party

Bolsheviks

provisional government

Joseph Stalin

Lenin

soviet

1. How did World War I help to bring about the Russian Revolution?
2. What groups made up the Red Army and the White Army?
3. Why did the Bolsheviks rename their party the Communist Party?