

Modern World History

Russian Revolution and Civil War

Like most revolutions, the Russian Revolution of 1917 had a combination of political and social causes. At the beginning of the 20th century, Russia was the last of the great powers to retain an autocratic system of government. Educated Russians, many of them influenced by liberal ideas from the West, resented the lack of civil and political rights under the Russian system and pressed for political change. Progress was made following the [1905 revolution](#); an elected parliament (the [duma](#)) was established, censorship was abolished, and political parties were finally legalized. Nevertheless, Czar [Nicholas II](#) continued to rule as an autocrat, dissolving the duma at will, and political and civil liberties remained circumscribed by the pervasive presence of the secret police. The absence of an effective forum for political participation, even after 1905, furthered the development of a radical intelligentsia determined to overthrow the autocratic regime. The intelligentsia became more, rather than less, radical after 1905, viewing the events of that year as an episode on the road to full-scale revolution.

In addition to political grievances, social and economic discontent helped pave the way for revolution. Russia was comparatively late to emerge from feudalism, serfdom having been abolished only in 1861. Peasants, who made up 80 percent of Russian society at the beginning of the 20th century, pressed for the redistribution of land from private landowners to the peasant communes. Rural overpopulation exacerbated peasant discontent, and the czarist regime was confronted with ongoing agrarian disturbances in the years leading up to 1917. Compared to the other great powers, Russia was also late to industrialize. Rapid industrialization beginning in the 1890s put tremendous strains on Russian society and produced a nascent working class with great revolutionary potential. Through political rallies and educational circles, the radical intelligentsia turned to the workers for support in fostering a socialist revolutionary program. The Social Democrats in particular preached that the industrial workers were the only truly revolutionary class. In reality, most workers were probably more interested in seeing their economic grievances (low wages, poor working conditions, etc.) redressed than in seeing the autocratic regime toppled. Nevertheless, since the authorities typically responded to strikes and demonstrations by sending in police and [Cossack](#) troops, economic issues were easily politicized.

The long-term social, economic, and political discontents that confronted Russian society in the early 20th century were exacerbated by Russia's involvement in [World War I](#). Crushing defeats at the hands of the German armies, together with the glaring inefficiency of a bureaucracy confronted with the demands of total war, discredited the czarist regime in the eyes of the Russian people. The czar's wife, Empress [Alexandra](#), was extremely unpopular due to her German origin and her association with [Rasputin](#), a peasant healer from Siberia who treated the heir to the throne for hemophilia. When Nicholas II left for the front to take control of the Russian armed forces, Rasputin gained considerable influence at court. False rumors about a romantic affair between the czarina and Rasputin contributed to the desacralization of the monarchy and the further erosion of czarist authority. Meanwhile, growing inflation and lengthening bread lines revitalized the workers' strike movement during the war and provided the spark that would ignite the February revolution.

The first phase of the 1917 revolution began on February 23 (International Women's Day), when women workers from Petrograd textile mills took to the streets demanding an end to the bread shortage. The strike quickly spread to nearby factories; by the following day more than 200,000 workers had gone on strike. On February 25 students and members of the middle classes joined the demonstrators, demanding an end both to the war and to the czarist government. By that point the workers' movement had developed into a general strike, paralyzing the normal functioning of the Russian capital. On February 26 armed troops, acting on orders from the government, fired on the demonstrators, killing hundreds. The massacre sparked a mutiny within the Petrograd garrison. Early on the morning of February 27, soldiers of the Volynskii regiment shot their commanding officer, then rushed to nearby regiments and persuaded soldiers there to revolt as well. Many soldiers joined the insurgents on the streets, while others simply disobeyed any further commands to fire on civilians. What began as two physically separate revolts—the soldiers' mutiny in the city center and the workers' demonstrations in the outlying districts—became joined by the afternoon of February 27 as insurrection spread to all parts of the city.

Members of the Duma (the Russian parliament) anxiously watched the street violence of late February from their meeting place at the Tauride Palace and debated how best to restore order. When Nicholas ordered the duma dissolved, Duma leaders decided to form a "Temporary Committee of the State Duma" to take over the reins of government in Petrograd. On the same evening in a

different room of the Tauride Palace, workers, soldiers, and socialist intellectuals met to form the Petrograd Soviet. Over the course of the next several days, the two bodies worked together to consolidate the revolution and establish a new government. The provisional government was formed on March 2; it was to govern until a constituent assembly based on universal elections could be convened.

With the exception of [Alexander Kerensky](#), a moderate socialist who sat on both the provisional government and the Soviet Executive Committee, the socialists initially declined to join the provisional government. The leaders of the Petrograd Soviet pledged to support the new government, however, as long as the government pursued policies of which the Soviet approved. This decision ushered in an era of "dual authority" characterized by tense and often uneasy cooperation between the Soviet and the provisional government.

Spread of Revolution

Meanwhile, the revolution spread quickly and with relatively little bloodshed (there were exceptions such as Tver, where considerable violence occurred) to the provincial cities and then to the countryside. On March 2 the military high command convinced Nicholas II to abdicate in favor of his brother Michael. (The czar initially decided to abdicate in favor of his son Alexis but changed his mind due in part to his son's poor health.) When Grand Prince Michael refused the crown on March 3, the three-centuries-old [Romanov dynasty](#), and with it Russia's monarchical system of government, came to an end.

The extreme optimism that accompanied the February revolution began to fade after several weeks as the provisional government dragged its feet on the urgent issues of land reform, peace, and elections to the constituent assembly. Returning to Russia on April 3 after almost 16 years of exile, [Bolshevik](#) leader [Vladimir Lenin](#) issued the [April Theses](#), in which he outlined his plan for the course of the revolution. Among other things, Lenin called for the overthrow of the provisional government and its replacement by a socialist government based on that of the Soviets. He also rejected cooperation with nonsocialist political groups, demanded an immediate end to the war, and called for radical social and economic reforms. In mid-April the provisional government faced a political crisis when Foreign Minister Paul Miliukov's controversial policy of continuing the war to victory, rather than seeking a negotiated peace, led to massive street demonstrations and violence. In the wake of the April Crisis, the government was reorganized; several leaders from the Petrograd Soviet were brought in to form the first coalition government of moderate socialists and nonsocialists. The Bolsheviks, under Lenin's leadership, continued to remain aloof from the provisional government.

Throughout the summer of 1917, food shortages and continued economic hardship contributed to growing disillusionment with the provisional government. Discontent over Russia's involvement in the war continued to increase, particularly after the government launched an unsuccessful military offensive in June. The summer months were characterized by almost continuous government instability. Workers and garrison soldiers once again took to the streets during the July Days (July 3–5), demanding that all governmental power be passed to the Soviets. The demonstrations were suppressed on July 5, and Bolshevik leaders were forced into hiding. In the aftermath of the July Days, a second coalition was formed, with Kerensky as prime minister. That government collapsed as well after suspicions of an attempted coup in late August (the Kornilov Affair) seemed to confirm fears of a counterrevolutionary movement. The threat of counterrevolution, coupled with popular disillusionment over the provisional government's failure to end the war and enact promised reforms, increased the popularity of the radical left and paved the way for the October Revolution.

In the fall of 1917, with a political climate favorable to the radical left, Bolshevik leaders debated how and when to take over the government. Lenin favored an immediate insurrection, while more moderate Bolsheviks preferred to wait for the second Congress of the Soviets when, they believed, power would pass to the Soviets by democratic means. The question resolved itself on the morning of October 24, when Kerensky shut down the leading Bolshevik newspapers in an effort to suppress the radical left. The Bolsheviks could then move forward with plans to overthrow the government, justifying their seizure of power as a necessary step to defend the revolution. Unlike the February revolution, the October Revolution was not characterized by massive street demonstrations. Instead, small groups of soldiers and Red Guards took control of bridges, railway stations, and other strategic points throughout Petrograd. Unable to summon troops to resist the insurgents, Kerensky fled. On the afternoon of October 25, Lenin announced that the provisional government had been overthrown. Significantly, the insurrection was carried out in the name of the Petrograd Soviet and not the Bolshevik Party. However, Menshevik and Social Revolutionary delegates walked out of the Congress of Soviets on the night of October 25 to protest the insurrection, leaving the Bolsheviks with a majority in the congress. The following day Lenin announced decrees on peace and land and the formation of an all-Bolshevik government, the Council of People's Commissars (or Sovnarkom).

Once in power, the Bolsheviks decided to go forward with elections to the constituent assembly in mid-November. The Socialist Revolutionaries were the clear winners in the election, gaining 40 percent of the popular vote against the Bolsheviks' 25 percent (the remainder of the votes were divided among the Constitutional Democrats [Kadets], the [Mensheviks](#), and non-Russian nationality candidates). Recognizing that its hold on power was precarious, the Bolshevik government took steps to consolidate its authority and quash any resistance.

After ordering the arrest of leading Kadets in late November, the government established the All-Russia Extraordinary Commission for the Struggle with Counterrevolution and Sabotage (or Cheka) on December 7. The [Cheka](#), which could arrest and execute without trial anyone suspected of counterrevolutionary activities, quickly became one of the most powerful organs of the state. The constituent assembly opened as planned on January 5, 1918, but the Bolshevik government forcibly dispersed the assembly after only one day. By circumventing the democratic process and choosing instead to rule by force, the Bolsheviks laid the foundation for the authoritarian dictatorship that would follow. The decision to suppress the constituent assembly also opened the door to civil war.

The [Russian Civil War](#) was a complex affair that is perhaps best seen as two or even three distinct civil wars occurring between 1918 and 1922. The first serious challenge the Bolsheviks faced came from the Komuch, a group of Right Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) who opposed the [Treaty of Brest-Litovsk](#) and sought to restore the constituent assembly. In June 1918 with the aid of insurgent Czechoslovak legions, the Right SRs set up a regional government for the Volga based on the platform of the Socialist Revolutionary Party.

The conflict between the Bolsheviks and the so-called "patriotic socialists" was upstaged by the decision of the "Whites" (Russian nationalist officers, supported by industrialists and former landowners) to stage a coup in Omsk in November 1918. Despite Allied intervention on behalf of the White forces, the Bolsheviks' Red Army was able to suppress the attempted counterrevolution, but only after two years of bloody conflict. After the final defeat of the Whites in the autumn of 1920, the focus of fighting shifted to widespread peasant insurrections, collectively referred to as the Green movement.

Many of the peasant guerrilla leaders had been allied with the Red Army in defeating the White forces; once the threat of a White victory (which would have meant the return of the landlords) disappeared, however, peasant revolts against Bolshevik policies—most notably the forced requisitioning of grain—erupted across Russia on a massive scale. It took a combination of concessions and brutal repression to quell the peasant revolts and finally end the civil war.

Throughout the civil war years Lenin and the Bolsheviks employed ruthless measures to eradicate any political opposition, thus creating the first one-party state and providing a model for later totalitarian regimes. Upon Lenin's death in January 1924, [Joseph Stalin](#) succeeded him (after considerable party infighting) as leader of the [Communist Party](#).

Further Information

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