

The Russian Revolution and the Consolidation of the Soviet Union

The Crisis of Tsarist Russia and the First World War*

In the course of the 19th century, Russia experienced several revolutionary disturbances. Although the authoritarian regime managed to cope with the continuing unrest in its vast empire, Tsar Nicholas II* faced recurring problems in the early 1900s.

At first, the industrial development in Russia lagged behind the other European great powers, but industrialization progressed rapidly after 1890. Up to that point, Russia could be regarded as an entirely agrarian society. However, around the turn of the century, industrialization in Russia was in full swing. The growing number of factories created an industrial working class, especially in the cities, and socialist parties were founded. Due to the repressive Russian government, these parties were soon forced to go underground and become revolutionary. Many people in Russia – not only socialists – were dissatisfied with the authoritarian government. The growing opposition to the tsarist regime eventually exploded into a revolution in 1905.

In 1904-1905, Russia was surprisingly defeated in the war against Japan which encouraged anti-government groups to rebel openly against the tsarist regime. The tsar's government finally had to give in after a general strike in October 1905. Nicholas II agreed to create a parliament, the Duma*, and granted new civil liberties. Yet, the effect of the tsarist reform was disappointing. The new parliament had little power, and the tsar did not trust the Duma – in fact, he remained an almost absolute ruler.

The political discontent went hand in hand with severe economic problems in Russia. In spite of industrial progress, Russia remained a backward country. In 1914, the working class represented only 1.5 per cent of Russia's population. The vast majority of the Russians, the peasants, lived in poverty due to debt, taxes, and rent.

After the outbreak of World War I, Russia's weaknesses became evident. The tsar's empire was unable to cope with the challenges. The country lacked modern infrastructure, and its industry could not at all meet the army's demand for equipment and supply. In addition to that, the Ottoman Empire's alliance with the Central Powers* cut Russia off from foreign supplies.

From the beginning, the course of the war was extremely disappointing for Russia. The Western Allies had counted on the great masses of the Russian army, but the troops soon turned out to be poorly equipped and badly led. The Russian government and authorities were inefficient, corrupt, and proved to be completely unable to cope with the problems of modern warfare. Nevertheless, Russian troops did their duty for three years, more than 2 million Russians were killed during that period, another 5 million were wounded or crippled, and more than 2 million were taken prisoner.

In early 1917, the Russians were exhausted and discouraged because of the casualties they had suffered. The people blamed the government for their misery and had lost all faith in Tsar Nicholas II. As a result, demonstrations and strikes erupted in Petrograd, and the tsar reacted by ordering troops to quell the demonstrations. He dissolved the Duma and relied on the military to enforce his will. However, the troops refused obedience to the tsar and joined the demonstrators. The Duma showed its

disobedience by refusing to dissolve itself. In March 1917, Nicholas II realized that he had lost all power to rule the country and abdicated.

Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolution

After the tsar's abdication, a provisional government was established. This liberal government was supposed to ensure law and order in Russia until a constitutional assembly could be elected to choose a permanent system of government. The revolutionary socialists were not at all interested in a stable liberal government. They represented a major force that strove for a fundamental change of Russian society.

The socialists' stronghold was Petrograd, where they formed a council, the Petrograd Soviet* of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. However, the socialist movement in Russia was anything but united. It consisted of two rivalling groups, the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks. The Mensheviks were moderate socialists who made up the majority of the Soviet's deputies. The Bolsheviks, on the other hand, were only a small faction, but they were radical socialists.

The socialists soon established more Soviets along the lines of that in Petrograd. Since the military and economic situation of Russia did not improve after the tsar's abdication, many people throughout Russia did not trust the liberal provisional government. So they supported the more attractive socialist programme which called for immediate peace, land reform, and the turning over of factories to the workers.

The leader of the Bolsheviks was Lenin* whose real name was Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov. Lenin came from a middle class family, was intelligent and determined, and had studied law. He was a radical socialist who became a revolutionary after his brother had been executed by the tsarist police as a revolutionary, so he was forced to live in exile in Switzerland. In April 1917, Lenin returned from Switzerland to Russia, assisted by the German government, which was interested in destabilizing Russia in order to win the war. In the so-called *April Theses*, Lenin demanded that all governing power had to be turned over to the Soviets.

Lenin was a radical socialist, but he was a pragmatist as well. He knew that, according to Marxism, the forces of history would first pave the way for a socialist revolution in the most industrialized countries, i. e. in those societies with the highest ratio of workers. If Karl Marx's theory was right, socialist revolutions were inevitable, but they would break out in highly industrialized countries first, such as in Great Britain, France, or Germany. Since Russia, in 1917, had comparatively little industry and a small working class, Lenin had to modify Marx's theory and adapt it to Russian circumstances. Therefore, he was in favour of creating a small group of dedicated Marxists that were supposed to train the workers and turn them into a revolutionary force. Thus, Lenin's adaption of Marxism laid the foundation of Russian communism which did not have much in common with what Karl Marx had originally intended: it relied on a small communist party elite rather than on the broad masses of the working class. However, Lenin's slogan, "Land, Peace, and Bread," made many people his followers and filled the masses with enthusiasm.

By November 1917, eight months after the tsar's abdication, the situation in Russia had not improved and the people had lost the faith in the liberal provisional government. On 7 November, the Bolsheviks seized the opportunity, overthrew the provisional government in a coup d'état, and took control of Russia. In 1918, the Bolsheviks changed their name to the Communist Party.

As far as foreign policy is concerned, one of the first measures taken by the Communists was to keep their promise of making peace immediately. Therefore, early in 1918, they signed the peace treaty of Brest-Litovsk with the Central Powers. The peace conditions imposed on the new Russian government were extremely harsh, and the Communists had to give up a large amount of Russian territory.

Nevertheless, the new rulers in Russia were willing to sign the peace treaty since they had to turn their full attention to internal affairs. It was not too difficult for the Communists to take control of Petrograd and the industrial regions, but Russia was a vast country, and the Communists were opposed by powerful groups: aristocrats, the middle-class, and the Mensheviks. A civil war broke out in early 1918, but the opposition to Communism was anything but united.

The civil war was fought between the Reds, i. e. the forces of the new government, and the Whites, i. e. those who opposed Communism. The war lasted nearly three years, devastated the country even more, and a famine claimed as many as five million lives. The Western Allies supported the Whites with arms and money because they were upset about the new Russian government signing a separate peace treaty with the Central Powers. In addition to that, the West also feared that if Communism was established in Russia, the revolution would spread and become a global threat to the Western democracies. This aid prolonged the civil war, but it could not change the result. By 1921, the White forces had been completely defeated by the Communists.

The Consolidation of Communist Power and the Rise of Stalin

Lenin and the Communists reorganized the Russian political system immediately after their seizure of power. Lenin made himself head of the *Council of People's Commissars*, which can be regarded as the cabinet. A legislative body, the *National Congress*, was created, which officially had supreme authority, but in fact, the power was in the hands of the People's Commissars. Moscow replaced Petrograd as the capital of Russia, and, in 1922, the country was given a new name: the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The Russian people from now on were called the Soviet people.

During the years of the civil war, i. e. from 1918 to 1921, the Soviet leaders adopted the policy of *War Communism* in order to cope with the most urgent problems. The Russian industries were nationalized, but this measure did not result in any improvement of the situation. In 1921, the economy collapsed and Lenin reacted to the crisis by establishing the *New Economic Policy* (NEP) which allowed individuals to buy, sell, and trade farm products. However, the major industries remained under government control. Only smaller businesses could be run privately.

Lenin's main problem was the question of how to feed the masses since the dispossession of the wealthy landlords had made agriculture inefficient. In order to increase productivity, the Soviet government established collective farms on which peasants could work together as a community and share the rare modern machinery. This measure did in fact improve the general agrarian crisis, but still the great majority of farmers preferred their own small strips of land and adhered to the traditional methods of farming.

Although there were numerous problems to face for the young Soviet Union, there was no doubt about Lenin being the main leader of the whole Communist movement in Russia. When he died in 1924, however, a power struggle broke out within the Communist Party. The two main rivals were Leon Trotsky and Joseph Stalin. Trotsky was a very intelligent man and an extremely talented organ-

izer. He had created the Red Army* and thereby ensured the Bolshevik revolution to prevail. Stalin was the leader of the Communist Party, i. e. its secretary general.

The two opponents' quarrel was not only a struggle for power; it was also an issue which affected the future of the revolution. Whereas Trotsky believed that the revolution could only be successful in the long run if it took place all over the world, Stalin advocated a socialism which was – for the time being – confined to one country only, i. e. the USSR. It was Stalin's firm belief that the revolution would spread over the whole world more easily once socialism was successful in the Soviet Union. After a long and bitter struggle, Stalin prevailed over Trotsky and, by 1928, was the undisputed leader of the Soviet Union. He had succeeded in eliminating all the Bolshevik leaders of the revolutionary era, and Leon Trotsky was later murdered in Mexico where he lived in exile, presumably at Stalin's command.

The Soviet Union under Stalin (1928–1939)

Having seized total control over the state, Stalin made significant changes in the economic policy of the Soviet Union. In 1928, he ended the NEP and introduced a command economy* by launching his first five-year-plan. It was a plan for economic growth which set industrial, agricultural, and social goals for the next five years. Stalin's ambitious aim was to transform the USSR from an agricultural country into an industrialized state. The industrial output focussed on armaments and heavy industry, but the growth in these sectors occurred at the expense of those industries producing consumer goods. So Stalin hoped that collective farming would produce enough food to meet the needs of the Soviet people. He believed collectivization of agriculture could even create a surplus for export which would provide the Soviet economy with the capital needed for industrial growth. As a result, private farms were eliminated and millions of peasants were forced into collective farms*. The wealthier farmers who tried to maintain their independence had to fear imprisonment or even execution. By 1934, the USSR's 26 million family farms had vanished and had been reorganized into 250,000 collective units.

The first five-year-plan stretched the resources of the Soviet Union to the limit and demanded a great deal from the Soviet people, but it succeeded in most industries. In 1933, Stalin's second five-year-plan started. Again, the focus was on a production increase in heavy industries. The Soviet people had to work very hard and made many sacrifices to meet the ambitious goals of the Communist leadership. However, the increase in heavy industries made consumer goods become even scarcer and the population had to face higher prices.

In the course of the 1920s and 1930s, it became evident that it was not as easy to establish a classless society as the revolutionaries of 1917 had expected. The Soviet leaders admitted that it would take some time to achieve this great aim. As a result, the government came to the conclusion that the Communist Party would rule in the meantime. The people of the Soviet Union had to be brought into line with the policy of the Communist Party. If they refused, they had to face repression.

The Orthodox Church was regarded as a major threat by the Communists. The church was expropriated, and the children were taught atheism. Cultural life was also made conform to the party line with the help of control and censorship: writers, artists, and musicians were only allowed to produce works that were in accordance with Communist ideology.

In 1936, Stalin proclaimed a new constitution for the Soviet Union. It appeared to be more democratic at first sight. Voting by secret ballot was introduced, and the members of the various Soviets

were to be elected directly by the local districts. The member republics in the USSR were officially granted complete autonomy. However, the Communist Party was the only organization allowed to engage in politics. It named the candidates, made all the policies, and was in charge of all electoral promotion and propaganda. Opposition to the party's official candidates and programme was considered
5 disloyal and immediately crushed by the state police, both secret and regular.

The almighty Communist Party was organized in an authoritarian way. All decisions were made by the *Politburo*, a committee consisting of 16 men that was only responsible to the secretariat of the party. The Politburo's decisions were transmitted like orders down through the chain of command to local cells. However, the real centre of power in the political system of the Soviet Union was the sec-
10 retariat of the Communist Party. Thus, the general secretary of the party had dictatorial power over the whole Soviet Union. Party members were carefully selected and trained and were expected to show obedience to superiors.

As general secretary of the Communist Party, Stalin controlled the Politburo and thereby the whole country. Having established a totalitarian* dictatorship, Stalin's style of government grew
15 harsher. In the middle of the 1930s, he started the so-called Great Purges*. They were triggered off by the assassination of a high party official. Arrests, trials, imprisonments, and execution followed. Finally, almost all the original Bolshevik leaders were removed from the party, as were most of the high-ranking officers of the Red Army. In 1939, by the end of the Great Purges, millions of people had been arrested or executed. As a result, the government, the Communist Party, and the Red Army now
20 consisted of new, generally younger staff, all completely obedient to Stalin. With the Great Purges Stalin consolidated his power and eliminated any kind of potential resistance to his position.

Jochen Marx