

The Russian Revolution

The Russian Revolution was one of the most cataclysmic events in the 20th century. Rather than being a single event, however, it generally refers to two revolutions: the February Revolution, in which the Russian monarchy was toppled, and the October Revolution, in which the Bolsheviks, a group of Communists, seized power. In between February and October¹ Russia had four provisional governments and tried to continue the disastrous war with Germany. This reading will introduce you to imperial Russia, propose some long- and short-term causes of the revolution, and examine the events of the revolution itself.

Russian Society

The Russian Empire was ruled by an autocrat called the Tsar, who ruled by divine right. Russia had neither a parliament nor (legal) political parties until 1905. The aristocracy, which made up 1.5% of the population, ran the country. As prominent landowners they were also important members of government and society. Roughly half of the Russian aristocracy served in the army, usually as senior officers or as civil servants.

Russia was mainly a country of peasants, who formed 80% of the Russian populace in the 19th century. The peasantry was generally administered through “peasant communes,” which were a peculiar Russian institution. The communes were a type of self-administering body based largely upon custom. The lord usually gave most of his land to the peasants, though he would retain a portion for his own use. The commune rented the land from the landlord and distributed it equally among the people. (The landlord had more success dealing with one representative instead of numerous individuals.) The land was distributed according to the size of each family; each year it was redistributed to reflect changes in population. The peasants were thus roughly equal in economic terms, though of course those who worked harder were a little better off.

Because Russian industry was small, factory workers composed only a small portion of the total population until the end of the 19th century. In the late 19th century, massive government sponsorships attracted a number of (mostly French) foreign investors. Under their guidance, Russia began to industrialize. Productivity grew exponentially, as did the size of the working class, as the peasants sold off their land. Russia started to build its railway network, including the Trans-Siberian Railway, which is still the longest railway line in the world.

Industrialization usually produces long-term benefits for society, but it imposes strains in the short term. Russia’s growth began later than its European peers, and thus took place very quickly in an effort to catch up. Russia’s rapid industrialization rested on the achievements of urban workers who toiled for long hours in terrible conditions. Unlike in other European countries, however, trade unions and strikes were completely

¹ The Russian Empire used the Julian calendar, which is slightly behind the Gregorian calendar that is used in the West. According to the Gregorian calendar, the events of the Russian Revolution occurred in March and November.

prohibited, so the workers had no means of improving their situation. Elites in most European countries had accepted the existence and basic demands of some trade unions; this is generally understood to have staved off revolution. Though Russia had been industrializing for years when the Great War began, most Europeans still considered its social and economic structures to be backward. While all European societies had a high degree of income inequality in the early 1900s, most Russians were particularly poor; in 1913 the average American was eight times richer than the average Russian. Most Russian peasants, moreover, still did not own their land. Because most Russians lived in fairly oppressive conditions, then, a revolution began to appear to many as the best way to improve their lives.

The Russian working class was particularly volatile because of the strains of industrialization. However, their volatility was always specific: they were generally concerned with their own situation, not the living standards of others, and would rather advance in the system rather than changing it entirely. Furthermore, their leaders were rarely educated enough to lead them into a revolution.

Intellectuals are rarely revolutionary – they generally like democratic, meritocratic societies in which they can apply themselves – but because few opportunities existed for them under the archaic imperial regime, which favored the aristocracy, Russian intellectuals were an exception. Many Russian intellectuals turned into revolutionaries, but their goals were modest: a universally elected Parliament and democratic freedoms. Generally, though, they just wanted to get rid of the regime; they had no concrete plans for the future.

Marxism and Russia

Karl Marx was a German-Jewish philosopher and economist and the father of scientific communism. (Marx's understanding of communism was "scientific" in the sense that his theories were supposed to be held to an empirical standard.) Fredrick Engels, who is often mentioned alongside Marx – and funded Marx's writings – was the son of a rich German factory owner. The major Marxist work is *Das Capital*, but it was quite complicated and most people had trouble understanding it. Marx then wrote the *Communist Manifesto* to reach out to a more popular audience. The general theme of both works is that private ownership of the means of production – i.e., lands, factories, etc. – is the major evil of capitalism. According to Marx, capitalism is the fourth stage of historical development, and will eventually be replaced by socialism, a lesser form of communism in which all the classes work together for the betterment of society.

According to Marxist theory, class divisions will disappear over time once socialism is introduced. (The means of this introduction are debated; Marx argued that capitalist authorities must be overthrown in a violent revolution; democratic socialists demurred, believing that voters should elect socialist representatives.) The state, which is a tool of coercion that the upper classes use, will "wither away"; there will be no need for the army, police, jails, or borders. Once all the classes are erased, a society will have reached the communist ideal; this was the standard that Marx created.

In a communist society, private ownership of the means of production is replaced by common ownership. The means of production are owned communally, and the

profits are distributed to people according to their needs. The theory states that workers will work harder when it is for the benefit of their community, rather than for the benefit of a rich industrialist.

When Russia attempted to impose communism, it did not work out the way Marx predicted, partly because many of his basic assumptions were incorrect. Even so, the theory was so logical that Russian Communists remained extremely dogmatic.

The main socialist party in Russia was the Social Democratic Labor Party, which was established in 1898. The party split at its second Party Congress in 1903, with the most popular group forming the Bolshevik (Majority) Party, and the second most popular group forming the Mensheviks (Minority). In reality, the two factions were almost equal in membership.

Marx claimed to only represent workers because they were the true revolutionary class. A revolution could only occur under two conditions, though: a country had to have a well-developed capitalist society with a large working class, and the proletariat had to develop a revolutionary consciousness and produce leaders from within its own ranks. Russia, according to Marxist theory, was not a likely candidate for a socialist or communist revolution. Russian capitalism was in an embryonic state, and the working class was still very small. The Bolsheviks, however, did not want to give up the dream of a workers' paradise. They recognized that the working class was still small and that it had not developed a revolutionary consciousness, but believed that it was time for a revolution. They feared that the working class would never be able to rise above working-class concerns about wages and working conditions.

The Bolsheviks believed that someone (preferably a relatively small group led by intellectuals or professional revolutionaries – in other words, themselves) had to push the workers towards revolution. There was no better time than the present, since the Russian monarchy was very weak, and with a good leader the regime could be toppled.

Political Parties in Russia

Political parties were outlawed in Russia, but a few emerged in the late 19th century. The parties became far more radical than their counterparts in the West (partly because Western governments were generally clever enough to compromise with their people). Three kinds of parties represented resistance to the monarchy at the turn of the 20th century: Marxist socialists, non-Marxist socialists, and liberals. The parties were united in the belief that the monarchy should be overthrown and a Constituent Assembly should take power after a universal election that included all men and women. Land owned by aristocrats and the Crown would be distributed among the peasants. (Land distribution was the greatest source of unrest in Russia at the turn of the century.)

Russian politicians and intellectuals worried that Russia had fallen behind Western countries, and they devised radical ways to close the gap. All of the socialist parties believed that the only way to improve society was to overthrow the monarchy in a socialist revolution. While the socialists believed in improving society up to Western standards, they also believed that Russia had developed differently than the Western countries because of the peasants' communes, which they felt were socialist institutions. So while it was important for them to attain the same material standards that

Western countries had reached, they believed that Russia should follow a different path to development; the peasant communes, they believed, should be a model for a Russian, socialist type of development.

Liberals did not believe in this theory that Russian development was somehow different. They believed Russia's development was similar to that in Western countries, but merely lagged behind. The liberals were, however, extremely radical compared with their Western counterparts. Though they didn't necessarily support revolution, they felt that the autocracy would surrender to public pressure and become a constitutional monarchy. If not, a revolution would be necessary. No Western liberal parties were so radical that they proposed revolution.

The liberals did respect private property, partly because most of them were part of the middle class and wanted to keep what they had. They believed that the government should confiscate land from the aristocrats, but that the landowners deserved compensation. The confiscated land would then be sold to individual peasants, not maintained as a commune. The Socialists did not intend to compensate the landlords, nor did they intend to have any kind of private property. If the peasant lands became private, they believed that the smarter peasants would buy out the lazier ones, as you would expect in a capitalist system. A socialist system, which has a greater focus on economic equality, would not permit that.

The Revolution of 1905

Russian industrialization had progressed swiftly since 1890, but its progress was derailed by an economic slump between 1900 and 1906. Though the slump was just part of the cyclical nature of capitalism, it brought on a series of strikes. At first, the workers' demands focused on their own issues: they demanded an eight-hour workday, the right to strike legally, the right to form trade unions, and a minimum wage. Later in the strike, the workers expanded their demands; for instance, they called for basic democratic freedoms and equality before the law. Some radicals even demanded direct universal suffrage.

A large but peaceful group of workers assembled in St. Petersburg on Sunday, January 9, 1905 to march on the palace. They wanted to deliver a petition to the tsar outlining their demands; most Russians believed that the tsar loved them, but that his advisors had deceived him about the living conditions of most people. Many in the crowd even carried his picture. The workers were met by the armed forces when they reached the palace, and a general ordered the soldiers to fire on the crowd. About 300 workers were killed. Ironically, considering that he had thus far escaped blame he deserved, the tsar was blamed for something that he had no part in; Nicholas was out of town at the time. Even so, his failure to punish the officers responsible for Bloody Sunday displeased the people. The workers lost their faith in the tsar after the massacre, realizing that he was not the savior they had envisaged.

A wave of worker strikes hit the nation in the ensuing months; the army suppressed them. Many of the soldiers were raised as peasants, however, so they identified with the workers' demands and were unenthusiastic in their suppression. Several mutinies also took place. The largest and most famous occurred aboard the

battleship *Potemkin*. Infuriated by a dinner of rotten meat, the crew threw all of the officers overboard. Though they did not really know how to steer the ship, they made it to Romania, where they received asylum.

The civil unrest coincided with external trouble. In 1904–5, Russia fought a disastrous war with Japan. The Japanese navy destroyed Russian fleets twice in this span. This was the first time that an Asian power had defeated a European one in the modern era, and it shamed the Russian people and reflected poorly on the competence of the tsar and his ministers.

Socialist parties only played a small role in the Revolution of 1905, but they were involved in some of the bloodiest battles in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The Socialists organized and elected a workers' council, or *soviet*, in St. Petersburg. They imagined that such bodies would administer Russia in the future. Their first leader was Leon Trotsky, a Jewish revolutionary. The workers also fought at the barricades against the police, army, and Cossacks (militant Ukrainians). The fierce, 10-day battle in Moscow was reminiscent of the battles of the Paris Commune. With a flawed strategy, however (the Socialists never attacked, only shooting at the authorities from behind the barricades), the overthrow was doomed to failure.

Despite the failure of the revolution, the tsar was forced into implementing reforms. Most significantly, he granted the people a constitution that guaranteed them basic civil liberties (freedom of speech, the press, and religion), the right to form unions, and universal male suffrage. Russia had officially become a constitutional monarchy.

The government's reaction to the revolution mixed concessions and coercion well enough that the people were generally pacified. However, tensions returned soon after. The constitution that Nicholas II gave his people was not well received. In particular, the electoral system was unequal: one aristocrat's vote was equivalent to the votes of 15 peasants and 45 workers. Furthermore, the tsar could veto any legislation passed by the democratically elected Duma, or even dissolve the Parliament entirely.

The latter situation became quite common. The tsar was often displeased with the legislation proposed by the increasingly radical elected representatives, so he often dissolved the Duma and ruled by decree. In truth, neither the tsar nor the opposition followed the parliamentary rules because they believed that the constitutional monarchy was temporary. While the opposition expected a more democratic country, the tsar was waiting for a chance to return to full autocratic power.

Still, the constitution was a significant step towards democratization. The workers did not get their eight-hour workday, but they had the right to form unions and strike. Furthermore, the economic slump ended in 1906, and industrialization resumed at a breakneck pace.

Russia's economy probably could have caught up with the West. Increasing numbers of workers were becoming skilled, which meant that they had more money and were becoming less radical. Many people on the political left felt that revolution was unnecessary. The Revolution of 1905 had shown that the monarchy could be pressured into action. Surely the tsar could be influenced to make more concessions. The 1905 revolutionaries were in disarray: many had been arrested and sent to hard-labor camps, while a few were executed. Many others fled. There were signs that Russia could

become more moderate, but this movement stopped with the onset of the First World War.

The First World War

France and Britain fought on a narrow front in the war, and the two powers were pitted against only one Central Power, Germany. The Russians, however, engaged their three enemies – Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire – on a vast front that extended from Poland to the Caucasus. Russia is generally accused of acquitting itself poorly in the Great War, but such accusations are not quite accurate. The Russians broke the army of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1916 and advanced 50 miles. They crushed the Turks and advanced 125 miles into Ottoman territory, while the Allies took years to make any significant territorial gains. By 1917, the Russians had more prisoners of war than Britain and France combined.

The Germans, however, had a superior fighting force and inflicted incredible casualties on the Russians. Morale was bad on the front, but it was worse at home. The Russian economy was not yet strong enough to deal with a modern war. The trains were in disarray, which delayed the delivery of grain to the front and to the cities. The food shortage created tensions in urban areas, and riots were common. Workers struck often to demand increases to their food rations.

The monarchy lost a great deal of prestige during the First World War. Nicholas II did not understand the seriousness of the situation, and was unable to cope with it. During a crisis, he tended to retire to the countryside instead of dealing with it. His government was grossly inefficient, largely because he valued loyalty more than skill.

The Russian Revolutions

By 1917, virtually all the political parties had united in opposition to the monarchy. The revolution was not a direct outcome of their opposition, though. Rather, the revolution was sparked by the collapse of the Russian economy. The opposition was able to use the popular discontent to overthrow the monarchy.

Much as in France nearly 130 years before, the revolution was sparked by women protesting the food shortage. Many workers joined the protests, and the military garrisons refused to fight them. (With most available soldiers already fighting in the war, the garrisons consisted of green recruits whose next posting would be at the front, so it was in their interest to join the crowds, because if the revolt was successful, they would not have to go to war.) Nicholas II abdicated, and Russia became a democratic republic.

On the eve of the Revolution, the liberal Constitutional Democratic Party was the strongest opposition party. They had more MPs than any other in the Duma, and had been relentlessly attacking the monarchy for months. Their members generally played the most important role in the February Revolution. However, when Nicholas abdicated, they felt that they had attained their goals. They invited the Socialists to form a provisional government with them and hoped to get on with the business of the nation.

The Socialists, however, were not finished. The revolution would only be complete, they believed, once private land ownership had been abolished. With a solid

middle-class base, the liberals could not support this agenda. They also believed that Russia should delay implementing an eight-hour workday because it was important to get goods to the front; the Socialists opposed this measure also. The liberals wanted to redistribute land from the rich landlords to the peasants, but again they wished to delay this measure. Unlike the Socialists, they planned to reimburse the landlords, which they could not do with a bare wartime treasury.

With many areas of disagreement, the Socialists refused to form a provisional government with the liberals and organized a soviet (workers' council) instead. The competing governments issued parallel orders, which created chaos at the front and at home.

The liberals and Socialists eventually made an uneasy compromise, but it was too late to stop the increasing chaos. The government's decision to continue the war, along with deteriorating economic conditions, further undermined the government's prestige. The workers, who initially supported the liberals, soon became more radical than the party had hoped. They asked for full control of the factories.

The February Revolution took the Bolsheviks by surprise, and they did not participate. Lenin had spent the war in Switzerland with some of his cohorts, but he smelled opportunity for his party after the February Revolution. He asked the German authorities to help him get back to Russia, and they happily obliged. The Germans hoped that Lenin would undermine the Russian war effort; they also provided significant financial help and safe transport to the returning Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks were genuinely aligned with German interests, at least at first. They reasoned that if Russia lost the war, the provisional government's prestige would slip further. As the only party to oppose the war, the Bolsheviks stood to gain from Russia's defeat.

The official Russian war aims were to capture the Bosphorus, which is the only passage from the Black Sea into the Mediterranean. The Bolsheviks asked the soldiers if they thought it was necessary to capture so much territory, and told them that a Bolshevik regime would just let them go home. The Bolsheviks told the workers that they could set their own wages if they took over the factories. The peasants, meanwhile, could have the land they coveted if they rose up and took it.

These policies made the Bolsheviks very popular, and helped them secure support from crucial groups. The soldiers wanted to go home, and the Bolsheviks were the only party promising an end to the war. The party was also popular with unskilled workers (though not skilled workers, who presumably had more to lose from the imposition of communism). Unskilled workers usually toiled in large factories in large cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg, so their support gave the Bolsheviks a major foothold there.

By October 1917, the Bolsheviks felt they had enough support to take power. In a nearly bloodless coup, they overthrew the provisional government in St. Petersburg. Unlike the February Revolution, this was carefully planned, but it helped that the provisional government was so weak and disorganized that it was able to offer only token resistance. The Bolsheviks quickly assumed control over Moscow and St. Petersburg and assumed the reins of government. Nonetheless, the Bolsheviks did not have effective control of *any* of Russia outside these two cities, and enemies quickly

lined up against them. For the next three years, the Bolsheviks fought to consolidate their power.

Summary

- By the start of the February Revolution, the vast majority of Russians were still peasants.
- At the end of the 19th century, Russia began to industrialize rapidly. The small but growing worker class had no right to form a union or to strike and endured terrible working conditions; intellectuals had few prospects for advancement because of the aristocracy. The two groups began to work together; some found common cause in the doctrines of Karl Marx.
- Russians' frustrations first boiled over in the 1905 Revolution; though the revolution failed, Tsar Nicholas II nonetheless granted some of the protestors' demands, like a constitution and an elected Parliament.
- The tsar's unwillingness to live up to the spirit of the reforms – for example, he cancelled the Duma several times between 1905 and 1917 – helped to unite the political parties in opposition to him.
- The war proved disastrous for Russia. Though Russia won victories against Austria-Hungary and Turkey, the German Empire advanced far into Russian territory. Moreover, the war highlighted the inadequacies of Russian industrialization, and both the soldiers and those on the home front suffered food shortages.
- The tsarist regime finally crumbled in February 1917. The revolutionaries' efforts to govern were not successful, and the government had nearly crumbled when the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917.