

# The Russian Revolution of 1917

---

EPISD World History Team

**Say Thanks to the Authors**

Click <http://www.ck12.org/saythanks>

*(No sign in required)*



## AUTHOR

EPISD World History Team

To access a customizable version of this book, as well as other interactive content, visit [www.ck12.org](http://www.ck12.org)

CK-12 Foundation is a non-profit organization with a mission to reduce the cost of textbook materials for the K-12 market both in the U.S. and worldwide. Using an open-source, collaborative, and web-based compilation model, CK-12 pioneers and promotes the creation and distribution of high-quality, adaptive online textbooks that can be mixed, modified and printed (i.e., the FlexBook® textbooks).

Copyright © 2020 CK-12 Foundation, [www.ck12.org](http://www.ck12.org)

The names “CK-12” and “CK12” and associated logos and the terms “**FlexBook®**” and “**FlexBook Platform®**” (collectively “CK-12 Marks”) are trademarks and service marks of CK-12 Foundation and are protected by federal, state, and international laws.

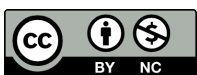
Any form of reproduction of this book in any format or medium, in whole or in sections must include the referral attribution link <http://www.ck12.org/saythanks> (placed in a visible location) in addition to the following terms.

Except as otherwise noted, all CK-12 Content (including CK-12 Curriculum Material) is made available to Users in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 3.0 Unported (CC BY-NC 3.0) License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/3.0/>), as amended and updated by Creative Commons from time to time (the “CC License”), which is incorporated herein by this reference.

Complete terms can be found at <http://www.ck12.org/about/terms-of-use>.

Printed: February 26, 2020

**flexbook**  
next generation textbooks



## CHAPTER

## 1

The Russian Revolution of  
1917

FIGURE 1.1

**Student Learning Objectives**

**At the end of this section the student will be able to**

- Identify and describe the major causes and effects of the following important turning points in world history from 1914 to the present: the world wars and their impact on political, economic, and social systems; communist revolutions and their impact on the Cold War; independence movements; and globalization. [WHS.1F]
- Identify the causes of the February (March) and October revolutions of 1917 in Russia, their effects on the outcome of World War I, and the Bolshevik establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.[WHS.10D]

- Explain the major causes and events of World War II, including the German Invasion of Poland and Soviet Union, the Holocaust, Japanese Imperialism, the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Normandy landings and the dropping of the atomic bombs.[WHS.12C]
- Locate places and regions of historical significance directly related to major eras and turning points in world history. [WHS.16A]

## The Russian Revolution

The **Russian Revolution of 1917** was one of the most significant events in the 20th century, and marked one of the most radical turning points in Russia's 1,300-year history. The Russian Revolution removed Russia from WWI and brought about the transformation of Russia into the **Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)**. It replaced Russia's traditional monarchy with the world's first Communist state. The new communist government, led by **Vladimir Lenin**, would solidify its power only after three years of civil war. The revolution affected economics, social structure, culture, international relations, industrial development, and most any other benchmark by which one might measure a revolution. Although the new government would prove to be at least as repressive as the one it replaced, the country's new rulers were drawn largely from the intellectual and working classes rather than from the aristocracy—which meant a considerable change in direction for Russia. Over the next several decades, the Soviet Union would actively sponsor and assist Communist movements and revolutions around the world in an effort to broaden its sphere of influence.

### Causes

The Russian Revolution was the culmination of a long period of repression and unrest. From the time of Peter the Great, the czarist government had increasingly become an autocratic bureaucracy that imposed its will on the people by force, with wanton disregard for human life and liberty.

In 1881, student revolutionaries who were angry over the slow pace of political change assassinated Alexander II, a reform-minded czar. When his son, Alexander III took the throne, he halted all reforms in Russia, clinging to the principles of "autocracy, orthodoxy, and nationality." To wipe out revolutionaries, Alexander III used harsh measures. He imposed strict censorship on published materials and written documents, including private letters. His secret police carefully watched both secondary schools and universities. Political prisoners were exiled to Siberia.

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 special target of persecution, leading to a wave of **pogroms** - organized violence against Jews - where police and soldiers stood by and watched Russian citizens loot and destroy Jewish homes, stores, and synagogues.

When **Nicolas II** became czar in 1894, he was determined to maintain the principle of autocracy. Russia, however, was slowly industrializing, which only further spread discontent. Grueling working conditions, miserably low wages and child labor were common, while trade unions were outlawed. As the gap between the rich and poor grew, exploited laborers who worked in factories and built the railway lines organized strikes.

Amid the widespread unrest of workers and other members of Russian society, various revolutionary movements began to grow and compete for power. The group that would eventually succeed in establishing a new government in Russia followed the views of **Karl Marx**. These revolutionaries believed that the industrial class of workers would overthrow the czar. The industrial class would then form "a dictatorship of the proletariat." In such a state, the workers would rule. One such Marxist group the, **Bolsheviks**, supported the idea that change could best be brought about by a small number of committed revolutionaries willing to sacrifice everything for radical change. The major leader of the Bolsheviks was Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, who adopted the name of **Lenin**. He had an engaging personality, was an excellent organizer, and was ruthless. In the early 1900's, Lenin fled to Western

Europe to avoid arrest by the czarist regime. He maintained contact with other Bolsheviks until he believed he could safely return to Russia.



FIGURE 1.2

## Crisis 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 crisis. These events showed the czar's weakness and paved the way for revolution.

### Bloody Sunday: The Revolution of 1905

The year 1905 revealed all too clearly Czar **Nicholas II**'s perceived indifference, brutality, and weakness. On Sunday, January 9, a crowd of over 100,000 marched peacefully through the center of St. Petersburg, eventually assembling in front of the Czar's Winter Palace. Unaware that the tsar was not in town that day, they called for the tsar to appear so that they could present him with a petition.

The police, who had just finished putting down a series of strikes by industrial workers, followed their standing orders to get rid of any problems. Their solution was to open fire on the crowd, which included women and children

as well as church leaders. As the crowd scattered, police pursued them on horseback, continuing to fire on them. Many in the crowd were trampled to death in the ensuing panic. Estimates of the total death toll range from a few hundred to several thousand.

News of the massacre spread quickly, and many saw it as a sign that the tsar no longer cared about his people. The incident earned Nicholas the title “Nicholas the Bloody” even though he did not in fact know about the violence until it was already over. An unorganized series of demonstrations, riots, strikes, and assorted episodes of violence erupted across Russia in the following months.

## The Russian Constitution and Duma

Any chance for Nicholas II to regain his standing was soon lost, as Russia was rocked by a long series of disasters, scandals, and political failures. During the first half of 1905, Russia suffered a humiliating military defeat against Japan in the **Russo-Japanese War**. Later in the year, the tsar reluctantly gave in to heavy political pressure and granted Russia its first constitution. Permission to form Russia’s first parliament, called the **Duma**, was also soon granted.

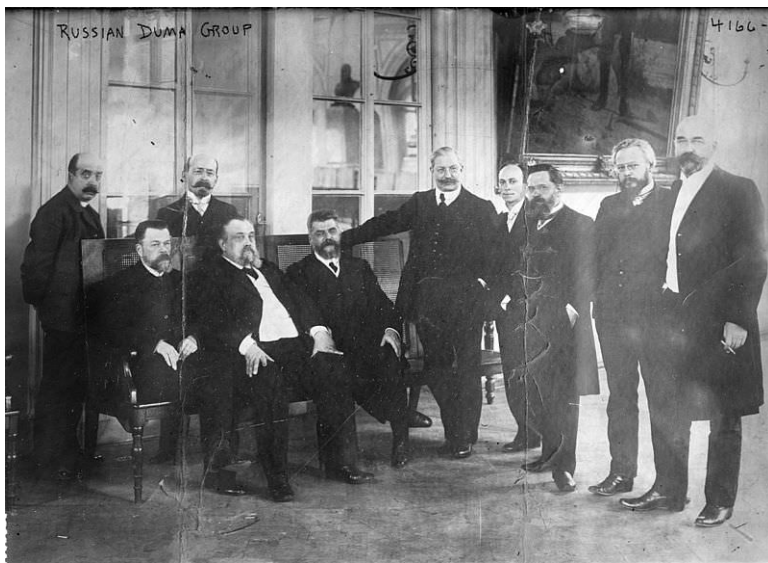


FIGURE 1.3

Russian State Duma

The leaders of the first Duma that met in May 1906 were moderates who wanted Russia to become a constitutional monarchy similar to Britain. Hesitant to share his power, the czar dissolved the Duma after ten weeks. Other Dumas would meet later. Yet none would have real power to make sweeping reforms.

In the meantime, Nicholas’s own family became the subject of a different sort of crisis. His wife, Alexandra, had begun consulting with a mystic peasant named **Grigory Rasputin** in a desperate attempt to help her hemophiliac son, Alexis. It seemed to her that Rasputin had the ability to ease the boy’s symptoms. In time, the self-proclaimed monk Rasputin gained political influence over the tsar through his wife, while at the same time engaging in scandalous sexual escapades throughout the Russian capital. Rumors quickly spread that Rasputin had magical powers and that he had the entire royal family under some sort of spell.

## World War I

It was in the midst of this scandal that Nicholas drew Russia into World War I in the summer of 1914. 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, ignoring the czar’s chief advisers and, instead

continuing to fall under the influence of Rasputin. The war was a disaster for Russia: it caused inflation, plunged the country into a food shortage, and ultimately cost the lives of nearly 5 million Russian soldiers and civilians, as well as a series of humiliating military defeats. As in the Russo-Japanese War, Russia's involvement in World War I revealed the weaknesses of czarist rule and military leadership.

The war was the final straw for the Russian people. In 1916, a group of nobles murdered Rasputin, fearing his increasing role in government affairs. But it was too late, as popular discontentment was at an all-time high. 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

With Russia faring poorly in World War I and facing severe food shortages, strikes and public protests happened in the country with increasing frequency during 1916 and early 1917. Violent encounters between protesters and authorities also increased.

On February 23, 1917, a large gathering of working-class women convened in the center of Petrograd to mark International Women's Day. The gathering took the form of a protest demonstration calling for "bread and peace." While the demonstration began peacefully, the next morning it turned violent as the women were joined by hundreds of thousands of male workers who went on strike and flooded the streets, openly calling for an end to the war and even to the monarchy. Feeding on their outrage with each passing day, the demonstrations became larger and rowdier, and the outnumbered police were unable to control the crowds.

With news of the unrest, Tsar Nicholas II, who was away visiting his troops on the front, sent a telegram to Petrograd's military commander on February 25, ordering him to bring an end to the riots by the next day. In their efforts to carry out the tsar's order, several troops of a local guard regiment fired upon the crowds on February 26. The regiment fell into chaos, as many soldiers felt more empathy for the crowds than for the tsar. The next day, more than 80,000 troops mutinied and joined with the crowds, in many cases directly fighting the police.

The events in March of 1917 forced Czar Nicholas II to abdicate his throne. The Czarist rule of the Romanov dynasty, which spanned over three centuries, had 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 under the leadership of Alexander Kerensky. His decision to continue fighting the war 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. Social revolutionaries, competing for power formed **soviets**. Soviets were local councils consisting of workers, peasants, and soldiers. In many cities especially Petrograd, the soviets had more influence than the provisional government.

## The Bolshevik Revolution

The Germans launched their own "secret weapon" that would erode the provisional government's authority. They arranged Lenin's return to Russia after many years of exile. The Germans believed that Lenin and his Bolshevik supporters would stir unrest in Russia and hurt the Russian war effort. Traveling in a sealed railway boxcar, Lenin reached Petrograd in April 1917.

Lenin and the Bolsheviks recognized their opportunity to seize power. They 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 of "**Peace, Land, and Bread**," was gaining widespread appeal. Lenin decided to take action.

In November 1917, without warning, Bolshevik Red Guards made up of armed factory workers stormed the Winter Palace in Petrograd. They took over government offices and arrested the leaders of the provisional government.




---

**FIGURE 1.4**


---

The Bolshevik Revolution was over in a matter of hours. Not a single shot was fired, as those appointed to guard these sites either fled or were disarmed without incident. Even the headquarters of the General Staff—the army headquarters—was taken without resistance.

After Lenin's government secured power, one of its first major goals was to get Russia out of the World War. In November 1917, the new government ordered Russian troops to cease all hostilities on the front. In March of 1918, Russian and Germany signed the **Treaty of Brest-Litovsk**.

Russia's exit from the war was very costly, but Lenin was desperate to end the war at any cost, as the Germans were threatening to . In the peace, Lenin consented to give up most of Russia's territorial gains since the time of Peter the Great. The lost territories included Finland, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Ukraine, Belarus, Bessarabia, and the Caucasus region, along with some of the coal-mining lands of . The Soviets would not regain these territories until the end of World War II.

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

Still recovering from their painful losses of land to Germany, the Bolsheviks now face a new challenge - stamping out their enemies at home. Their opponents formed the White Army. The revolutionary leader, Leon Trotsky, who helped negotiate the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk 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.



Russia's civil war proved far more deadly than the earlier revolutions, and even deadlier than its involvement in World War I. Around 15 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 triumphed and finally crushed all opposition to Bolshevik rule. The victory showed that the Bolsheviks were able both to seize power and to maintain it. Yet in the aftermath of the civil war, Lenin and the Bolsheviks faced over-whelming problems.



FIGURE 1.5

### Lenin's New Economic Policy

War and revolution destroyed the Russian economy. Trade was at a standstill. Industrial production dropped and many skilled workers fled to other countries. Lenin, who helped mastermind the Bolshevik Revolution, shifted his role. He turned to reviving the economy and restructuring the government.

In March 1921, Lenin launched the **New Economic Policy (NEP)** by temporarily putting aside his plan for a state-controlled economy. Instead, he resorted to a small-scale version of capitalism. The reforms under the NEP allowed

peasants to sell their surplus crops instead of turning them over to the government. Individuals could buy and sell goods for profit. 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. Lenin also tried to encourage foreign investment.

## Political Reforms

The many different nationalities within Russia had always posed an obstacle to national unity. Communist leaders also 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. Each republic was controlled from the new capital, Moscow.



FIGURE 1.6

The Bolsheviks also renamed their party the Communist Party. The name came from the writings of Karl Marx. He had used the word communism to describe the classless society that would exist after the 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. Thanks partly to the new policies and to the peace that followed the civil war, the USSR slowly recovered. By 1928, the country’s farms and factories were producing as much as they had before World War I. Lenin did not live to see this recovery. He had several strokes and spent the last 18 months of

his life as a semi-invalid. His death in 1924 would open a power struggle for control of the party and the country. Eventually, Lenin's successor, Joseph Stalin, would build a totalitarian state in the USSR, dramatically transforming the government and controlling every aspect of citizen's life.

### Video Assignment

Watch: [History vs. Vladimir Lenin](#) by TED Ed



#### MEDIA

Click image to the left or use the URL below.

URL: <http://www.ck12.org/flx/render/embeddedobject/205017>

### Interactive Student Notebook Assignments

1. Here is a puzzle: why was the "February Revolution" in March and the "October Revolution" in November? Use the internet to find the answer and write a summary about what you found.
2. Create an illustrated timeline that traces the Russian Revolution. The timeline should include at least five events that span from the February (March) revolution of 1917 to the establishment of the USSR. Each illustrated event should be accompanied by a written explanation of the significance of the event.

### Review Questions

1. What were the major causes of the 1917 revolutions in Russia and how did they affect World War I?
2. Why did the Russian Revolution happen "later" than other major revolutions?
3. Why did the Russians leave the First World War before the end of the war?
4. What new political, economic, and social patterns emerged in Russia following the communist revolution?
5. What was the U.S.S.R. and who established it?

### Vocabulary

**TABLE 1.1:**

Russian Revolution	ended czarist rule in Russia, put into place a provisional government, and later, brought about Bolshevik communist control of a new Soviet Union.
Nicholas II	the last Tsar of Russia and of the Romanov dynasty, deposed of his powers in the 1917 October Revolution.
Vladimir Lenin	leader of the communist Bolsheviks who overthrew the Russian provisional government in 1917 and ruled the Soviet Union until 1924.
Bolsheviks	the Russian communists, led by Vladimir Lenin, who overthrew the Russian provisional government in the October Revolution of 1917.

**TABLE 1.1:** (continued)

October Revolution	the second of two revolutions taking place in Russia in 1917 in which the Bolshevik communists took control of Russian government.
Russian Civil War	a conflict fought between Bolshevik communist armies (reds) and those opposed to their takeover of the Russian government (whites) from 1918 to 1920.
USSR	acronym for the United Soviet Socialist Republic, or, the Soviet Union.

### Internet Resources

- [The Russian Revolution](#) by Epic History

### Vocabulary

#### 13.1 World War I

#### Student Learning Objectives

At the end of this section the student will be able to:

...

#### (ISN) Interactive Student Notebook Assignments

1. Copied content specific questions

#### (ISN) Discussion and Study Questions

1. Guiding Questions

### Vocabulary

[Quizlet Flashcards for World War I](#)

---

### References

1. By the lost gallery. .
2. By Art Gallery ErgsArt. .
3. Karl Bulla. [Wikipedia Commons](#) . publicdomain
4. by Vasily Smirnov. Bolshevik Revolution.
5. By Sergei Zubkov. V Lenin.
6. by Vasily Smirnov. USSR.

