

Soviet Russia Under Lenin and Stalin

TIME LINE

1917	The March Revolution leads to the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II The Provisional Government is established Soviets are elected in Petrograd and other Russian cities The Bolsheviks take power in the November Revolution
1918	The Soviet government dissolves the constituent assembly The Soviet government signs the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk
1918-1920	The Reds defeat the Whites in the Russian Civil War

World War I hastened the collapse of the tsarist regime. By the end of 1916, Russia was no longer able to sustain military operations against the Central Powers. The economy was in chaos, and the power of the government had all but evaporated.

In March 1917, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated. The new Provisional Government failed to establish its effective control over the country. In the November Revolution, Vladimir I. Lenin and the Bolsheviks took power, beginning their effort to create the world's first Communist society.

Following Lenin's death in 1924, Joseph Stalin gradually established his authority. In the Five Year Plans, which began in 1928, Stalin sought to reorganize the country's economy, eliminating capitalism and promoting the development of heavy industry and the collectivization of agriculture. Stalin's rule was also marked by the Great Purge, the dictator's attempt to eliminate any possible opposition to his absolute authority.

The March Revolution

National Collapse

For Russia, World War I was a devastating experience. Russia's backward agriculture and underdeveloped industry, transportation,

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and communications could not sustain a major war effort. In the autumn of 1915, Tsar Nicholas II (r. 1894-1917) took personal command of his army, leaving the government in the hands of his wife, the Empress Alexandra (1872-1918). She came increasingly under the influence of the unscrupulous Grigori Rasputin (1872-1916), a self-proclaimed holy man who supposedly had the mystical power to stop the bleeding of the imperial couple's hemophiliac son, Alexei. As Rasputin's power grew, the prestige of the tsarist regime suffered. In December 1916, a group of conspirators with close ties to the imperial family murdered Rasputin. The removal of one man, however, could not reverse the course of Russia's collapse.

End of Tsarist Regime

In early 1917, spontaneous strikes and demonstrations swept the Russian capital of Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg). The unrest resulted from war-weariness, shortages of food and other goods, runaway inflation, and distrust of the government. Tsar Nicholas II dissolved the Duma (the Russian parliament), but most of its members remained in the capital. On March 12, the Duma elected a committee to represent its interests.

As the disturbances mounted, Tsar Nicholas II ordered troops to suppress the demonstrations. Disobeying their orders, the troops joined the demonstrators. On March 15, the tsar abdicated. After three hundred years of ruling Russia, the power of the Romanovs collapsed. (In 1917, Russia still used the Julian calendar, which, in the twentieth century, was thirteen days behind the Gregorian calendar. By the Julian calendar, the disturbances in Petrograd intensified in late February. For that reason, the revolution is often referred to as the February Revolution.)

The Provisional Government

The Duma committee now became Russia's Provisional Government, headed by Prince George Lvov (1861-1925), a liberal nobleman. Alexander Kerensky (1881-1970), a member of the

Socialist Revolutionary Party, was the only socialist to serve in the liberal-dominated government. The Provisional Government promised reforms and announced plans for the election of a constituent assembly to draft a constitution for a democratic republic.

Creation of Soviets

In the meantime, workers, soldiers, and sailors in Petrograd, responding to a call issued by socialist leaders, elected the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. ("Soviet" is the Russian word for council.) Although the Petrograd Soviet was controlled by members of the various socialist parties, it gave tacit support to the Provisional Government. Similar soviets were established in other Russian cities and towns.

Bolshevik Program

In April 1917, Vladimir I. Lenin (1870-1924), the leader of the radical Marxist group known as the Bolsheviks, returned to Petrograd from his exile in Switzerland. He presented his program, the April Theses, to his Bolshevik followers, urging them to push for a proletarian socialist revolution.

The Bolsheviks and other socialists called for "Peace, Land, and Bread": an end to the war, the confiscation of the land of the great landowners and its distribution to the peasants, and the seizure of food for the cities.

Policies of Provisional Government

While the Provisional Government recognized the peasants' need for more land, it also respected the rights of private property. Therefore, the government was not prepared to authorize the confiscation of land, nor was it willing to seize food to meet the needs of the cities.

The Provisional Government also wanted to continue the war against the Central Powers. In July 1917, the Russian army launched an offensive against the Austrians in Galicia. However, the offensive quickly collapsed.

The July Days

Even before news of the events in Galicia reached Petrograd, the July Days insurrection broke out in the capital. The July Days represented a spontaneous revolt against the unpopular Provisional Government. Most of the leaders of the Petrograd Soviet opposed the insurrection, believing it was premature. Although Lenin shared this view, the Bolsheviks nevertheless supported the July Days. When the insurrection was suppressed, Lenin had to flee to Finland to escape arrest. In the short run, the Bolsheviks were weakened by their support of the revolt. In the long run, however, this position won the Bolsheviks many new followers among the increasingly more radical workers, soldiers, and sailors of the capital.

In late July, Kerensky replaced Prince Lvov as head of the Provisional Government. The change in leadership did little to strengthen it.

The Kornilov Affair

In September 1917, General L. G. Kornilov (1870-1918), the commander of the Russian army, attempted to seize power and establish a military dictatorship. With the help of the Bolsheviks, who now controlled the Petrograd Soviet, the Provisional Government was able to turn back the threat. The Kornilov Affair served to weaken further the Provisional Government.

The November Revolution

In late October, Lenin ordered his followers to begin plans to overthrow the Provisional Government. On the night of November 6-7, the Red Guards, an armed force organized by the Petrograd Soviet, seized key strategic locations in the city. (By the Julian calendar, it was October 24-25, and even today the Soviets refer to the "Great Socialist October Revolution.")

On the morning of November 7, Lenin announced the establishment of a new regime, which bore the revolutionary name of the Council of People's Commissars. Lenin served as the

council's chairman, while Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) became commissar for foreign affairs. Joseph Stalin (1879-1953) was commissar for nationalities.

In the other major cities and towns, the Bolsheviks also took control, although fighting continued in Moscow for several days. While the Bolsheviks had seized power with relative ease and little violence, their new government confronted immense problems.

Lenin

Youth and Early Career

The man known to history as Lenin was born Vladimir Ilyich Ulianov in 1870 in Simbirsk, a town on the Volga River east of Moscow. His father was the director of the elementary schools of the province. His older brother, Alexander I. Ulianov, was involved in a conspiracy to assassinate Tsar Alexander III. The plot was uncovered before it could be carried out, and Alexander Ulianov was executed in 1887.

Lenin attended the University of Kazan briefly but was expelled for participating in a student demonstration. He studied law on his own, and in the mid-1890s he passed the state law examination.

More interested in Marxism than the practice of law, Lenin became involved in radical activities in St. Petersburg. He was arrested and imprisoned and then exiled to Siberia. In 1900, he went into exile in Western Europe. There he published a Russian-language Marxist newspaper, *Iskra* ("The Spark"), which was smuggled into Russia.

Leader of the Bolsheviks

In 1898, a group of Russian Marxists established the Social Democratic Party (see Chapter 25). When the Russian Social Democrats met in London in 1903, Lenin and his followers, known as the Bolsheviks, split with the more moderate Russian Marxists, the Mensheviks. Lenin and the Bolsheviks insisted that party membership should be restricted to an elite group of

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committed revolutionaries. The Bolsheviks also believed the party should press for the proletarian revolution in Russia at an early date. Rather than wait for Russian industrial capitalism to achieve a mature level of development.

Early Measures of the Bolshevik Regime

Following the November Revolution, Lenin and his followers sought to realize the Bolshevik vision of the new socialist society. The government urged the conclusion of an immediate peace. It called on the peasants to seize the landowners' land and the workers to take control of the factories.

Reform Laws

Regarding the Russian Orthodox Church as a reactionary institution, the Bolsheviks sought to destroy it. Church and state were separated. Church property was seized, and many churches, monasteries, and convents were closed. Religious instruction was prohibited, and only civil marriage ceremonies had legal recognition.

The Bolsheviks replaced the Julian calendar with the Gregorian calendar and simplified the Cyrillic alphabet. Titles of nobility were abolished.

The Constituent Assembly

Prior to its overthrow, the Provisional Government had scheduled elections for a constituent assembly to be held in late November. Lenin's government decided to allow these elections to be held, but the results were disappointing for the Bolsheviks. Although the Bolsheviks had won increasing support in Russia's cities, the country remained overwhelmingly rural, and the Socialist Revolutionary Party had a large following among the peasants. Some 420 Socialist Revolutionaries were elected to the constituent assembly, while the Bolsheviks won only 225 seats.

In January 1918, the constituent assembly met in Petrograd. The Bolsheviks dissolved it after only one session. Lenin also organized a secret police force, known by its Russian acronym as

the Cheka, to combat counterrevolutionary activity. By dissolving the constituent assembly and establishing a secret police, Lenin began the process of creating a Bolshevik dictatorship to replace the autocracy of the tsars.

Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

Negotiations between Lenin's government and the Germans led to the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918. Believing that it was impossible for Russia to continue the war, Lenin insisted that there was no alternative to accepting the harsh terms dictated by the Germans. In any event, he reasoned, the world revolution would soon engulf Germany, and the treaty would then be nullified.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk forced the Russians to give up Finland, Russian Poland, the Baltic area (Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania), part of Belorussia and the Ukraine, and Transcaucasia. The treaty was nullified following Germany's defeat by the Allies later in 1918.

The Civil War

The November Revolution had been unexpected, catching the Bolsheviks' opponents off balance. By the spring of 1918, however, these opponents had recovered their poise and began their effort to topple Lenin's regime.

Reds Versus Whites

During the Civil War, the Bolsheviks – who began to call themselves Communists – had certain advantages. They dominated the heart of the country and had much of Russia's remaining industry under their control. Their lines of communication and supply were relatively short. Furthermore, Leon Trotsky, who now served as commissar for war, succeeded in creating an effective fighting force, the Red Army. On the other hand, the anti-Communist forces, known as the Whites, failed to coordinate their efforts. Furthermore, many Russians feared that a White victory would mean the restoration of the old order.

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Nevertheless, the Whites took control of large areas of Russia. In July 1918, as White forces approached the Ural Mountains town of Ekaterinburg, local Communists ordered the murder of the former tsar and his family to prevent their rescue by the Whites.

During 1919 and 1920, the Reds gradually defeated the major White commanders: Admiral Alexander Kolchak (1874-1920) in western Siberia, General Nikolai Yudenich (1862-1933) in the Baltic region, and Generals Anton Denikin (1872-1947) and Piotr Wrangel (1878-1928) in the Ukraine and northern Caucasus.

Allied Intervention

Allied intervention in the Civil War proved to be of limited significance. French, British, and American troops were sent to Russia to prevent the Germans from seizing stockpiles of raw materials, while the Japanese intervened in eastern Siberia. While the Allies provided some assistance to the White forces, they did not commit themselves fully to the effort to overthrow Lenin's regime. Nevertheless, the Soviets have never forgotten these Western invasions of Russia.

Soviet Territorial Losses

During the Civil War, the Soviets suffered some major setbacks. In the West, Finland and the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania gained their independence, while Rumania seized the province of Bessarabia. Independence movements failed, however, in the Ukraine and in Georgia and Armenia in the Caucasus. In 1920, Poland invaded Russia. Under the terms of the Treaty of Riga, signed in March 1921, Poland annexed western Belorussia and the western Ukraine.

War Communism

During the Civil War, the Soviet regime established a policy known as War Communism. The major industries, as well as banks and insurance companies, were nationalized. Private trade was prohibited, and the regime requisitioned food from the peasants in

order to feed the cities. The Supreme Economic Council supervised the operations of the Russian economy.

The economy sank into deeper chaos. Agricultural and industrial production declined sharply, the transportation and communication systems collapsed, and the cities experienced increasingly more serious shortages of food and fuel.