

chapter 16

Revolution in Russia: 1917 to the Eve of World War II



The Russian Revolution, also called the Bolshevik Revolution after the victorious political party, is unique in history. Unlike earlier revolutions in France, England, and other European nations, it was not a simple desire to overthrow and replace the government then in power. Instead, it was an attempt to overthrow the social and political order of all Europe.

The Russian Revolution brought about the prediction Marx and Engels had made in *The Communist Manifesto*: the violent overturning of the social order by the workers. This had not happened elsewhere in Europe because conditions in Russia were more extreme. During the nineteenth century, most European nations had acquired some form of representative government. Liberal political parties had acquired some measure of power and influence, and even Socialists were a recognized force in the political order. In Russia, no such tradition of representative government existed. Although there was a parliament of sorts, the Russian czar was an autocrat who still believed in bygone traditions of the divine right of kings.

The new order that arose in Russia after the revolution had a great deal in common with the old order. In both cases, the head of state was an autocrat,

the army and the police were loyal to the state and were regularly used to put down opposition among the people, and there was no tolerance of dissent.

One major difference between the old regime and the new was that the new regime was determined that the state should be the only influence on the lives of the people. The Bolsheviks disbanded practically every independent organization in Russia, including the Orthodox Church. Since the Church might conceivably disagree with many of the harsh measures undertaken by the state, the Church could no longer be allowed to exist.

CHAPTER 16 OBJECTIVES

- Explain the causes of the Russian Revolution.
- Describe the course of the Russian civil war.
- Compare and contrast the policies and leadership of Lenin and Stalin.

Chapter 16 Time Line

- 1917 March Czar Nicholas II abdicates
- November Bolshevik Revolution; Lenin takes power
- 1918 Treaty of Brest-Litovsk; outbreak of civil war; assassination of royal family
- 1920–1921 War with Poland
- 1921 Peasant uprising; New Economic Policy established
- 1922 Soviet Union is formally founded
- 1924 Lenin dies; Stalin takes power
- 1928 First Five-Year Plan
- 1936–1938 Great Purges

The Russian Revolution

World War I played a major role in bringing about the Russian Revolution. The advance of the German army into Russia brought food shortages, famine, and starvation; it smashed the Russian railway system in the west; it diverted thousands of able-bodied men from their jobs to serve in the army. As it had

elsewhere in Europe, war brought industrialization to a halt and wrecked the economy. It was easy for ordinary Russians to see that the czar was helpless to take control and improve matters.

Czar Nicholas II had succeeded to the Russian throne in 1894. Like most of his predecessors, Nicholas believed that he ruled by divine right and that no one should question him. The revolution of 1905 forced him to acknowledge that times had changed—that the people demanded some say in how they were governed. Although Nicholas made some concessions toward the demands of liberalism and republicanism, his reforms were too timid and slight to satisfy any but the most conservative. Resentment against the czar led to a popular uprising in 1917, as a result of which Nicholas abdicated.

There was no orderly transfer of power. In the wake of the czar's abdication, the Socialists and moderates set up a Provisional Government, which shared its power with the Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg) Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. The aims of these two bodies were not the same. The Provisional Government concentrated all its planning on defeating the Germans in the Great War. The Soviet, on the other hand, made the domestic economy its priority. Its goal was to set up a legislative assembly that could address pressing concerns about land ownership, grain prices, and food shortages.

Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, born in 1870 in Simbirsk on the Volga River, quickly rose to prominence as the leader of the Bolshevik (Russian for "majority") Party. Lenin made a great impression on the people by continually repeating the slogan "Peace, Land, and Bread"—the three issues of greatest concern to the ordinary people.

By November, the government had become so unpopular that the Bolsheviks were able to grab power in a successful *coup d'état*, orchestrated by Lenin's close associate Leon Trotsky. Lenin lost no time in setting up one-party rule, with himself as the party dictator. Lenin's most pressing concern was to end the war with Germany. He cared nothing for victory over Germany, nor did he respect alliances made by the former Russian regime with the Western capitalist nations he despised and hoped one day to overthrow. Therefore, the quickest way to achieve peace was through diplomacy. In December of 1917, Russia and Germany agreed on peace terms; German forces would withdraw in exchange for a vast swath of Russian territory (Latvia, Lithuania, Russian territory in Poland and Finland, and the Ukraine). The terms were made official in the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed in March 1918.

By signing this treaty with Germany, the Bolsheviks aroused strong opposition in two groups of people. The first was Russia's former allies, still fighting

the First World War. Britain and France felt that Russia had betrayed and abandoned them. The second group was the many Russians who were alarmed at the terms of the treaty. The loss of the western territory was significant because this was the most “modern” part of the country. Western Russia was better developed, more densely populated, and more industrialized than the central and eastern portions of the country. However, Lenin believed that the first thing he must do in power was to seize control and hold it. This did not allow for the niceties of pleasing his future constituents or kowtowing to his power base. He needed to demonstrate that he was in charge and that he knew what he was doing. Therefore, he ignored all opposition to the treaty.

The Russian Civil War

By 1918, an all-out civil war was raging in Russia between the Whites and the Reds. The Whites were royalists, moderates, anti-Communists, and non-Russian Europeans who wanted to overpower the Bolsheviks and restore some semblance of reasonable government to Russia. The Reds supported the Bolsheviks, who renamed themselves “Communists” during this period. (The terms *Bolshevik* and *Communist* can be used interchangeably to refer to the ruling political party when discussing Russia under Lenin’s rule.) The Red Army’s loyalty to the Communist Party and the state would make it one of the Party’s most effective tools in the following years.

The civil war lasted for about three years, during which there were mass desertions on both sides; in the end, the Reds prevailed. There were several reasons for their victory. First, they outnumbered the Whites. Second, their commanders were much better organized than those on the White side. Third, they had in Lenin an identifiable strong leader with clear goals. The Whites consisted of too many groups whose interests were not necessarily identical. Fourth, the Reds controlled Moscow, which meant they controlled the railroads. Finally, the Reds enjoyed tremendous popular support within Russia. Workers naturally rallied behind the Bolsheviks because they were the self-proclaimed Workers’ Party. Peasants distrusted the Whites because the Whites did not immediately promise them ownership of the land. Russian leaders also supported the Reds; they considered the Whites to be foreign interlopers and they resented Europe’s hostility toward the new Russian government. On their side, the Europeans bitterly resented the timing of the revolution because it had meant Russia’s withdrawal from World War I. This era created distrust

between Russia and the rest of Europe that lasted the rest of the century and lingers even to the present day.

Russia and the Soviet Union Under Lenin

The Communist regime that emerged from the civil war was characterized by chaos. Lenin and his associates had no experience of governing and had to create a system by trial and error. Lenin knew that he wanted an autocratic regime in which he would be sole dictator. He never considered establishing a parliamentary system; he believed this to be simply a rubber stamp for the capitalist forces of society.

A major goal of the Russian revolutionaries was to incite similar revolutions throughout all of Europe; to destroy not just a type of government but an entire existing social and political order. To help bring this about, Lenin and his associates formed the International Communist Party, known as the Comintern, in 1919. The Comintern was characterized by rigid, uncompromising rules. Although the Socialist movement was strong throughout Europe, European Socialists were more moderate than Communists; they were on the whole satisfied with the greater degree of representation that ordinary citizens acquired during the nineteenth century. For example, by 1914 universal or near-universal adult male suffrage was the law in Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and elsewhere. Additionally, women acquired unprecedented freedom and political power during and immediately after World War I. In this acceptance of the system, Lenin saw the defeat of everything he wanted to accomplish; the Socialists of Europe simply were not prepared to go to the same extremes as the Communists. Through the Comintern, Lenin hoped to change this. Moscow controlled the Comintern from the early 1920s.

In 1919, after World War I was over, the Great Powers met at Versailles to negotiate the peace. Russia took no part in the negotiations, but the country was nonetheless affected. The Russian territory that Germany had taken at Brest-Litovsk was made into independent nations; had Russia sent a delegation to Versailles, this might have been arranged differently. As matters stood, the Communist government refused to acknowledge the loss of the western territory until some time after Versailles. In the end, of course, Russia lost the fight to keep its land.

War between Russia and Poland broke out in 1920. It did not last long. In March 1921 the peace treaty established the Russian-Polish border that would

remain in place until 1939. Poland had become an enemy for Lenin to reckon with, for several reasons. First, it had a long-standing history of resentment toward Russian oppression. Second, it was a large nation with a large population, capable of holding its own in a struggle with Russia. Third, the Poles were fiercely anti-Bolshevik, in part because Poland was largely a Catholic nation and the Bolsheviks were atheists.

The early 1920s in Russia can accurately be called “a Second Time of Troubles.” As a true Marxist, Lenin believed above all in policies that favored the workers. He also believed that industrialization was the key to Russia’s economic recovery. Therefore he instituted the New Economic Policy in 1921. It called for peasants to sell their surplus grain to the state at a fixed price in either money or kind (such as clothing or tools); the grain would be used to feed the urban industrial workers.

The peasants reacted to the government orders in a way the Communists had not foreseen. Industry was crippled from the war and was not producing anything for the peasants to buy, so money was not useful to them; and the state rarely remembered to pay them in kind. Therefore, instead of working hard to provide the necessary surplus, they hoarded their grain, fearful of not having enough to feed their families. With no grain coming in from the country, the urban workers were going hungry; soon many of them were fleeing to the country in search of food. Severe droughts at this time led to widespread famine. Historians estimate that perhaps 6 million Russians died of starvation and disease during this period.

In 1922, Russia was renamed to reflect the new government’s philosophy: it became the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, called the Soviet Union or USSR for short. The twelve individual republics—including Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Russia—were equals, each with its own soviet, and all firmly under control of the dictator.

The Communists made it clear to the old guard that there was no place for them in the new workers’ state. In the Soviet Union, the concept of private property disappeared. The wealthy were stripped of their homes, which were turned into apartment houses for workers, with the original owners perhaps being allowed to rent one room as their own family apartment. At least 2 million aristocrats packed what they could carry and fled to Western Europe. Those who stayed had to learn hard manual labor like all other Soviets.

Stalin

After suffering a series of strokes, Lenin died in 1924 without naming a successor. Two men, both of whom had been close to Lenin but neither of whom he believed should rule, emerged as the most likely candidates for dictator: Leon Trotsky and Joseph Stalin.

Trotsky was born Leon Bronstein in 1879 in the Black Sea province of Kherston. A political protestor in his youth, he had been imprisoned and exiled to Siberia. On his successful escape, he took the name Trotsky. He had been Lenin's closest associate, despite violent disagreements between them, and had played a major role in the coup of 1917. Joseph Stalin was born Joseph Dzhugashvili in 1878 in Georgia. An early follower of Lenin, he led an outlaw existence throughout much of his youth and was imprisoned on a number of occasions. He founded the workers' newspaper *Pravda* (*Truth*). Stalin, based on the Russian word for "steel," was a pen name he used throughout his career. Like Trotsky, Stalin rose to a prominent position of leadership among the Communists, although he had serious and frequent disagreements with Lenin. In the power struggle following Lenin's death, Stalin triumphed over Trotsky and became dictator; it was not long before he forced Trotsky to leave the country for good.

Stalin has earned the reputation of being history's most ruthless dictator, with the possible exception of Adolf Hitler. Under his rule, the Soviet Union could accurately be described as a police state. Stalin enforced his policies with no evidence of a conscience and no regard whatsoever for human life. Historians have estimated that about 30 million Russians died during his regime—some of starvation or disease, but most either in the brutal conditions of the labor camps or because their executions were ordered by the state. The government was careful to conceal evidence of Stalin's brutality from the outside world; even many Russians were not aware of its full extent.

The Communists all believed that industrialization was of paramount importance in making the Soviet Union a major European power once again. However, they differed over the means toward achieving this end. Some believed that since the grain harvests were needed to feed the industrial workers, the state should try to gain the peasants' support. Others believed that it was not necessary to conciliate the peasants, since the state could force them into obedience. Stalin was one of the latter group.

Stalin's policy, called the Five-Year Plan, was implemented in 1929. It involved two goals. The first was collectivization, in which small independent farmers (known in Russian as *kulaks*) and subsistence farmers were forced to pool their land and work the new, giant farms together, with the state dictating prices. Since the *kulaks* were accustomed to independence, owning their own land and farming it as they saw fit, they naturally had no desire to join state-run collectives. Their lack of cooperation made Stalin decide to get rid of them; he was genuinely at odds with the peasants, considering them nothing more than a means for providing the urban workers with food. Between 1930 and 1933, more than 2 million *kulaks* and "sympathizers" were deported, either to collective farms far from their own districts or to prison camps.

The second goal of the Five-Year Plan was to develop heavy industry. Russia had been slow to industrialize but had begun to catch up to the rest of Europe by 1913. Although the war and revolution put a stop to this process, production had risen nearly to its 1913 levels by 1927. As part of the Five-Year Plan, the state called for major public-works projects, including the Moscow Metro, railways, canals, and power plants. Many were built with prison-camp labor. As a result of the Five-Year Plan, employment doubled and industrial output more than doubled by 1932—but not without taking a toll on the workers. Other Five-Year Plans would follow.

Artists and intellectuals had a particularly bad time of it under the new regime. Under the New Economic Policy, some bold experimentation had occurred in the arts, but Stalin immediately put a stop to it. He believed that the purpose of all art was to serve the state, not to express what an individual artist wished to communicate. Books, films, popular songs, symphonies, paintings, plays—works of art in all genres were banned if they hinted at any criticism of the regime or suggested that social conditions in Russia were anything short of ideal. Some emigrated to Europe or the United States; others stayed and did their best to come to terms with the policies.

Although Stalin achieved an impressive degree of control over the state and the people, there were some things he could not control, even with his willingness to use any means necessary. During his first few years in power, the Soviet Union experienced severe food shortages, widespread lack of cooperation from the peasants, mass migrations to the cities that left fewer people to farm the land, a typhus epidemic, and in 1933, a famine that probably killed more than 4 million people. The nation's economic gains during this period are especially impressive considering the harsh conditions in which the people were living.

During the mid-1930s, a wave of executions and banishments known as the Great Purges did much to establish Stalin's historical reputation. Historians' interpretations of the Great Purges vary, but most agree that Stalin set about them as a means of preserving his autocratic powers. Between 1936 and 1939, at least 750,000 people were executed or banished to the labor camps. Anyone who opposed Stalin publicly, or was unfortunate enough to be caught denouncing him privately, was purged—military officers, high-ranking politicians or economists, artists and intellectuals, and political dissenters.

Communism Elsewhere in Europe

Lenin had originally expected that the Communist Revolution would sweep through Europe. His expectations were only partially fulfilled. Socialist and Communist uprisings took place throughout Germany and Eastern Europe, but none lasted more than five months. Outside Russia, Socialists could generally find their place in a parliamentary system of government.

Germany underwent a chaotic period of popular uprisings during the fall of 1918. In January 1919, the monarchy was replaced by the Weimar Republic, named for the city in which the legislative assembly met and wrote the new German constitution. The Weimar Republic lasted only until the rise of Adolf Hitler in 1933. (See Chapter 17.)

The Communists were closest to achieving success in Hungary, where a workers' republic was established in 1919 under Bela Kun. This Communist state lasted five months—a period of brutal oppression known in Hungary as the Red Terror—before it was replaced by something resembling a constitutional monarchy under former diplomat and naval commander Miklos Horthy. Communists in Bavaria and Slovakia also established workers' states, but each lasted for a few weeks only.

QUIZ

- 1. What was the immediate result of the abdication of Czar Nicholas II?**
 - A. The Provisional Government assumed power.
 - B. Lenin founded the International Communist Party.
 - C. The state introduced enforced collectivization.
 - D. Russia signed a peace treaty with Germany.
- 2. The primary goal of the Five-Year Plan was**
 - A. to pass major social legislation.
 - B. to recover territory lost during World War I.
 - C. to write a new constitution.
 - D. to improve industrialization.
- 3. The Russian Revolution was unique among all European revolutions because**
 - A. a dictator rose to power after the abolition of a monarchy.
 - B. it was intended to overturn the social order throughout Europe.
 - C. the new government was established only after a civil war was fought.
 - D. it replaced one form of government with an entirely different form.
- 4. In what way was the new order in Russia exactly like the old order?**
 - A. The head of state and the head of the Orthodox Church were allies.
 - B. The head of state was an autocrat whose dictates could not be questioned.
 - C. The government relied on and courted the support of the people.
 - D. The government supported revolutionary activity in other European nations.
- 5. Why did European nations oppose the Bolshevik government when it was first established?**
 - A. They were afraid of the Bolsheviks' influence in Eastern Europe.
 - B. They did not want an alliance to form between Russia and Germany.
 - C. They resented Russia's withdrawal from the First World War.
 - D. They did not believe in government by the people.
- 6. Which of the following choices best describes the White forces during the Russian civil war?**
 - A. workers and peasants
 - B. international Communists
 - C. royalists and anti-Communists
 - D. liberals and Socialists

7. In the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Russia agreed to give up western territory to Germany in exchange for _____
- German surrender to Russia.
 - German withdrawal from Russia.
 - a German-Russian defensive alliance.
 - German reparations.
8. Why did Communism not take a stronger hold in Europe after World War I?
- Socialists were contented with representative European governments.
 - There was no international Communist party.
 - Europeans were shocked by stories of Stalin's brutal policies.
 - Nations were too busy rebuilding their economies.
9. Russian peasants supported the Reds during the civil war because the Reds promised them _____
- land.
 - money.
 - the vote.
 - freedom.
10. Stalin is considered an especially brutal dictator because
- he led the nation into wars it could not win.
 - he was an absolute ruler who did not accept advice or counsel.
 - he ordered the exile, imprisonment, and/or execution of millions.
 - he used the army and police as tools of oppression.