

World War I and the Russian Revolution

THE STORY MATTERS...

On June 28, 1914, an assassination in the Balkans created an international crisis, igniting a European powder keg created by nationalism, massive military buildups, complex alliances, and imperial rivalries. By August, Europe was at war. The widespread use of trench warfare on the Western Front in France created a destructive stalemate that lasted four years. The introduction of new weapons, including heavy artillery, tanks, machine guns, and poison gas, produced casualty levels that dwarfed those of previous wars.

Lesson 27-3

The Russian Revolution

READING HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

revolution aid

Content Vocabulary

soviet war communism abdicate

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

- Why do politics often lead to war?
- How can technology impact war?

IT MATTERS BECAUSE

As the war dragged on, Russia stirred with unrest. The Romanov dynasty of Russia ended when Czar Nicholas II stepped down and a provisional government was put in power. Then the Bolsheviks under V. I. Lenin overthrew the government and by 1921 were in total command of Russia.

Background to Revolution

GUIDING QUESTION *What factors and events led to the Russian Revolution?*

After its defeat by Japan in 1905 and the Revolution of 1905, Russia was unprepared militarily and technologically for the total war of World War I. Russia had no competent military leaders. Even worse, Czar Nicholas II insisted on taking personal charge of the armed forces despite his lack of ability and training.

In addition, Russian industry was unable to produce the weapons needed for the army. Many soldiers trained using broomsticks. Others were sent to the front without rifles and told to pick one up from a dead comrade. Thus, it is not surprising that the Russian army suffered incredible losses. Two million soldiers were killed between 1914 and 1916, and another 4 to 6 million were wounded or captured. By 1917 the Russian will to fight had vanished.

An autocratic ruler, Czar Nicholas II relied on the army and bureaucracy to hold up his regime. He was further cut off from events when a man named Grigory Rasputin (ra • SPYOO • tuhn), known to be a mystic, began to influence the czar's wife, Alexandra. With the czar at the battlefield, it was rumored that Alexandra made all of the important decisions after consulting Rasputin.

Rasputin's influence made him an important power behind the throne.

As the leadership stumbled its way through a series of military and economic disasters, the Russian people grew more upset with the czarist regime. Even conservative aristocrats who supported the monarchy felt the need to do something. They assassinated Rasputin in December 1916, but it was too late to save the monarchy.

At the beginning of March 1917, working-class women led a series of strikes in the capital city of Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg), helping to change Russian history. A few weeks earlier, the Russian government had started bread rationing in Petrograd after the price of bread skyrocketed. Many of the women who stood in the lines waiting for bread were also factory workers who worked 12-hour days. Exhausted from standing in line, and distraught over their half-starving and sick children, the women finally revolted.

THINKING LIKE A *Historian*

How Important Was Rasputin?

In the introduction to his best-selling book *Nicholas and Alexandra*, historian Robert Massie quotes Aleksandr Kerensky's observation, "If there had been no Rasputin, there would have been no Lenin." The role of Rasputin in the history of Russia is one debated by historians. Was he such an important figure or was his influence merely the stuff of legends? How much influence can one man have to effect historical change? Use the Internet to find reliable sources about how much Rasputin contributed to the fall of the Russian monarchy.

On March 8, about 10,000 women marched through the city of Petrograd demanding "Peace and Bread" and "Down with Autocracy." Soon the women were joined by other workers. Together they called for a general strike. The strike shut down all the factories in the city on March 10.

Alexandra wrote to her husband Nicholas II at the battlefield: "This is a hooligan movement. If the weather were very cold they would all probably stay at home."

Nicholas ordered troops to break up the crowds by shooting them if necessary. Soon, however, large numbers of the soldiers joined the demonstrators and refused to fire on the crowds.

The Duma, or legislative body, which the czar had tried to dissolve, met anyway. On March 12, it established the provisional government, which mainly consisted of middle-class representatives. It urged the czar to step down. Because he no longer had the support of the army or even the aristocrats, Nicholas II reluctantly agreed and stepped down on March 15, ending the 300-year-old Romanov dynasty.

The provisional government, headed by Aleksandr Kerensky (keh • REHN • skee), decided to carry on the war to preserve Russia's honor. This decision to remain in World War I was a major blunder. It satisfied neither the workers nor the peasants, who were tired and angry from years of suffering and wanted an end to the war.

The government also faced a challenge to its authority – the soviets. The soviets were councils comprised of representatives from the workers and soldiers. The soviet of Petrograd was formed in March 1917. At the same time, soviets sprang up in army units, factory towns, and rural areas. The soviets, largely made up of Socialists, represented the more radical interests of the lower classes. One group – the Bolsheviks – came to play a crucial role.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Drawing Conclusions What grievances did the Russian people have with the provisional government?

Lenin and the Bolsheviks

GUIDING QUESTION *How did Russia move from a czarist regime to a Communist regime?*

The Bolsheviks began as a small faction of a Marxist party called the Russian Social Democrats. The Bolsheviks came under the leadership of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (ool • YAH. nuhf), known to the world as V. I. Lenin. Under Lenin's direction, the Bolsheviks became a party dedicated to violent revolution. Lenin believed that only violent revolution could destroy the capitalist system. A "vanguard" (forefront) of activists, he said, must form a small party of well-disciplined, professional revolutionaries to accomplish the task.

Between the years 1900 and 1917, Lenin spent most of his time abroad. When the Russian provisional government was formed in March 1917, he saw an opportunity for the Bolsheviks to seize power. In April 1917, German military leaders, hoping to create disorder in Russia, shipped Lenin back to Russia. Lenin and his associates were sent in a sealed train to prevent their ideas from infecting Germany.

Lenin's arrival in Russia began a new phase of the Russian Revolution. Lenin maintained that the soviets of soldiers, workers, and peasants were ready-made instruments of power. He believed that the Bolsheviks should work toward gaining control of these groups and then use them to overthrow the provisional government.

At the same time, the Bolsheviks reflected the discontent of the people. They promised an end to the war. They also promised to redistribute all land to the peasants, to transfer factories and industries from capitalists to committees of workers, and to transfer government power from the provisional government to the soviets. Three simple slogans summed up the Bolshevik program: "Peace, Land, Bread," "Worker Control of Production," and "All Power to the Soviets."

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Inferring Why did German military leaders return Lenin to Russia?

The Bolsheviks Seize Power

GUIDING QUESTION *How did Russia move from a czarist regime to a Communist regime?*

By the end of October 1917, Bolsheviks made up a slight majority in the Petrograd and Moscow soviets. The number of party members had grown from 50,000 to 240,000. With Leon Trotsky as head of the Petrograd soviet, the Bolsheviks were in a position to claim power in the name of the soviets. During the night of November 6, Bolshevik forces seized the Winter Palace, the seat of the provisional government. The government quickly collapsed with little bloodshed. This overthrow coincided with a meeting of the all-Russian Congress of Soviets, which represented local soviets countrywide. Outwardly, Lenin turned over the power of the provisional government to the Congress of Soviets. The real power, however, passed to a council headed by Lenin.

The Bolsheviks, who soon renamed themselves the Communists, still had a long way to go. Lenin had promised peace, yet he realized delivering that would not be easy. It would mean the humiliating loss of much Russian territory, but there was no real choice.

On March 3, 1918, Lenin signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany and gave up eastern Poland, Ukraine, Finland, and the Baltic provinces. To his critics, Lenin argued that it made no difference. The spread of the socialist revolution throughout Europe would make the treaty largely irrelevant. In any case, he had promised peace to the Russian people. Real peace did not come, however, because the country soon sank into civil war.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Making Generalizations Why might the promises of the Bolsheviks have been appealing to the Russian people?

Civil War in Russia

GUIDING QUESTION *What forces opposed the Communist government?*

Many people were opposed to the new Bolshevik, or Communist, government. These people included not only groups that were loyal to the czar but also liberal and anti-Leninist socialists. They were joined by the Allies, who were concerned about the Communist takeover. The Allies sent troops to Russia in the hope of bringing Russia back into

the war. The Allies rarely fought on Russian soil, but they gave material aid to anti-Communists.

Between 1918 and 1921, the Communist, or Red, Army fought on many fronts. The first serious threat to the Communists came from Siberia. An anti-Communist, or White, force attacked and advanced almost to the Volga River before being stopped. Attacks also came from the Ukrainians and from the Baltic regions. In mid-1919, White forces swept through Ukraine and advanced almost to Moscow before being pushed back.

By 1920, however, the major White forces had been defeated and Ukraine retaken. The next year, the Communist regime regained control over the independent nationalist governments in Georgia, Russian Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

The royal family was another victim of the civil war. After the czar abdicated, he, his wife, and their five children had been held abdicate to formally give up as prisoners. In April 1918, they were moved to Yekaterinburg, a mining town in the Urals. On the night of July 16, members of the local soviet murdered the czar and his family and burned their bodies in a nearby mine shaft.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Contrasting How were the White forces and the anti-Leninist socialists different?

Triumph of the Communists

GUIDING QUESTION *What factors helped the Communists win the Russian civil war?*

How did Lenin and the Communists triumph in the civil war over such overwhelming forces? One reason was that the Red Army was a well-disciplined fighting force. This was largely due to the organizational genius of Leon Trotsky. As commissar of war, Trotsky reinstated the draft and insisted on rigid discipline. Soldiers who deserted or refused to obey orders were executed on the spot.

Furthermore, the disunity of the anti-Communist forces weakened their efforts. Political differences created

distrust among the Whites. Some Whites insisted on restoring the czarist regime. Others wanted a more liberal and democratic program. The Whites, then, had no common goal.

The Communists, in contrast, had a single-minded sense of purpose. Inspired by their vision of a new socialist order, the Communists had revolutionary zeal and strong convictions. They also were able to translate their revolutionary faith into practical instruments of power. A policy of war communism, for example, was used to ensure regular supplies for the Red Army. War communism meant the government controlled the banks and most industries, seized grain from peasants, and centralized state administration under Communist control.

Another instrument was Communist revolutionary terror. A new Red secret police—known as the Cheka—began a Red Terror. Aimed at destroying all those who opposed the new regime, the Red Terror added an element of fear to the Communist regime.

Finally, foreign armies on Russian soil enabled the Communists to appeal to the powerful force of Russian patriotism. At one point, more than 100,000 foreign troops—mostly Japanese, British, American, and French—were stationed in Russia in support of anti-Communist forces. Their presence made it easy for the Communist government to call on patriotic Russians to fight foreign attempts to control the country.

By 1921 the Communists were in total command of Russia. The Communist regime had transformed Russia into a centralized state dominated by a single party. The state was also largely hostile to the Allied Powers, because the Allies had tried to help the Communists' enemies in the civil war.

READING PROGRESS CHECK

Identifying Central Issues What was war communism, and why was it important?

Vocabulary

| | |
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| soviet | Russian councils composed of representatives from the workers and soldiers |
| war communism | in World War I Russia, government control of banks and most industries, the seizing of grain from peasants, and the centralization of state administration under Communist control |
| abdicate | to formally give up control of a country or state |