Russian Revolution (1917)

The Russian Revolution occurred in two stages towards the close of World War I. It led to the overthrow of the Romanov dynasty and the establishment of the world’s first communist regime. Although the Revolution in 1917 was the first to overthrow the Romanovs, imperial Russia had a long history of rebellions against the autocratic rule of the tsars. During the seventeenth century, Ivan Bolotnikov and Stenka Razin led two separate peasant rebellions nearly fifty years apart. In the following century, Kondatry Bulavin and Yemelyan Pugachev led uprisings. In the nineteenth century, Russia faced the Decembrist Revolt in 1825 following the death of Alexander I. In 1863, parts of Poland and Lithuania rebelled to gain more cultural freedom.

The reign of Nicholas II (1894-1917) worsened the relationship between the tsar and the Russian public. On the day of his coronation, a mass was held at Khodynka field near Moscow. When some attendees heard not everyone would receive the promised free food and drink, they trampled others, with an estimated 1,300 dead and 1,300 injured. Nicholas and Alexandra still held their celebration banquet, gaining him the title Bloody Nicholas.

The Revolution of 1905 illustrated the tensions between the tsar and his people and further exacerbated those tensions. The educated elite began to resent the autocracy of the tsar, while ethnic minorities on the Western peripheries of the empire, such as Poles, Jews and Lithuanians, demanded more political and social freedom. Workers in St. Petersburg peacefully protested for more humane working conditions. An Orthodox priest, Father Gapon, led the crowd towards the Winter Palace to present the tsar with their requests. As the protestors approached, the tsar’s troops opened fire, killing between two hundred and 1,000 people. In 1906, Nicholas II agreed to allow the opening of the Duma (the Russian Assembly). Although the Duma operated until 1917, Nicholas restricted its influence throughout the period.

The Russian people initially supported the tsar’s entry into WWI with great patriotism, believing the war would be short. As the war dragged on, however, millions of male peasants left the countryside for the front, many never returning. Women were left impoverished, often supporting many children alone. Shortages were routine, especially in Moscow and St. Petersburg. On the home front, the largely female public began to protest. These protests coincided with the growing instability of the monarchy. Nicholas II fired his commander-in-chief and insisted on directing the war himself from the front. His wife Alexandra, left in charge of many day-to-day administrative decisions, was widely despised because of her German origins and close relationship with the mystical monk, Rasputin. Cousins of the tsar eventually assassinated Rasputin.

On February 22 (old style), workers at the Pulitov Factory announced a strike. The next day, International Women’s Day, women protested in the street for more bread, largely unavailable in the city. The mob of angry women marched to the nearby Pulitov Factory and encouraged the men to join them in their protest. The army in Petrograd received orders to disperse the protestors, but the soldiers, largely sympathetic to the protest, refused to fire on the large number of women in the crowd. During the tsar’s return to Petrograd, his advisors recommended that he abdicate. He relinquished power initially to his son Alexei, who was too ill to rule, and then turned to his brother Michael, who refused to take the crown unless democratically elected. Nicholas was imprisoned with his family in the Alexander Palace at Tsarskoe Selo outside of the city.

The Provisional Government came to power under the leadership of Alexander Kerensky, who believed it should remain in place until the end of World War I, when Russia could again hold elections. The Provisional Government also agreed to maintain Russia’s participation in the war. At the same time, the Petrograd Soviet organized itself, modeled on the organs of self-government that evolved in rural areas following the 1905 Revolution. The Petrograd Soviet consisted mainly of socialist groups representing urban workers, and Kerensky believed these men wanted to undermine the Provisional Government.

Participation in World War I became increasingly unpopular, especially after Russia’s failed offensive against Germany. Led by the Krondstat sailors, many men refused to go to the front. During riots in Petrograd, Lenin, who reentered Russia in April, famously announced “All power to the Soviets,” but denied responsibility for the ensuing protests. The decline in popularity of the Provisional Government pushed Russian society in Petrograd toward more radical groups, like the Bolsheviks. In August, General Kornilov decided the city was in anarchy and ordered troops to take it. But Kerensky, with the help of the Bolsheviks, stopped Kornilov from taking power.

In September, the Provisional Government agreed to release all Bolsheviks from prison. Combined with Trotsky’s power as leader of the Petrograd Soviet and the growing popular support for the Bolsheviks, this decision fatally undermined the Provisional Government. On October 25, the Bolsheviks stormed the Winter Palace and overthrew the Provisional Government. Initially, the people elected Bolshevik leaders, but the Bolsheviks lacked a strong base of support outside the industrialized cities of Petrograd and Moscow. As a result, the country descended into civil war as the Bolsheviks fought to gain support in the large expanses of rural Russia.

Further Reading:

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