

Russian Revolution

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was one of the most explosive political events of the twentieth century. The violent revolution marked the end of the Romanov dynasty and centuries of Russian Imperial rule. During the Russian Revolution, the Bolsheviks, led by leftist revolutionary Vladimir Lenin, seized power and destroyed the tradition of czarist rule. The Bolsheviks would later become the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

When Was the Russian Revolution?

In 1917, two revolutions swept through Russia, ending centuries of imperial rule and setting into motion political and social changes that would lead to the formation of the [Soviet Union](#). While the two revolutionary events took place within a few short months, social unrest in Russia had been simmering for decades.

In the early 1900s, Russia was one of the most impoverished countries in Europe with an enormous peasantry and a growing minority of poor industrial workers.

Much of Western Europe viewed Russia as an undeveloped, backwards society. The Russian Empire practiced serfdom—a form of feudalism in which landless peasants were forced to serve the land-owning nobility—well into the nineteenth century. In contrast, the practice had disappeared in most of Western Europe by the end of the [Middle Ages](#).

In 1861, the Russian Empire finally abolished serfdom. The emancipation of serfs would influence the events leading up to the Russian Revolution by giving peasants more freedom to organize.

Russian Revolution of 1905

Russia industrialized much later than Western Europe and the United States. When it finally did, around the turn of the 20th century, it brought with it immense social and political changes.

Between 1890 and 1910, for example, the population of major Russian cities such as St. Petersburg and Moscow nearly doubled, resulting in overcrowding and destitute living conditions for a new class of Russian industrial workers.

A population boom at the end of the 19th century, a harsh growing season due to Russia's northern climate, and a series of costly wars—starting with the [Crimean War](#) (1854-1856)—meant frequent food shortages across the vast empire.

Large protests by Russian workers against the monarchy led to the [Bloody Sunday massacre of 1905](#). Hundreds of unarmed protesters were killed or wounded by the czar's troops.

The massacre sparked the Russian revolution of 1905, during which angry workers responded with a series of crippling strikes throughout the country.

Nicholas II

After the bloodshed of 1905, [Czar Nicholas II](#) promised the formation of a series of representative assemblies, or Dumas, to work toward reform.

Russia entered into [World War I](#) in August 1914 in support of the Serbs and their French and British allies. Their involvement in the war would soon prove disastrous for the Russian Empire.

Militarily, imperial Russia was no match for industrialized Germany, and Russian casualties were greater than those sustained by any nation in any previous war. Food and fuel shortages plagued Russia as inflation mounted. The economy was hopelessly disrupted by the costly war effort.

Czar Nicholas left the Russian capital of Petrograd (St. Petersburg) in 1915 to take command of the Russian Army front. (The Russians had renamed the imperial city in 1914, because the name “St. Petersburg” had sounded too German.)

Rasputin and the Czarina

In her husband’s absence, Czarina Alexandra—an unpopular woman of German ancestry—began firing elected officials. During this time, her controversial advisor, [Grigory Rasputin](#), increased his influence over Russian politics and the royal [Romanov family](#).

Russian nobles eager to end Rasputin’s influence murdered him on December 30, 1916. By then, most Russians had lost faith in the failed leadership of the czar. Government corruption was rampant, the Russian economy remained backward and [Nicholas repeatedly dissolved the Duma](#), the toothless Russian parliament established after the 1905 revolution, when it opposed his will.

Moderates soon joined Russian radical elements in calling for an overthrow of the hapless czar.

February Revolution

The [February Revolution](#) (known as such because of Russia’s use of the Julian calendar until February 1918) began on March 8, 1917 (February 23 on the Julian calendar).

Demonstrators clamoring for bread took to the streets of Petrograd. Supported by huge crowds of striking industrial workers, the protesters clashed with police but refused to leave the streets.

On March 11, the troops of the Petrograd army garrison were called out to quell the uprising. In some encounters, the regiments opened fire, killing demonstrators, but the protesters kept to the streets and the troops began to waver.

The Duma formed a provisional government on March 12. A few days later, [Czar Nicholas abdicated](#) the throne, ending centuries of Russian Romanov rule.

The leaders of the provisional government, including young Russian lawyer Alexander Kerensky, established a liberal program of rights such as freedom of speech, equality before the law, and the right of unions to organize and strike. They opposed violent social revolution.

As minister of war, Kerensky continued the Russian war effort, even though Russian involvement in World War I was enormously unpopular. This further exacerbated Russia's food supply problems. Unrest continued to grow as peasants looted farms and food riots erupted in the cities.

Bolshevik Revolution

On November 6 and 7, 1917 (or October 24 and 25 on the Julian calendar, which is why the event is often referred to as the [October Revolution](#)), leftist revolutionaries led by Bolshevik Party leader [Vladimir Lenin](#) launched a nearly bloodless coup d'état against the Duma's provisional government.

The provisional government had been assembled by a group of leaders from Russia's bourgeois capitalist class. Lenin instead called for a Soviet government that would be ruled directly by councils of soldiers, peasants and workers.

The Bolsheviks and their allies occupied government buildings and other strategic locations in Petrograd, and soon formed a new government with Lenin as its head. Lenin became the dictator of the world's first communist state.

Russian Civil War

Civil War broke out in Russia in late 1917 after the Bolshevik Revolution. The warring factions included the Red and White Armies.

The Red Army fought for the Lenin's Bolshevik government. The White Army represented a large group of loosely allied forces, including monarchists, capitalists and supporters of democratic socialism.

On July 16, 1918, the Romanovs were executed by the Bolsheviks.

The Russian Civil War ended in 1923 with Lenin's Red Army claiming victory and establishing the Soviet Union.

Impact of The Russian Revolution

The Russian Revolution paved the way for the rise of communism as an influential political belief system around the world. It set the stage for the rise of the Soviet Union as a world power that would go head-to-head with the United States during the Cold War.