

The October Revolution



- In this, the second week of our course, we continue to look at some of the background history to “Stalin’s Russia.” In particular, we investigate the revolution that forever altered Russia and, thereby, lay the groundwork for Stalin’s rise. To say the least, Russia experienced a cataclysm in 1917—possibly the most revolutionary revolution any country has experienced in the modern era, maybe ever. The more chaotic a transformation, the greater the likelihood of despotism. Insecurity and anarchy breed dictatorship. These are time-honored adages, as old as history itself, and they certainly held true for Russia in the year 1917 and the decades that followed.

- First, we must address the period that we left off in our last unit. Following the failure of the “Decembrist Revolution,” Russia entered an era of what historians like to call “reaction.” The new czar, Nicholas I, had been frightened by the rebels’ show of force. Rather than institute reforms, he sought inspiration in the past. His credo of “Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Nationality” (meaning respect for him, the Russian church, and Russian tradition—not nationalism in the western sense) reflected this impulse, and Russia did not advance during his reign. As France was overthrowing the Bourbon monarchy once and for all (1830) and Britain was instituting middle-class voting rights (1832), Russia was ossifying, becoming more encrusted in its old ways. Nicholas died in 1855, in the midst of Russia’s humiliating defeat in the Crimean war (1853-1856). Here, Russia proved itself unable to defend itself in its own back yard (the northern Black Sea region), exhibiting to all the world, including Nicholas’ successor Alexander II (1855-1881), how backwards the country was. A period of reform followed, but it was limited. In 1861, Russia’s serfs, for example, were emancipated. However, in order to really gain their freedom the serfs needed to pay large sums of money to their landlords, money that most of them did not have. The result was that Russia’s masses of toilers remained tied to the nobles’ land as *de facto* serfs up until World War I. A number of other reforms were instituted, but they were piecemeal--too little, too late.

- Nicholas I (1825-1855)



- The ruler who led Russia into the twentieth century was ill suited to the task. Debilitating stresses now fractured the country. A mass of overworked, underpaid, and discontented peasantry (i.e., very poor farmers and laborers) seethed in the Russian countryside. Industrialization came late to Russia, but its sudden rise in the environs of St. Petersburg and Moscow after 1870 produced tens of thousands of highly politicized, radical, and unhappy factory workers. Labor conditions in Russian factories were worse than at the lowest moments of the British industrial revolution. Nicholas II might, upon his ascension, have moved quickly to alleviate these pressures via reform, but, like Nicholas I, he believed above all in the power and tradition of tsardom. He would only change things when he had to.

Nicholas II (ruled 1894-1917)



The Revolution of 1905

- The events of 1905 forced his hand. In that year, Russia suffered humiliating defeat at the hands of the Japanese in the Russo-Japanese war, making Russia one of only two colonial powers to lose to a non-western military (the other was Italy). Revolts broke out in St. Petersburg and Moscow; masses of desperate, impoverished people marched on Nicholas' residence at the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg. Pressured by the tumult, Nicholas issued the "October Manifesto," granting Russia its first constitution and legislature. One might have thought that this would pave the way for Russia's transformation, but Nicholas granted these things reluctantly. As soon as the tumult of the year receded, he backtracked, refusing to work with the legislature and repeatedly calling new elections to force a more conciliatory membership. The "Revolution of 1905," as it has been termed, produced some changes. Once again, however, they were too little, too late, and Nicholas did everything in his power to make sure that whatever changes did take place were of as little consequence as possible. Between 1905 and 1914, for example, myriad attempts were made to help solve the "land issue"—the fact that the vast majority of choice farmland lay in the hands of a tiny minority of oligarchs while the vast majority of Russians remained deeply impoverished—but nothing was ever accomplished. Life in Russia's factories worsened. As more and more Russians entered the cities in search of work, rents and food prices rose, while wages stagnated. Rising discontent encountered a government that, just as it had for centuries, remained set in its ways.



World War I

- It must nonetheless be said clearly: without World War I, the Russian Communists (Bolsheviks) would never have come to power, and therefore the name Stalin would be unknown to the historical register. Certainly, there would have been a revolution at one point or another—centuries of stagnation could not but have come to some sort of bad end, but only a cataclysmic event like the “great war” could have produced so dramatic an outcome as Bolshevism and Stalinism. But World War I did indeed occur, and the massive stresses of this conflict were too much for the teetering Russian colossus to bear. No country lost more dead and wounded (as many as ten million casualties, according to certain figures) than Russia during the “Great War”; no country experienced more economic, political, and social stress. Not coincidentally, no country came out of the war more transformed.

Defeat after defeat on the frontlines combined with numerous other problems to trigger revolution

- **Inflation:** As demand for increasingly scarce resources mounted, prices rose precipitously. Basic necessities like bread became too expensive for large portions of the population.
- **Rising cost of housing:** A large influx of laborers into the cities to work in the armaments industries overburdened the housing stock, driving up rents and making apartments unaffordable for many families.
- **High cost of farm labor:** Since so many peasant farmers were in the army, there was a shortage of labor in the countryside. Landlords took land out of cultivation rather than pay the high wages demanded by the few laborers who remained.
- **Dwindling harvests:** Because of the soaring cost of bread, the government fixed grain prices, but allowed the prices of manufactured goods to continue to rise. Landlords and peasant farmers withdrew from the grain markets because the amount of money they received for their produce became increasingly worthless relative to the price of manufactured goods.
- **Food shortages:** Food shortages in the cities became increasingly common.
- **Fuel shortages:** There were also fuel shortages during extraordinarily cold winters of 1916 and 1917.

- Revolutions typically occur when broad swathes of the population, including segments with disparate interests, are joined by one common sentiment: exasperation and anger towards their government. By 1917, this was the case in Russia.
- The military and economic disasters drove the anger.
- As one contemporary noted, mothers were among the most desperate: “Mothers of families, exhausted by endless standing in line at stores, distraught over their half-starving and sick children, are today perhaps closer to revolution ... and they are a great deal more dangerous because they are the combustible material for which only a single spark is need to burst into flame.”

→ Russia experienced two revolutions in 1917: 1) The February Revolution and 2) The October Revolution (though according to the western calendar the first actually occurred in March and the second in November). The failure of the first to satisfy broad segments of the population helped lead to the second, much more radical transformation. First, we turn to the February Revolution:

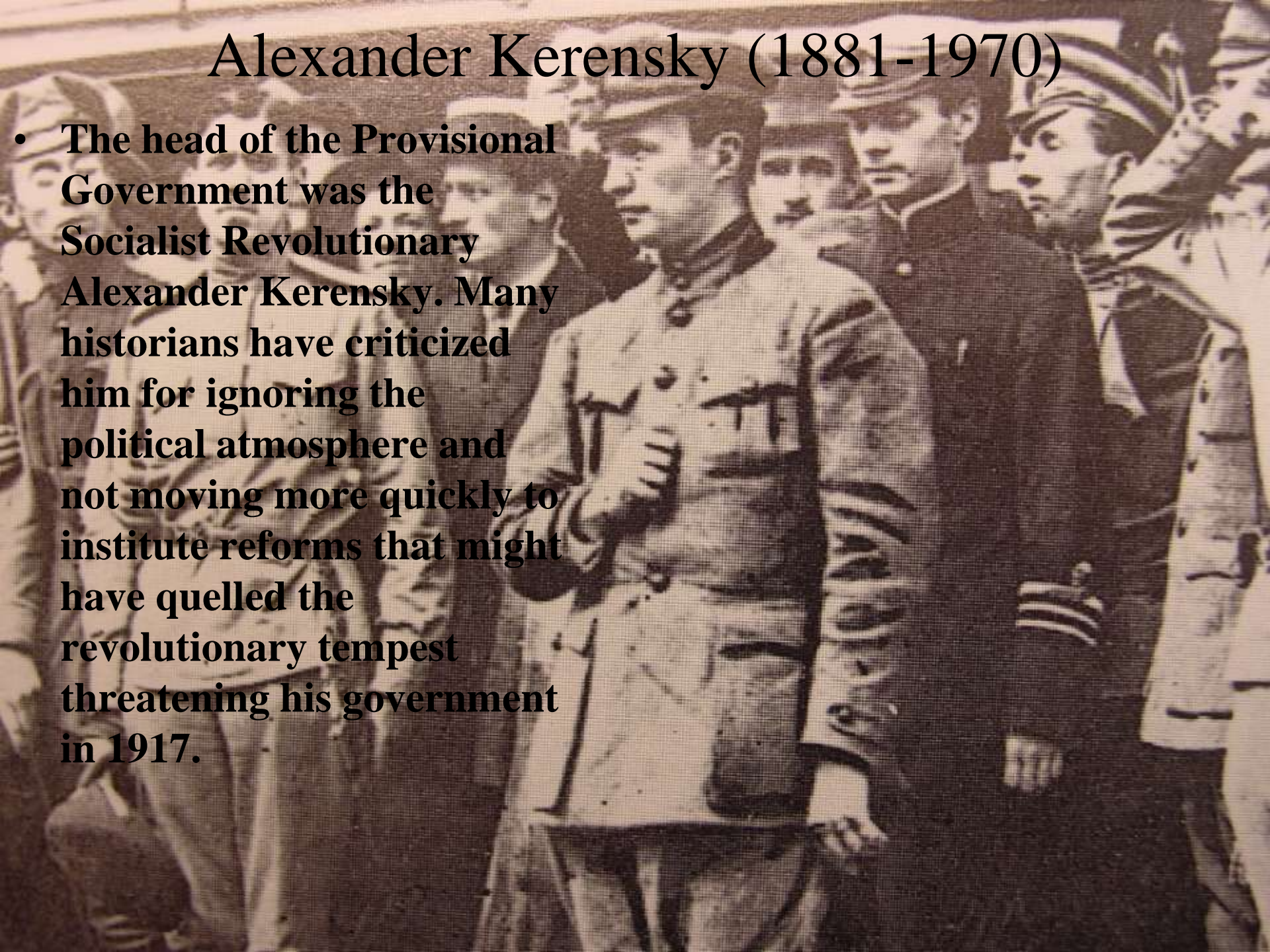
- On Feb. 25, 1917 10,000 Petrograd women marched through the city demanding “Peace and Bread” and shouting “Down with Autocracy.”
- Feb. 27: A general strike shut down all of the factories in the city.
- Feb. 28: The entire garrison in St. Petersburg, approximately 150,000 men, joined the uprising, and the united workers and soldiers took control of the capital.
- The uprising claimed about 1,500 victims.
- Czar Nicholas abdicated the throne, and the imperial government was quickly dispersed.

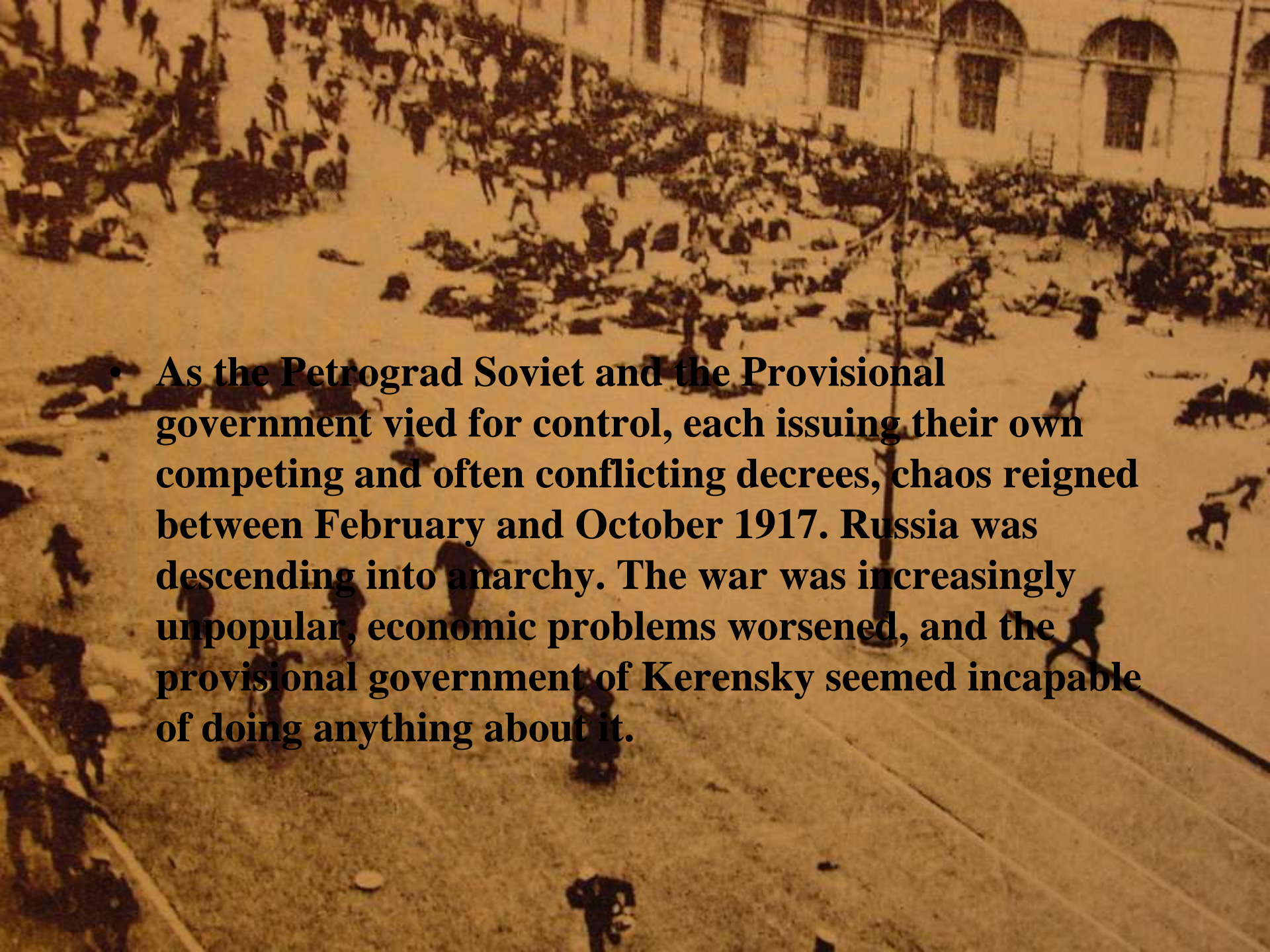
In most revolutions, a single center of power emerges from the chaos. But Russia never has made, and probably never will make, things that simple. The problem now was that two centers of power, each with competing claims and agendas, emerged, both centered in the Russian capital of Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg):

- 1) **The Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.** This was a radical communist assembly that demanded an immediate end to the war, the redistribution of land from nobles to peasants, and bread for everyone. It was dominated by an at that time still relatively little-known communist group called the Bolshevik (“Majority”) party. Numerous other Soviets also sprung up in towns and cities throughout European Russia, including Moscow. In the Soviets that mattered, the Bolsheviks held the strings.
- 2) **The Provisional Government.** This was believed by many to be the legitimate replacement of the czarist aristocracy, centered as it was in the former czarist halls of power, like the Winter Palace. By definition temporary, the provisional government sought to organize elections to a constituent (representative) assembly where a new, democratic constitution would be drawn up for Russia. It sought to do everything by the book: to go about the planning and organization of a new state slowly and deliberately. Most importantly, the provisional government refused to withdraw Russia from the war. It also refused to institute reforms like the redistribution of land until the war was over. There was a military reason for this last decision: redistribution of land would have drawn the vast majority of Russian soldiers, who were peasant farmers, away from the front to claim redistributed lands.

Alexander Kerensky (1881-1970)

- The head of the Provisional Government was the Socialist Revolutionary Alexander Kerensky. Many historians have criticized him for ignoring the political atmosphere and not moving more quickly to institute reforms that might have quelled the revolutionary tempest threatening his government in 1917.





- **As the Petrograd Soviet and the Provisional government vied for control, each issuing their own competing and often conflicting decrees, chaos reigned between February and October 1917. Russia was descending into anarchy. The war was increasingly unpopular, economic problems worsened, and the provisional government of Kerensky seemed incapable of doing anything about it.**

Lenin (1870- 1924)

- Led by Vladimir Lenin, the Bolshevik Party grew in stature as the chaos worsened and power shifted to the Petrograd Soviet. The son of a school administrator from the minor nobility and a long-time adherent to Russia's most radical Marxist wing, Lenin had spent the war years in exile in Switzerland. However, in April 1917 the Germans secreted him across the front into St. Petersburg in a sealed train. They hoped that his influence would shift the balance of power decisively to the Petrograd Soviet, which would then withdraw Russia from the war. They were right.



- Lenin rallying the masses.





Lenin's Principles

- **World War I represented the death throws of the imperialist powers, imperialism being the highest and final stage of capitalism:** Lenin felt that Communist revolutionaries like himself needed to seize this moment in history to overthrow capitalism while it was on the ropes. World War I had created fertile ground for the rise of Communism.
- **The “Weakest Link” Theory:** Lenin knew that Russia was not ready for Communism. According to Marxist theory, only advanced industrial societies could advance to Communism, and Russia was still predominantly agricultural. He did believe, however, that a Communist revolution in Russia would trigger Communist revolutions in advanced states like Germany and Britain. Russia was the “weakest link.” A Communist takeover would be easier to achieve in chaotic Russia and, with its success, the factory workers in advanced states would be inspired to rise up and break the chains of capitalism.
- **Telescoping of History:** In a similar sense, Lenin believed that Russia could go directly from an agricultural state to a Communist society. Since it would serve as the “bread basket” of Europe, Russia, according to Lenin, could skip the industrial/democratic phase of history that was central to Marxist historical development.
- **The Vanguard Party.** All that was needed to achieve the Revolution in Russia was a well-trained, fanatically devoted group of hard-core revolutionaries. That group was the Bolshevik Party, which now controlled the increasingly powerful Petrograd Soviet. Its time to act had come.

Lenin arrived at Finland Station in Petrograd in April 1917, roughly a month after the tsarist regime had been swept from power. Immediately, he declared his revolutionary platform:

- **Peace:** Russia needed to withdraw from the war and sign a peace treaty with Germany immediately.
- **Land:** There needed to be an immediate redistribution of all farm land.
- **Bread:** The government needed to direct all of its energy away from the war effort towards providing food to the people.
- **All Power to the Soviets:** The Provisional government needed to be abolished and all authority transferred to the Petrograd Soviet and its affiliates around the country.

Long Story Short

- Immediately, the Bolsheviks, which beyond the Soviets had never had broad public support, began to gain a larger following, particularly on account of Lenin's calls to end the war and redistribute the land right away. Russia had myriad political parties at the time; including other communist parties, like the Mensheviks. However, all of the other parties refused to commit to radical and rapid changes; in particular they refused to commit to ending the war. A coup d'état against the Provisional Government was attempted in July but failed. Another was attempted in October. This one succeeded.

The first shots of the Revolution: As the sun was setting on the evening of October 24, 1917, the battleship *Aurora* fired upon the Winter Palace, where the Provisional Government was headquartered. This was the sign for the Red Guard—the Bolsheviks' shock troops—to march against the palace. Through the night, fighting raged across much of the city. By morning, the Bolsheviks were in the seat of power.



True to his promise, Lenin moved to end to the war right away

- He immediately declared a three-month armistice.
- On December 3, 1917, only weeks after the Bolshevik seizure of power, treaty negotiations began in the frontier town of Brest-Litovsk.
- German demands were severe.
- On February 17, 1918 the negotiations broke down, and the Germans began to invade. Unopposed, they took territory at a rapid pace.
- The Bolsheviks agreed to resume negotiations immediately, and an agreement was signed on Feb. 20.

- The revolution was by no means over, however. Just as the last guns on the eastern front were silenced, the first shots of Russia's civil war were being fired—a civil war that would last three years and claim as many as five million lives, either due to direct fighting or the famines that accompanied it. Stalin played a significant, though not the decisive role in 1917. Indeed, he hadn't even arrived in St. Petersburg until after the February revolution had already swept Nicholas II from the halls of power (though it should be noted that Lenin wasn't there either). But soon enough, the “man of steel” began consolidating his position at the apex of Bolshevism, in particular gaining direct access to and influence over Lenin himself. The civil war proved critical to this process, as Stalin demonstrated himself to be a superb administrator, commander, and shepherd of resources. Indeed, during the civil war, Stalin became, it can be argued, second only to Lenin in prestige and influence. It is directly to Stalin—from his birth to his role in the civil war--that we will turn in next week's unit.

