

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.

### **Historical Background**

In the years leading up to the Russian Revolution of 1917, the country had a succession of wars. These were, The Crimean War (1854-56), The Russo-Turkish War (1877-78), The Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905), and World War I (1914-18). All of these required a lot from the state, including tax dollars and manpower. Russia suffered defeat in all, except against Turkey. This series of war caused great discontent among the people and caused suffering in the country's economy and government.

Along with these wars, there were three major parties that contributed to the cause of the revolution.

First, there were the peasants, who maintained the majority of the population in Russia. They were excessively poor and could barely escape famine from harvest to harvest. The population boom in Russia from 1867-1896 was felt most drastically by the peasants. The increase of 30 million people in less than 30 years was too great that the land to the peasants' disposal did not increase sufficiently. The government tried to help, but war took precedence.

Second, there was a rise of the industrial working class. These workers were employed in the mines, factories and workshops of the major cities. They suffered low wages, poor housing and many accidents. Again, the government tried to help by passing factory acts to restrict the amount of hours one could work. However, their efforts were at too small a scale to have any real effect. As a result, there were many strikes and constant conflicts between the workers and the police.

Lastly, the tsar of Russia was the cause of much disapproval. Tsar Nicholas II was much more interested in his family life, than matters of the state. He had an obsession with retaining all his privileges and the belief that he was chosen by God to rule. Also, he didn't understand the forces of industrialisation and nationalism that were growing throughout Russia. His disregard for the struggles of the people led them to lose faith in him and the long-standing tradition of autocracy. The people were not content and were ready to revolt. They just needed a good reason and a strong leader.

### **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.

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.

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.

## 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.

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.

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

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was one of the most significant events in the 20th century. It completely changed the government and outlook on life in the very large country of Russia. The events of the revolution were a direct result of the growing conflict in World War I, but the significance of an empire collapsing and a people rising up extends beyond the war effort.

## Historical Significance

The events of the Russian Revolution that brought the Soviet Union about had a deep impact on the entire world. It generated a new way of thinking about economy, society and the government. The Bolsheviks set out to cure Russia of all its injustices that arose from social class differences. They succeeded in some ways. Even still, the revolution marked the end of a dynasty that had lasted 300 years and concluded with the seizure of power by a small revolutionary group. The tsar was replaced with a Council of People's Commissars and private ownership was abolished. The Communist movement began to grow worldwide, which frightened the capitalist world. Although the strength of Communism did not last, because it existed at all is proof that the Russian Revolution was a major event of the twentieth century.