

The Russian Revolution, October 1917

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.

Russian Revolution of 1905

Russia industrialised 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 unsanitary living conditions for a new class of Russian industrial workers.



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 tsar's troops. The massacre sparked the Russian revolution of 1905, during which angry workers responded with a series of crippling strikes throughout the country. After the bloodshed of 1905, Tsar



Nicholas II promised a duma (parliament) would be set up, with which he would share power.

Impact of the First World War

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, Russia was no match for industrialised 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.

Tsar 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.)

In her husband’s absence, Tsarina 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 tsar. Government corruption was widespread, the Russian economy remained backward and Nicholas repeatedly dissolved the Duma (Russian parliament) when it opposed his will.

The February Revolution

The February Revolution began on 23 February 1917. Demonstrators, demanding bread and peace, 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 26 February, the troops of the Petrograd army garrison were called out to put down 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 27 February. A few days later, Tsar Nicholas abdicated the throne, ending centuries of Russian Romanov rule. A Provisional Government was set up.

The Bolshevik Revolution (October Revolution)

In October 1917, revolutionaries led by Bolshevik Party leader Vladimir Lenin launched a coup d’état (overthrow) against the provisional government. The provisional government had been assembled by a group of leaders from Russia’s bourgeois capitalist class (middle 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.