

Russian Revolution

By **1917**, the industrial mobilization for **total war** was creating serious domestic turmoil in all of the European nations involved. Many governments became nervous about social unrest and feared political instability. Russia was the only country that experienced the complete collapse that every nation feared. Out of Russia's collapse came the Russian Revolution.

The **Revolution of 1905** was supposed to have brought liberal reforms to Russia, but Tsar Nicholas II failed to implement the reforms that he agreed to and relied on the military to uphold his rule. WWI magnified the social, economic, and political problems that already existed within Russia before the war. Between 1914 – 1916, 2 million Russian soldiers were killed, and Russian industries were unable to produce the necessary amount of war supplies. The working class in the industrial cities became increasingly hostile to their working conditions, and the middle class resented Nicholas II for failing to institute the constitutional monarchy that he agreed to in 1905 (everyone dislikes the tsar, the economy is geared solely towards the war, and lots of people are dying).

In March 1917, a series of strikes broke out in the capital of Petrograd (St. Petersburg). On March 8, International Women's Day, 10,000 women marched through the capital protesting labor conditions and bread prices. On March 10, the women were joined by other workers and a **general strike** shut down the entire city. Nicholas II ordered the military to disperse the crowds, using force if necessary, but the military refused to harm fellow citizens and joined the protests. On March 12, the **Duma** claimed governmental authority and established a provisional government that was led by the middle-class and liberal aristocrats. **Tsar Nicholas II abdicated**. The provisional government supported universal suffrage, civil equality, and an 8-hour workday. At the same time, radical working-class groups called **soviets** emerged. The soviets were dominated by socialists; specifically the **Social Democratic Party**, which was split between the **Mensheviks** and **Bolsheviks**. The Mensheviks were similar to the Social Democrats of Germany, desiring socialist reforms through the democratic process and even willing to form a governing coalition with the middle-class liberals. The Bolsheviks were dedicated to the violent revolutionary overthrow of the capitalist system itself. The Petrograd Soviet decided to support the provisional government, but remained a potential political rival.

Once the provisional government was established by the liberals in March 1917, Lenin perceived an opportunity for the Bolsheviks to increase their power. The German government, likewise, saw an opportunity to create further disorder within Russia and they helped Lenin, who was exiled in Switzerland, sneak into Russia. Lenin entered Russia in April and began making speeches outlining his revolutionary vision and exploiting two key failures of the liberal government: 1) they had continued to fight WWI, and 2) they had failed to provide agrarian reform. He argued that the soviets could immediately take control of the state and implement socialism. In other words, gradually moving towards socialism via a liberal government was unnecessary because the workers could simply seize power. The Bolshevik political program included: an immediate end to the war, the redistribution of land to the peasants, the transfer of factories from

capitalists to committees of workers, and the transfer of government power to the soviets. The Bolshevik platform was “**Peace, land, bread.**”

The liberal provisional government attempted to consolidate its power, but soviets exercised equal power within major cities (unclear who is in charge). The military had basically dissolved by abandoning its officers and returning home. The Bolsheviks continued to gain influence within the Petrograd and Moscow soviets throughout the summer of 1917. **Leon Trotsky**, leader of the Petrograd soviet, ultimately gave his support to Lenin and pro-Bolshevik forces took control of Petrograd in November 1917. The provisional government, led by **Alexander Kerensky**, collapsed and Lenin emerged as the leader of the new government. In January 1918, the new legislature that had been elected before the collapse of the provisional government was supposed to begin session, but the new legislature was not a Bolshevik majority. Lenin cancelled the new legislature, and declared the land nationalized in order to ensure peasant support. He also turned control of the factories over to committees of workers. Essentially, Lenin was delivering on his promises.

Next, he had to bring peace. However, ending the war would entail the loss of territory. In March 1918, the new Communist government led by Lenin signed the **Treaty of Brest-Litovsk** with Germany, which gave up Poland, Finland, and the Baltics. Lenin argued that these concessions would be meaningless once socialist revolution spread throughout Europe.

Within Russia, there was enormous opposition to the new Communist government. **Loyalists** who wanted to restore the tsar, middle-class liberals, and non-revolutionary socialists all opposed Lenin. Soon **civil war** ensued within Russia. Between 1918-1921, the Bolshevik (Red) Army fought on many fronts. First, they fought the White Army from Siberia in the west and Ukraine in the south. The **Red Army** proved to be quite disciplined and organized. Political distrust within the White opposition led to disorganization and weakness. The inability to agree on political principles and goals doomed the White opposition. The Communist government translated their revolutionary ideas into practical results in the development of **war communism** (nationalization of industries and centralization of planning). The Communist government also embraced terrorism through its secret police force, the **Cheka**.

As WWI came to an end, Great Britain, France, and the United States were concerned about the influence of **Bolshevism** in Eastern Europe and they threatened to invade Russia and challenge the Red Army. The threat of foreign invasion enabled the Communists to appeal to Russian patriotism to great effect. The Allies attempted to give military aid to the White opposition, but they were unsuccessful. By 1921, the Communists had defeated all political and military opposition within Russia.