

Topic 8.3: The Russian Revolution

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although Russia began to modernize in the late-nineteenth century, it continued to lag behind other European powers in both industrialization and the development of democratic institutions. At the turn of the twentieth century, Russia repeatedly struggled with civil and political unrest, which intensified after the outbreak of World War I.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The Russian Revolution resulted in the creation of the Soviet Union, a communist super state that stood for over seventy years. The Soviet Union presented a significant challenge to the European balance of power and a perceived threat to the survival of democracy in Europe. The threat of the spread of Soviet communism resulted in a closer relationship between Western Europe and the United States.

KEY TERMS

Bolsheviks

Initially one of many factions of the Russian Social Democratic Party, the Bolsheviks—led by Vladimir Lenin—called for a violent revolution and the establishment of a communist state.

Provisional Government

The Provisional Government was a short-lived republic formed after Tsar Nicholas II abdicated in early 1917. It lasted less than a year before the Bolsheviks overthrew it.

Russian Civil War

Several segments of Russian society resisted the Bolshevik takeover, resulting in a prolonged civil war. The Red Army of the Bolsheviks ultimately defeated the disorganized White Army, which was supported by foreign governments.

COMPARISON

*Marx and Lenin were **similar** because...*

Both Marx and Lenin believed that communism would be established as the result of a violent revolution caused by the uprising of the Proletariat (working classes).

*Marx and Lenin were **different** because...*

While Marx believed that the working classes would independently form a sense of class consciousness, Lenin believed that a revolutionary vanguard would need to guide the Proletariat toward the formation of a revolutionary sense of class consciousness.

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THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION OF 1905

At the turn of the twentieth century, Russia was still an absolute monarchy. Although Tsar **Nicholas II** supported modernization and industrialization efforts, he opposed any constitutional reforms that would undermine his autocratic power. In 1905, Russian workers gathered in St. Petersburg to petition the tsar for a representative body and labor reforms. Russian military forces responded violently, killing over a hundred protestors. Although Nicholas did not directly order the military to fire upon the workers, popular opinion held the tsar responsible for the massacre that became known as **Bloody Sunday**. In response calls for his abdication, Nicholas issued the **October Manifesto**, in which he pledged to establish a representative body.



Tsar Nicholas II and his family (1904)

Although the Constitution of 1906 created a representative body known as the **State Duma**, Russian liberals were ultimately disappointed, as the tsar possessed an absolute veto over all legislation. When the Duma was uncooperative, Nicholas simply dismissed it. The Russian Revolution of 1905 ultimately failed to establish a working constitutional state.

THE BOLSHEVIK REVOLUTION

Russia's entry into World War I on the side of the Entente Powers resulted in a string of defeats and disasters at the hands of the more-industrialized Germans. By 1917, the Russian economy was on the brink of total collapse, and Nicholas was forced to abdicate the throne. The **Provisional Government** took power in what is known as the February Revolution, but its legitimacy was immediately challenged by members of the **Petrograd Soviet**—a workers' council that became increasingly dominated by the communist **Bolsheviks**. The Provisional Government put its energies into continuing to fight the war, while the Bolsheviks put their energies into undermining the Provisional Government.

The collapse of the Provisional Government in November of 1917 resulted in the **Bolshevik Revolution** and the proclamation of the Russian Soviet Republic under the leadership of **Vladimir Lenin**. The Bolshevik takeover of the Russian state was more the result of superior organization than popular support. The **Russian Civil War** (1917-1923) put the Bolsheviks' highly-disciplined Red Army against a loose coalition of forces known as the White Army. In spite of foreign assistance from the United States and Great Britain, the White Army never gained the upper hand, and its last remnants were defeated by 1923.

THE NEW ECONOMIC POLICY

During the Russian Civil War, the Bolsheviks enforced an economic policy of **war communism**, which placed all industries under government control and banned private enterprise. By 1921, these policies had brought the economy to the brink of collapse. Lenin launched the **New Economic Policy (NEP)**, establishing a mixed economy that kept major industries under state control while allowing some forms of private enterprise. The NEP did not reflect a loss of faith in communism on Lenin's part; rather, it reflected the Marxist belief that communism could only be established after a capitalist economy reached full maturity.