

The Russian Revolution, the Short Version

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Vladimir Lenin speaking to a crowd. From the book "Through the Russian Revolution," by Albert Rhys Williams.

In 1917, two revolutions swept through Russia, ending centuries of imperial rule and setting in motion political and social changes that would lead to the formation of the Soviet Union. In March, growing civil unrest, coupled with chronic food shortages, erupted into open revolt, forcing the abdication of Nicholas II (1868-1918), the last Russian czar. Just months later, the newly installed provisional government was itself overthrown by the more radical Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924).

Russian Revolution: background

By 1917, most Russians had lost faith in the leadership ability of Czar Nicholas II. Government corruption was rampant, the Russian economy remained backward and Nicholas repeatedly dissolved the Duma, the Russian parliament established after the 1905 revolution, when it opposed his will. However, the immediate cause of the February Revolution – the first phase of the Russian Revolution of 1917 – was Russia's disastrous involvement in World War I (1914-18). Militarily, imperial Russia was no match for industrialized Germany, and Russian casualties were greater than those sustained by any

nation in any previous war. Meanwhile, the economy was hopelessly disrupted by the costly war effort, and moderates joined Russian radical elements in calling for the overthrow of the czar.

February Revolution: 1917

The February Revolution (known as such because of Russia's use of the Julian calendar until February 1918) began on March 8, 1917 (or February 23, on the Julian calendar), when demonstrators clamoring for bread took to the streets in the Russian capital of Petrograd (now called St. Petersburg). Supported by huge crowds of striking industrial workers, the protesters clashed with police but refused to leave the streets. On March 10, the strike spread among all of Petrograd's workers, and irate mobs destroyed police stations. Several factories elected deputies to the Petrograd Soviet, or council, of workers' committees, following the model devised during the 1905 revolution.

On March 11, the troops of the Petrograd army garrison were called out to quell the uprising. In some encounters, regiments opened fire, killing demonstrators, but the protesters kept to the streets and the troops began to waver. That day, Nicholas again dissolved the Duma. On March 12, the revolution triumphed when regiment after regiment of the Petrograd garrison defected to the cause of the demonstrators. The soldiers subsequently formed committees that elected deputies to the Petrograd Soviet.

The imperial government was forced to resign, and the Duma formed a provisional government that peacefully vied with the Petrograd Soviet for control of the revolution. On March 14, the Petrograd Soviet issued Order No. 1, which instructed Russian soldiers and sailors to obey only those orders that did not conflict with the directives of the Soviet. The next day, March 15, Czar Nicholas II abdicated the throne in favor of his brother Michael (1878-1918), whose refusal of the crown brought an end to the czarist autocracy.

Bolshevik Revolution: 1917

In the aftermath of the February Revolution, power was shared between the weak provisional government and the Petrograd Soviet. Then, on November 6 and 7, 1917, (or October 24 and 25 on the Julian calendar, which is why this event is also referred to as the October Revolution), leftist revolutionaries led by Bolshevik Party leader Vladimir Lenin launched a nearly bloodless coup d'état against the provisional government. 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 virtual dictator of the first Marxist state in the world. His government made peace with Germany, nationalized industry and distributed land, but beginning in 1918, had to fight a devastating civil war against anti-Bolshevik White Army forces. In 1920, the anti-Bolsheviks were defeated, and in 1922, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was established.

Quiz

- 1 What are the two central ideas of the article?
 - (A) Czar Nicholas II could not defeat Germany in World War I; Later, Lenin would help Russia make peace with Germany, even though there was a civil war in Russia at the time.
 - (B) The Russian people forced the end to the rule of the czars during World War I; The Bolsheviks led by Lenin took over the government and created the world's first Marxist state.
 - (C) Czar Nicholas II was an ineffective ruler because he involved Russia in World War I; Lenin was a more effective leader because he helped the Bolsheviks take control with little violence.
 - (D) The Russian people overthrew Czar Nicholas II because he dissolved the Duma; Later, the Bolsheviks would also disregard the Duma in their Marxist dictatorship.

- 2 Which paragraph in the section "February Revolution: 1917" BEST reflects the central idea that protests forced the czar to give up his power?

- 3 Which sentence BEST summarizes how Lenin affected Russia after the revolution?
 - (A) He brought the Bolsheviks to power and ensured that the imperial government could never again have power in Russia.
 - (B) He was a dictator who caused a violent civil war that lasted for two years.
 - (C) He changed Russia's relationship with Germany, enforced Marxist ideas, and kept the Bolsheviks in control of the government.
 - (D) He established the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922.

- 4 Which of the following statements BEST represents Czar Nicholas II's approach toward the discontented Russian people?
 - (A) He convinced his brother to take over his position as czar.
 - (B) He had Russia enter World War I so as to distract people.
 - (C) He relied on the police to control protesters through violence.
 - (D) He silenced the parliament when it clashed with his desires.

Answer Key

- 1 What are the two central ideas of the article?
- (A) Czar Nicholas II could not defeat Germany in World War I; Later, Lenin would help Russia make peace with Germany, even though there was a civil war in Russia at the time.
- (B) The Russian people forced the end to the rule of the czars during World War I; The Bolsheviks led by Lenin took over the government and created the world's first Marxist state.**
- (C) Czar Nicholas II was an ineffective ruler because he involved Russia in World War I; Lenin was a more effective leader because he helped the Bolsheviks take control with little violence.
- (D) The Russian people overthrew Czar Nicholas II because he dissolved the Duma; Later, the Bolsheviks would also disregard the Duma in their Marxist dictatorship.
- 2 Which paragraph in the section "February Revolution: 1917" BEST reflects the central idea that protests forced the czar to give up his power?
- Paragraph 4:**
The imperial government was forced to resign, and the Duma formed a provisional government that peacefully vied with the Petrograd Soviet for control of the revolution. On March 14, the Petrograd Soviet issued Order No. 1, which instructed Russian soldiers and sailors to obey only those orders that did not conflict with the directives of the Soviet. The next day, March 15, Czar Nicholas II abdicated the throne in favor of his brother Michael (1878-1918), whose refusal of the crown brought an end to the czarist autocracy.
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