

The End of Tsarism 1914-1917

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How strong was the Tsarist regime in 1914?

The nature of Russian society in 1914

Russia is a vast country stretching from the Eastern European plain, across the Ural Mountains and the plains of Siberia to the Far East. Approximately 110 million people lived in Russia in 1900, 97 million of which were peasant farmers, three million were industrial workers, about a million made up the aristocracy and half a million or so were from the professional classes. Russia was socially and economically backward in contrast to the other Great Powers, although it was beginning to undergo rapid industrialisation in the cities as it attempted to catch up with the USA, Germany, Great Britain, France and Japan. The vast majority of Russians were peasant farmers who lived an almost medieval existence of dependence upon the soil and the local aristocracy. By 1900 the peasantry was growing rapidly and there was a hunger for land that was predominantly in the hands of the aristocracy.

The government of Nicholas II in 1914

The Romanov Tsar Nicholas II, an absolute monarch who was not restricted by a parliamentary system, ruled the whole rotten edifice from St Petersburg. This situation changed following Russia's humiliating defeat by the Japanese in 1905. Following a general and widespread revolution, the Tsar was forced to accept the establishment of the Duma, a Russian parliament. However, this organisation was weak and essentially rubber-stamped decisions made by the monarchy and its council. Although the Duma theoretically limited Nicholas II's power, he could still be described as an absolute monarch with absolute power over the Russian people.

Traditional loyalty

The Romanov dynasty maintained its position through the traditional loyalty of powerful sections of Russian society. The most important of these were the aristocracy, the Church, the bureaucracy, the police and the Russian army. Each of these powerful elites was interested in preserving their own positions and the power of the monarchy. By 1914 Russia seemed to be very old fashioned, even medieval, in contrast to the other Great Powers.

Opposition groups

Opposition groups such as Liberals, socialists and communists were suppressed and many of the Tsar's political enemies were forced to live abroad.

The Liberals were the most moderate of the opposition groups. The aim of the Liberals was to introduce parliamentary democracy similar to those in the USA, France and Great Britain. This group achieved some success with the establishment of the Duma, or Russian parliament, in 1906. However, the Duma was really just a talking-shop and had no real influence over the Tsar.

The second major opposition group were the Social Revolutionaries who wished to create a new Russian society based on the traditional community of the peasant village.

The third group were the communists influenced by the writings of Karl Marx, a German Jew in exile in Great Britain from 1849. Marx was a philosopher and economist who believed that societies were constantly changing. Marx believed that whoever controlled the means of production (e.g. owners of land or factories) would then end up exploiting all the other groups in that society. As one class grew in dominance it would establish religious, social and cultural organisations to maintain its power. But, Marx claimed that this power structure never lasted and that it would eventually collapse. Marx predicted that the industrial workers in each country would rise against the middle and upper classes and seize control of the means of production. Eventually a classless society would be created. This theory is known as communism.

The communists saw Nicholas II, the aristocracy and the Church as the controllers of the means of production and the oppressors of the Russian people. The communists aimed to overthrow the Tsar, the aristocracy and the Church and replace them with small councils or Soviets, which would represent the ordinary people and control the means of production on their behalf.

The communists were split amongst themselves. On one side were the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, or Lenin. Lenin and the Bolsheviks believed that a communist revolution in Russia could only be achieved under the guidance of a small elite of professional revolutionaries under his command. (This was not part of Marx's theory of communism and was the seed of the personal dictatorships of Lenin and Stalin). The other communist group were the Mensheviks. The Mensheviks also wanted a communist revolution, but one that was democratic and not controlled by one person or a small group.

Of course, the Tsar could not tolerate any extreme political groups that aimed to destroy his power and that of his supporters. As a result the Tsar used the secret police to persecute opposition groups, many of which were deported to Siberia or forced into exile.

Why did the rule of the Tsar collapse in February/March 1917?

Impact of the First World War

Although vast, Russia was not as strong as it appeared on the map in 1914. Russia was relatively backward in its technology and industrialisation. How well equipped was Russia to fight in the First World War? Nicholas II commanded a huge army, but its lack of supplies and poor leadership, especially after the Tsar assumed sole command, left it relatively weak in contrast to the German army. Russia had suffered a defeat to Japan in 1905 and it did not seem to have learnt any lessons in the intervening years. The Russian soldiers were ill equipped to fight the Germans and Austro-Hungarians on the Eastern Front. St Petersburg was restyled as Petrograd; the original sounded too German to the patriotic Russians.

Military defeat

Initially Russia had done well in the First World War and had driven deeply into Germany and Austria-Hungary. But by 1916 these successes had been reversed and the Russian army was pushed back. As Russia began to face a series of defeats, the Tsar took sole command of the Russian army. This was a grave mistake as he became identified as a cause of its defeats.

Food shortages and transport dislocation

The Russian war effort was seriously undermined by a lack of supplies and poor leadership. Enthusiasm for the war waned as food supplies collapsed in the cities and inflation made matters worse. Russian workers began to contemplate strikes and protests against the Tsar against a background of hunger caused by food shortages.

Political upheaval and the role of Rasputin

While the Tsar directed the war, the day to day running of Russia was left in the hands of the Tsarina. She was very unpopular as she was German and was thought to be overly influenced by peasant holy man called Rasputin. He had wormed his way into the Romanov household by claiming to be able to treat the haemophilia of the Tsar's son and heir. Rasputin had an evil reputation in Russia and no one was sorry when some nobles assassinated him in December 1916. The Russian people had lost confidence in the Romanovs.

The Tsar's abdication

In February 1917, there was a general uprising against the Tsar. This was primarily over lack of food and the way the war was being fought. It was not a communist revolution, although activists were involved and took advantage of the chaos. The revolution began spontaneously. Women queuing for food in Petrograd combined with striking factory workers sparked off the revolt. When soldiers were sent to crush the revolt, they joined the strikers rather than fire upon them. The revolution spread like wildfire through Russia's towns and cities. Tsar Nicholas II tried to return to Petrograd, but was forced to abdicate and Provisional Government was set up under Prince Lvov.

The Provisional Government and the Bolshevik Revolution

Why did the Provisional Government last for only eight months?

Creation of the Russian Republic In March 1917 Prince Lvov and Kerensky led the first republic to be created in Russia. The Provisional Government was made up of many of the former members of the Duma. It

stood for democracy and moderation. This Provisional Government was weak and was undermined by the creation of numerous workers' councils or Soviets in the major cities and towns. These Soviets controlled key industries such as the railways and post offices. The Soviets were controlled by various factions of socialists and communists; but despite their popularity with the Russian people, the Soviets were divided on the way forward for Russia.

Problems facing the Provisional Government and its failures, including military defeats and their effects at home.

The Provisional Government made the decision to continue the war against Germany, but this ran counter to the mood of many in Russia. In the summer of 1917 many Russian soldiers deserted from the front with Germany; it became clear that Russia would not be able to continue in the war for much longer. Lenin, who was still in exile in Switzerland at the time of the February Revolution, was determined to return to Russia and seize control of the government on behalf of the Bolsheviks. Lenin believed that the February Revolution was not radical enough; he wanted another Bolshevik revolution in which he would seize power for the Russian people.

How were the Bolsheviks able to seize power in October/November 1917?

Growth of Bolshevik organisation in the summer and autumn 1917

In April 1917 Lenin returned to Russia via Germany in a sealed train in order to take control of the revolution and impose communism on the Russian people. The Germans hoped that Lenin would cause so much trouble in Russia, that Russia would be forced out of the war. In the summer and autumn of 1917, Lenin concentrated on building support with the factory workers, publishing propaganda in Bolshevik newspapers, expanding membership of the Bolshevik Party and creating an army called the Red Guards by arming workers with guns. Much of Lenin's success at building support for the Bolsheviks came from German financial support.

Bolshevik seizure of power and reasons for their success

On 24th October 1917 the Bolsheviks led a second revolution in Russia. The Bolshevik Red Guards led a revolution against the Provisional Government by seizing control of stations, telephone exchanges, post offices, the national bank and the Winter Palace in Petrograd. By the beginning of November, Moscow and the Kremlin had fallen to the Bolsheviks. Now Lenin set about creating the world's first communist state.

Creation of a communist state 1917-1924

How did Lenin impose communist control in Russia?

Foundation of totalitarian rule

Lenin's brand of communism (Bolshevism) was different to that envisaged by Karl Marx. Marx believed that a series of revolutions by the people would create a classless society. Marx predicted that the first communist revolution would occur in the most developed countries such as Britain or Germany. Marx did not live to see the Russian revolution, but he would have been surprised to see a communist revolution in a largely backward and rural country like Russia. The brand of communism established in Russia should be called Leninism or Marxist-Leninism. Essentially Marx believed that a communist state would occur after the workers had risen up against the middle-classes who themselves had risen against the aristocracy. In Russia the middle-classes had not had enough time to develop as a powerful economic and political group, instead the Russian Revolution was an uprising of the workers and peasants against the aristocracy.

Lenin believed that to be successful a communist revolution in Russia had to be led by a small elite of intellectuals and activists. Lenin had been dissatisfied with the general revolution in February 1917. His takeover in October 1917 was intended to put a stop to wrangling between the various revolutionary groups. Lenin wanted to create a strong communist state with himself as leader. In this intention lay the seed for the creation of a totalitarian state in which communist leaders led an elite (Communist Party) in control of the rest of society. It is arguable whether or not this was true communism. In effect, the former Russian class-system was replaced by a new structure of leader, party and people. Later Russian leaders, especially Stalin, built on this idea and created personality cults supported by propaganda, monumental statues and posters. The personality cult was much copied in other communist countries in the 1940s.

To help maintain his position as leader Lenin created a secret police group known as the Cheka. It set about exterminating political opposition, especially in other left-wing groups. In August 1918 Lenin was shot down in Moscow, he survived the assassination attempt, but the Cheka took savage revenge in their reprisals. Hundreds

were tortured and executed as Lenin laid the foundations of totalitarian rule for years to come.

End of the First World War and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk

The October revolution was not a popular, mass uprising as was later depicted in films and other propaganda. It was a careful planned political coup, which established the Bolsheviks as the political leaders of Russia. Lenin had a number of problems to face in 1917: opposition, the war and lack of food. Lenin had gained popular support by promising 'Peace, Land and Bread', now he had to deliver. After October 1917, Lenin set about creating a one-party state, eradicating any potential threats to his authority from the other political groups: the Mensheviks, the socialists, the democrats and the monarchists. The October revolution left the Bolsheviks in control of Petrograd, Moscow and the larger industrial cities, but most of Russia was controlled by other revolutionary groups or by those loyal to the old regime. Lenin dealt with the opposition by creating a communist force called the Red Army, which fought against the Whites (those who did not support the revolution) between 1917-1920.

The Red Army was brilliantly organised by Leon Trotsky who was expected to succeed Lenin after he had died. To help combat internal threats Lenin ended the war with Germany at the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk 1918. Russia gave up huge swathes of territory in return for peace. This was a humiliating treaty for the Russians: Russia lost 34% of its population, 32% of its agricultural land and 54% of its industries, but it gave Lenin the opportunity to consolidate Bolshevik control and defeat opposition. Lenin hoped that the treaty would be temporary; he believed that communist revolutions would occur in other European countries as a result of the war and Russia would regain lost territory at a later date. The German front line was so close to Petrograd after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed in March 1918, Lenin decided to make Moscow the capital of Russia instead.

The third problem was lack of food in the cities. The great estates of the aristocracy had been seized and land divided up amongst the peasants, but food was not getting into the urban areas. Lenin wanted to create great collective farms in order to meet demands for food, but in the early days of the revolution this would have created great hostility from the peasants. Instead Lenin let the peasants keep their new holdings for the time and sent commissars into the country to take food from the peasants to feed the city dwellers.

Causes, nature and consequences of the civil war 1918-1921

Between 1918-1921 Russia went through a serious civil war between the supporters of the Bolshevik communists (the Reds) and those who wanted to overturn the revolution (the Whites). Although the war is known as a civil war, foreign forces from Britain, France, Czechoslovakia, Finland and Poland supported the Whites. After three years of civil war, the Reds emerged triumphant. This success was largely because of the creation of a huge Red Army that had the support of a large number of peasants and workers. In contrast the Whites were disunited and disorganised and were not supported by the peasants who regarded the Whites as the landlord class.

How successful was Lenin in creating a new society in Russia?

War communism

The civil war created huge problems of supply for Lenin, especially when White armies cut off supplies of food, iron and coal. To win the civil war Lenin had to control all aspects of the economy to ensure that supplies got through. By 1920 37,000 businesses had been brought under direct control of the communists. All forms of trade were controlled. This was war communism.

Kronstadt Mutiny

Lenin's victory in the civil war by 1921 revived opposition to the Bolsheviks within the revolutionary movement. In March 1921 sailors based on the island fortress of Kronstadt near Petrograd revolted against the Bolsheviks in favour of free speech and a relaxation of government control. Lenin had to crush this opposition mercilessly, but it did make him realise that some aspects of war communism were not working. As a result Lenin introduced the New Economic Policy.

The New Economic Policy 1921

Lenin was incredibly successful in defeating his enemies and by 1921 was in a secure position politically. Economically Russia was in chaos. The communist changes in farming did not encourage the peasants to produce enough food and there was widespread famine as a result. Lenin had to abandon war communism and adapt communist principles to meet this challenge. Under the New Economic Policy (NEP) March 1921 the Soviet authorities permitted farmers to grow a surplus that could be privately sold. This degree of competition meant that

some farmers could get rich and they had an incentive to produce as much as they could. The policy was successful in solving the problems of famine but ran counter to communist ideals. Lenin was fully aware of this, but his pragmatism allowed the communists to establish themselves in other political, economic and social fields of activity. (Stalin abolished the NEP in 1928 in favour of the first Five Year Plan and set about persecuting the Kulaks (rich peasants) that it had created).

Creation of the USSR

By the end of the civil war in 1921 the communists controlled most of the Tsar's former empire. As areas were captured they were turned into socialist republics. By 1923 all of these socialist republics had come together as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). In theory each new state was a democracy with parliaments elected by the people. In practice the Communist Party was the only party, so the USSR was run by a dictatorship of the Communist Party. By the time Lenin died in January 1924, having dominated Russia since 1917, he had made sure the Communist Party kept control of the country. He achieved this partly by introducing popular policies, but mainly by force and terror.

The roles of Lenin and Trotsky

Lenin died in 1924 after a long and protracted illness. He left a strong communist government behind, but it was not clear who was to be his successor. Amongst the leading members of the Bolshevik party the most obvious candidates were Trotsky, the brilliant leader of the Red Army, Zinoviev, Bukharin, Kamenhev and Stalin. A power struggle followed between Trotsky and Stalin, from which the latter emerged triumphant in 1929.

The rule of Stalin 1924-1941

How far did Stalin set up a personal dictatorship in communist Russia?

The struggle for power with Trotsky

Trotsky seemed to be the obvious candidate to succeed Lenin, but less well known was Joseph Djughashvili, also known as Stalin. He was a Georgian. Georgia had become part of the Russian empire in the nineteenth century as Russia had swept south and east into Asia. Stalin came from a boot maker's family, but he had the benefit of a good education. He became a socialist and was responsible for a number of revolutionary activities in Georgia, especially between 1905-1908. Stalin spent most of the ten years between 1908-1917 in and out of jail. For the leaders of the Communists in exile, like Lenin, Stalin was regarded as one of the few who actually stayed in Russia to fight for his beliefs. In 1917 Lenin appointed him as Commissar for Nationalities because of his experience in dealing with minority national groups.

In 1919 Stalin became Commissar of the Workers and Peasant's Inspectorate, which gave him control over the civil service and the police; he took control of the Control Commission in Moscow and in 1922 he became General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. These posts and his wide-ranging influence allowed Stalin to build up a strong power base within the Communist Party organisation at a time when the power of the Party was being established throughout Russia.

In his last years, Lenin began to be very worried about who would succeed him. He predicted the power struggle between Trotsky and Stalin upon his death. Lenin was worried that Stalin had become too powerful, in his testament he wrote:

"Comrade Stalin, having become General Secretary, has concentrated an enormous power in his hands; and I am not sure he always know how to use this power with sufficient caution." He later added, "Stalin is too rude" and proposed that he should be removed.

While Lenin lay dying the political infighting began. Although Russia was a one party state there was considerable debate between the communist leaders as to the direction Russia should take. Trotsky promoted a greater degree of freedom, Stalin insisted that Russia should have discipline and that this should be applied by the Party from above: the Party must be "of one piece, a party of steel, monolithic". Stalin's main contribution to this debate was to advocate a policy of keeping communism in one country rather than encouraging an international revolution. Stalin was a nationalist and he wanted to make Russia strong. By 1929 Stalin had suppressed all political opposition and stood supreme.

Elimination of other rivals in the 1920s

In 1924 the Party Congress elected Stalin to the leadership of the Party. Trotsky's influence began to decline. He was dismissed as Commissar for War in 1925 and was excluded from the Central Committee in 1926. In 1927 he was expelled from the Communist Party and was exiled in 1929. Trotsky's exile took him to Mexico, where in 1940 a Soviet agent assassinated him.

It was clear Stalin did not want to share power and so moved against other leading communists who might threaten him. He got rid of left-wingers Kamenev and Zinoviev from the Central Committee in 1926 and the right-winger Bukharin in 1929. By removing his main political opponents and building up so much support within the Party Stalin had become the unchallenged leader of the Communist Party and the USSR.

Purges in the 1930s

Stalin could brook no opposition to his policies. From 1936 Stalin set about removing all the leading Communist Party members who had taken part in the 1917 revolutions. He used the murder of Kirov in December 1934 as an excuse to hunt out traitors. They were accused of trying to kill Kirov, Stalin or betraying Russia. They were put on trial, found guilty and shot. The 'Great Terror' extended to millions of communists and non-communists who were arrested and either executed or sent to labour camps.

Many of the arrested 'confessed' under torture to whatever charges were trumped up against them. The most important figures in the Party were tried in public, in what was known as 'show trials'.

The accused were always found guilty of treason and executed. Of Lenin's original Central Committee of 21, only two survived and Stalin was one of them. A million lower ranking Communists were shot or thrown into prison, most of the leading Red Army officers were accused of spying for Nazi Germany and half were shot. All eight admirals, 14 out of 16 Army Commanders and 60 out of 67 Corps Commanders were murdered. Even two heads of the NKVD (the secret police successor to the Cheka), Yagoda and Yezhov, those responsible for these purges, were shot. No one knows how many suffered during this time. Some have estimated that 20 million were sentenced to labour camps, over half of them dying there. Russia lost most of its scientists, doctors, teachers, engineers, as well as military officers. Even Stalin's second wife committed suicide after she protested at his violent actions.

Propaganda and censorship

While Stalin used violence to secure himself in power, he also used propaganda to create a cult of personality. Stalin wished to create a communist dictatorship of the USSR and also establish a personal dictatorship. Stalin wished to project himself as the father of the nation, the kindly 'Uncle Joe'. As in Nazi Germany a lot of effort was spent on the young, trying to get them to conform to a communist ideal. Artists and filmmakers had to show Stalin and Russian communism in a positive light. Huge statues of Stalin were put up in every town, his face could be seen on a million posters all over Russia. It was a case of 'Big Brother is watching you', the phrase created by George Orwell in 1984 the great satire of Stalinist Russia.

The 1936 Constitution

In 1936 a new constitution confirmed Stalin's and the Communist Party's control over the USSR. There was the appearance of democracy with two chambers of parliament, the Soviet of the Union and the Soviet of Nationalities, with elections to them every four years. But there was only one political party, the Communist Party, so elections were never contested. Real power was with the Central Committee and its chairman, Stalin.

Stalin controlled all parts of Russian life. The Churches were persecuted and religious services banned. Priests were arrested and sent to labour camps. Art, music and literature were censored and directed to glorify the achievements of the communist revolution and the people of Russia. In all these ways, the USSR was a totalitarian state, with the Communist Party having total control over the lives of the people.

To what extent did Stalin make the USSR a great economic power?

Collectivisation of agriculture

Lenin had attempted to nationalise farming between 1919-1921, but this had been a failure and had resulted in the New Economic Policy of 1921 that had allowed a degree of competition. By 1927 Russian farming was in a bad way. Food production was low; the towns did not get enough to eat. Without food there were no tractors, without tractors there was no food. To solve this problem, Stalin waged war on the Kulaks, a minority of relatively

prosperous peasants who had made money from the New Economic Policy. In 1928 their lands were taken from them without compensation and they were excluded from the collective farms. Six million Kulaks were sent to Kazakhstan or Siberia. In 1929 this policy was extended to the middle peasants and the Muzhiks. One hundred million people were deprived of their lands and forced to join collective farms. Those who rebelled were made to do forced labour as convicts timber-felling, mining, navvying etc. The aim of this policy was to produce more food and to do this more machinery was needed too.

Five Year Plans

Stalin was very concerned that while the USA and Europe modernised, Russia was being left behind. The Great Powers had fought against the communists, by supporting the Whites, during the civil war between 1918-1921. Stalin was worried that this could happen again:

"We are fifty or a hundred years behind the advanced countries. We must make good this lag in ten years. Either we do it or they crush us."

By improving industry Stalin hoped to improve standards of living, thus making Communism more popular. By increasing the number of industrial workers, Stalin aimed to reduce the power of the peasants of whom he had always been suspicious. He wanted to impress foreign workers with the success of Russian communism. Stalin aimed to revolutionise industry by using GOSPLAN to set extraordinarily high targets in his First Five Year Plan. He concentrated on the production of iron, coal, oil and steel. The Plan was conducted like a military operation, the morale of the workers was to be maintained with a barrage of never ending propaganda referring to the 'shock troops', 'workers' brigades', 'youth pioneers' and 'the iron and steel front.' The Second Five Year Plan focused on machines, especially tractors for the collectivised farms. The Third Year Plan, begun in 1938, but which the Second World War interrupted, aimed to produce more goods for the Russian people such as radios and cameras etc.

Economic effects

There is no doubt that the Five Year Plans were very successful in transforming Russia. Great new tractor works sprang up; ninety new towns were built beyond the Ural Mountains, new railways were built and a massive hydroelectric dam was built across the River Dnieper. Soviet propaganda made the Five Year Plans very popular with the young; they believed they were helping to create a better world through Communism. Alexei Stakanhov produced a record amount of coal in 1935 and he was hailed as a national hero. Many Stakanhovites tried to copy him. They were generally hated by the ordinary workers for continually setting higher targets. Many workers suffered during the period of the Five Year Plans and were put in prison for being 'saboteurs'.

The Great Patriotic War 1941-45

By 1939 Stalin appeared to be in a strong position, although he was very concerned by Nazi Germany. On 23rd August 1939 the Russians signed the Nazi-Soviet Pact with Germany. This deal meant that Poland would be divided up between Russia and Germany, and that Nazi Germany would not attack Russia. Stalin and Hitler were both well aware that this deal was only temporary, but it did give both sides time to prepare for a future conflict with each other. Stalin's Russia entered the Second World War on 22nd June 1941 when Hitler attacked. At first, it seemed as if Nazi Germany would conquer Russia, but Stalin's preparations in the 1930s had been enough. With the help of the cold Russian winter the Red Army pushed Germany out of Russia and had marched into Berlin by the spring of 1945. Stalin was at the height of his power. He had defeated Nazi Germany and he had control of the eastern half of Europe. As Nazi Germany collapsed, a new conflict began. The Cold War seemed to be the conflict that would finally settle the competition between communism and capitalism.