

The Russian Revolution, the Short Version

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Word Count **716**



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

In 1917, two revolutions swept through Russia. For hundreds of years, the country had been ruled by emperors, called czars or tsars, who commanded absolute power. The revolutions set in motion political and social changes that eventually led to the formation of the Soviet Union.

In March 1917, growing civil unrest with long-lasting food shortages erupted into open revolt. Nicholas II (1868-1918), the last Russian czar, was forced to step down. Just months later, the new government that was put in place after the revolution was itself overthrown. A political party called the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924), suddenly came to power.

Russian Revolution: background

By 1917, most Russians had lost faith in the leadership ability of Czar Nicholas II. Government corruption was widespread, the Russian economy remained backward. Again and again, Nicholas limited the power of the Duma, the Russian parliament, or congress, when it opposed his will, adding to a sense of anger.

The immediate cause of the February Revolution – the first of the two Russian Revolutions of 1917 – was Russia’s involvement in World War I (1914-18). The Russian army was no match for that of Germany, and more Russians were killed or wounded in the war than the soldiers of any nation in any previous war. Meanwhile, the economy was badly hurt by the costly war effort. Eventually, people with moderate political views joined more extreme groups in calling for the overthrow of the czar.

February Revolution: 1917

The February Revolution actually began on March 8, 1917. (Back then, Russia used a different calendar, so it was February 23 for Russians at the time.)

Demonstrators demanding bread took to the streets in the Russian capital of Petrograd (now called St. Petersburg). There, they were supported by huge crowds of striking factory 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 angry mobs destroyed police stations. Several factories elected leaders to workers’ committees, following a system used in a previous Russian revolution in 1905. These leaders served on a group called the Petrograd Soviet.

On March 11, soldiers were called out to put down the uprising. In some encounters, they opened fire, killing demonstrators, but the protesters kept to the streets and the troops began to waver. That day, Nicholas again sent the members of the Duma home, refusing to let them limit his power.

On March 12, the revolution triumphed after regiments of the Petrograd army switched to the side of the demonstrators. The soldiers then formed committees that elected deputies to the Petrograd Soviet, along with deputies from the factories.

The czar's government was forced out of power, and the Duma formed a temporary government to run the country instead. It competed 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 not to obey any other orders that went against the Soviet. The next day, March 15, Czar Nicholas II gave up the throne in favor of his brother Michael (1878-1918). Michael refused to accept the crown, bringing an end to the rule of the czars.

Bolshevik Revolution: 1917

After the February Revolution, power was shared between the weak temporary government and the Petrograd Soviet. Then, on November 6 and 7, 1917 (or October 24 and 25 in Russia at the time), leftist revolutionaries led by Bolshevik Party leader Vladimir Lenin launched a nearly bloodless takeover of the 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 gained absolute power and became the leader of a dramatically new kind of Russian government. He made peace with Germany, took over factories 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. Lenin made the USSR a communist country, in which people were supposed to share property and control of businesses and other parts of the economy. The goal of communism is an equal society, but the USSR was unable to achieve that and became a dictatorship.

Quiz

- 1 Which of these sentences would be MOST important to include in an objective summary of the article?
- (A) Vladimir Lenin made peace with Germany after he gained power in the Bolshevik Revolution.
 - (B) Czar Nicholas II wanted to give power to his brother Michael, but Michael did not want the job of czar.
 - (C) In the early 1900s, Russia went through two major revolutions that drastically changed its government.
 - (D) Not only did many Russians die in World War I, but the war effort also damaged the Russian economy.
- 2 Which of the following details is MOST important to the development of the main idea?
- (A) Lots of protesters took to the streets, demanding the czar give them bread.
 - (B) The Russians used a different calendar before the revolution took place.
 - (C) The city Petrograd is now known as St. Petersburg.
 - (D) Czar Nicholas II became unpopular when he silenced the Russian parliament.
- 3 How did Russia become subject to Bolshevik rule?
- (A) The Bolsheviks took advantage of the weak temporary government formed after the revolution.
 - (B) The Bolsheviks convinced the Russian people that they would benefit from a more equal society.
 - (C) The Bolsheviks started a civil war and gained strength after they were victorious.
 - (D) The Bolsheviks gained popularity because they provided better living conditions for the people.
- 4 Which of the following people or groups mentioned in the article would be MOST likely to agree with the idea that the government should take over businesses to promote equality?
- (A) Czar Nicholas II
 - (B) the Duma
 - (C) Lenin
 - (D) the anti-Bolsheviks

Answer Key

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