

Unit 5B: The Russian Revolution

Global exchanges are characterized by interaction within and between societies. As these exchanges increased, economic, political, and social revolutions occurred resulting in fundamental changes to economies, governments, and social hierarchies around the world.



The roots of the Russian Revolution of 1917 were deep. Russia had suffered under an extremely **oppressive** form of government for centuries under the rule of the tsars (czars). During the 19th century the country was filled with movements for political **liberalization**. Russia actually had multiple uprisings over many years. The first one took place in 1825. It, like many that followed, was not fully successful. However, it did help set the stage for future generations of dissidents.

In 1861, the Russian Empire finally abolished serfdom. The **emancipation** of serfs would influence the events leading up to the Russian Revolution by giving peasants more freedom to organize. In the early 1900s, Russia was one of the most impoverished countries in Europe with an enormous peasantry and a growing minority of poor industrial workers. Russia industrialized much later than Western Europe and the United States. When it finally did, around the turn of the 20th century, it brought with it immense social and political changes.

By 1905, shortly after another uprising, it appeared that the ruler of Russia, **Czar Nicholas II**, was looking at establishing a constitutional monarchy. Such a change, however, would not have satisfied either the czar or his opponents. Radical revolutionaries continued to fight for a democratic republic, and the czar wanted to retain his control of the peasants. So nothing was accomplished once again other than further resentment from both sides against the other.

In the fall of 1915, as World War I raged, Czar Nicholas had taken command of Russian armies in the field. This left a power vacuum in the capital. The collapse of the government suddenly came in March 1917. Food riots, strikes, and war protests turned into mass demonstrations. The army refused to fire on the demonstrators. A Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies was elected, and it formed a **provisional government** on March 14. The next day Nicholas **abdicated** (gave up his throne). He and his family were taken into custody and confined. Eventually, the leaders of the revolution believed that people loyal to the czar would try to free him and his family. It was this reason that Czar Nicholas and his family would later be executed. The leaders of the provisional (transitional) government, established a liberal program of rights such as freedom of speech, equality before the law, and the right of unions to organize and strike. They opposed violent social revolution.



The provisional government was a coalition of factions representing divergent points of view. Some leaders wanted withdrawal from the war and immediate economic reforms, with guarantees of political liberty. Others wanted to continue the war and postpone all reforms until the

conflict was finished. No compromise seemed workable. Into this governmental turmoil came **Vladimir Lenin**. Lenin had been living in exile for his beliefs. These beliefs followed the ideas of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Lenin was the leader of a radical group known as the Bolsheviks. They believed it was necessary to use force to bring about an ideal society run by workers and peasants.

Lenin's slogan was "All power to the Soviets!" He used this slogan to undermine the provisional government. He demanded peace at once, immediate land reform, workers' control of factories, and self-determination for the non-Russian peoples. Lenin rallied people to his beliefs by promising "**Peace, Land, and Bread**".



On November 6 and 7, 1917 (or October 24 and 25 on the Julian calendar, which is why the event is often 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 provisional government had been assembled by a group of leaders from Russia's bourgeois capitalist class. Lenin instead called for a Soviet government that would be ruled directly by councils of soldiers, peasants and workers.

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 dictator of the world's first communist state.

Questions for Russian Revolution

1. Was it a good idea for the Russian government to free the serfs?
2. Why would becoming a constitutional monarchy not be appealing to Czar Nicholas II?
3. Was Russia any different under the provisional government? Why or why not?
4. What does it mean when Lenin promised “Peace, Land, and Bread”?
5. What is the significance of the types of people that were included in the Soviet government?