
IMPERIALISM, WAR AND REVOLUTION

The revolutions of 1917 and the Russian Civil War

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The Revolution of February 1917

Russia joining World War I created great discontent, which led to strikes and demonstrations that were harshly repressed. This, in turn, increased anger at the tsar's government and strengthened the political opposition. The Revolution of 1917 began after a demonstration on 23rd February in Petrograd. The revolutionary slogan was 'Peace, bread and land'. A general strike broke out, and there were mutinies among the soldiers, who refused to fire at the crowds. On 27th February, the Provisional Government was formed under the moderate socialist Kerensky, who wished to establish a liberal political system. Nicholas II abdicated on 15th March. Workers, soldiers and peasants formed soviets with their own armed militias (the Red Guard), and soon fell under Bolshevik control, led by Lenin. The Bolsheviks had strong support from soldiers, workers and peasants because their demands included withdrawal from World War I, improved working conditions, and for land to be shared out amongst the peasants.

Failure of the Provisional Government

There were now two powers in Russia: the Provisional Government and the soviets. Lenin returned from exile and proposed a new program based on the April Theses. Defeats in World War I and civil discontent led to a popular insurrection in Petrograd in July. The government accused the Bolsheviks of organising the insurrection, and Lenin went back into exile. In September, General Kornilov led the most conservative wing of the army in an attempted coup against the provisional government, but the coup failed.

The Revolution of October 1917

On 24th October 1917, Lenin joined the Petrograd Soviet. The next day, the Bolsheviks took over strategic points around the city, stormed the Winter Palace and detained the Provisional Government. Under Lenin, the Bolshevik government withdrew from World War I, signing the peace treaty called the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918. Within Russia, many significant changes were made: large estates were seized, land was distributed to the peasants, factories were placed under the workers' control, and the different nationalities within Russia were granted the right of sovereignty.

Civil war and war communism

Two different groups joined to end the Revolution: the tsarists, and those who favoured a liberal political system. These counter-revolutionaries created the White Army, and fought in a civil war from 1918 to 1921 against the Bolshevik Red Army, who won the war.

'War communism' was introduced to guarantee supplies to the cities and the war fronts. Industries were nationalised and crops were seized to feed the army.

In the new Russian state, all decisions were taken by the Bolsheviks (now called the Communist Party). A communist dictatorship was established and all other parties were banned. The harsh political and economic measures led to strikes and revolts, which the government repressed violently.