Revolution and Civil War in Russia

The year 1913 marked the 300th anniversary of the Romanov dynasty. Everywhere, Russians honored the tsar and his family. Tsarina Alexandra felt confident that the people loved Nicholas too much to ever threaten him. “They are constantly frightening the emperor with threats of revolution,” she told a friend, “and here,—you see it yourself—we need merely to show ourselves and at once their hearts are ours.”

Appearances were deceiving. In March 1917, the first of two revolutions would topple the Romanov dynasty and pave the way for even more radical changes.

The March Revolution Ends Tsarism

In 1914, the huge Russian empire stretched from Eastern Europe east to the Pacific Ocean. Unlike Western Europe, Russia was slow to industrialize despite its huge potential. Landowning nobles, priests, and an autocratic tsar controlled the government and economy. Much of the majority peasant population endured stark poverty. As Russia began to industrialize, a small middle class and an urban working class emerged.

Unrest Deepens After the Revolution of 1905, Nicholas had failed to solve Russia’s basic political, economic, and social problems. The elected Duma set up after the revolution had no real power. Moderates pressed for a constitution and social change. But Nicholas II, a weak and ineffectual leader, blocked attempts to limit his authority. Like past tsars, he relied on his secret police
and other enforcers to impose his will. A corrupt bureaucracy and, an
overburdened court system added to the government’s problems.

Revolutionaries hatched radical plots. Some hoped to lead discontented
peasants to overthrow the tsarist regime. Marxists tried to ignite revolu-
tion among the proletariat—the growing class of factory and railroad
workers, miners, and urban wage earners. A revolution, they believed,
would occur when the time was ripe.

**Impact of World War**  

The outbreak of war in 1914 fueled national pride and united Russians. Armies dashed to battle with enthusiasm. But like the Crimean and Russo-Japanese wars, World War I quickly strained Russian resources. Factories could not turn out enough sup-
plies. The transportation system broke down, delivering only a trickle of
crucial materials to the front. By 1915, many soldiers had no rifles and
no ammunition. Badly equipped and poorly led, they died in staggering
numbers. In 1915 alone, Russian casualties reached two million.

In a patriotic gesture, Nicholas II went to the front to take personal
charge. The decision proved a disastrous blunder. The tsar was no more
cOMPETENT than many of his generals. Worse, he left domestic affairs to
the tsarina, Alexandra. In Nicholas’ absence, Alexandra relied on the
advice of Gregory Rasputin, an illiterate peasant and self-proclaimed
“holy man.” The tsarina came to believe that Rasputin had miraculous
powers after he helped her son, who suffered from hemophilia, a disorder
in which any injury can result in uncontrollable bleeding.

By 1916, Rasputin’s influence over Alexandra had reached new heights
and weakened confidence in the government. Fearing for the monarchy, a
group of Russian nobles killed Rasputin on December 29, 1916.

**The Tsar Steps Down**  

By March 1917, disasters on the battlefield, combined with food and fuel shortages on the home front, brought the monarchy to collapse. In St. Petersburg (renamed Petrograd during the war), workers were going on strike. Marchers, mostly women, surged through the streets, shouting, “Bread! Bread!” Troops refused to fire on the demonstrators, leaving the government helpless. Finally, on the advice of military and political leaders, the tsar abdicated.

Duma politicians then set up a provisional, or temporary, government. Middle-class liberals in the government began preparing a constitution for a new Russian republic. At the same time, they continued the war against Germany.

Outside the provisional government, revolutionary socialists plotted
their own course. In Petrograd and other cities, they set up soviets, or
councils of workers and soldiers. At first, the soviets worked
democratically within the government. Before long, though,
the Bolsheviks, a radical socialist group, took charge. The
leader of the Bolsheviks was a determined revolutionary,
V. I. Lenin.

The revolutions of March and November 1917 are known to Russians as the February and October revolu-
tions. In 1917, Russia still used an old calendar, which
was 13 days behind the one used in Western Europe.
Russia adopted the Western calendar in 1918.

**Checkpoint** What provoked the March Revolution?
Lenin and the Bolsheviks

Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov (oohl yahin uhl) was born in 1870 to a middle-class family. He adopted the name Lenin when he became a revolutionary. When he was 17, his older brother was arrested and hanged for plotting to kill the tsar. The execution branded his family as a threat to the state and made the young Vladimir hate the tsarist government.

As a young man, Lenin read the works of Karl Marx and participated in student demonstrations. He spread Marxist ideas among factory workers along with other socialists, including Yevgenia Krupskaya (nay dyez duh kroop sky uhl), the daughter of a poor noble family. In 1895, Lenin and Krupskaya were arrested and sent to Siberia. During their imprisonment, they were married. After their release, they went into exile in Switzerland. There they worked tirelessly to spread revolutionary ideas.

Lenin’s View of Marx Lenin adapted Marxist ideas to fit Russian conditions. Marx had predicted that the industrial working class would rise spontaneously to overthrow capitalism. But Russia did not have a large urban proletariat. Instead, Lenin called for an elite group to lead the revolution and set up a “dictatorship of the proletariat.” Though this elite revolutionary party represented a small percentage of socialists, Lenin gave them the name Bolsheviks, meaning “majority.”

In Western Europe, many leading socialists had come to think that socialism could be achieved through gradual and moderate reforms such as higher wages, increased suffrage, and social welfare programs. A group of socialists in Russia, the Mensheviks, favored this approach. The Bolsheviks rejected it. To Lenin, reforms of this nature were merely capitalist tricks to repress the masses. Only revolution, he said, could bring about needed changes.

In March 1917, Lenin was still in exile. As Russia stumbled into revolution, Germany saw a chance to weaken its enemy by helping Lenin return home. Lenin rushed across Germany to the Russian frontier in a special train. He greeted a crowd of fellow exiles and activists with this cry: “Long live the worldwide Socialist revolution!”

Checkpoint Why did Germany want Lenin to return to Russia in 1917?

The November Revolution Brings the Bolsheviks to Power

Lenin threw himself into the work of furthering the revolution. Another dynamic Marxist revolutionary, Leon Trotsky, helped lead the fight. To the hungry, war-weary Russian people, Lenin and the Bolsheviks promised “Peace, Land, and Bread.”

The Provisional Government’s Mistakes Meanwhile, the provisional government, led by Alexander Kerensky, continued the war effort and failed to deal with land reform. Those decisions proved fatal. Most Russians were tired of war. Troops at the front were deserting in droves. Peasants wanted land, while city workers demanded an end to the desperate shortages.
In July 1917, the government launched the disastrous Kerensky offensive against Germany. By November, according to one official report, the army was "a huge crowd of tired, poorly clad, poorly fed, embittered men." Growing numbers of troops mutinied. Peasants seized land and drove off fearful landlords.

The Bolshevik Takeover Conditions were ripe for the Bolsheviks to make their move. In November 1917, squads of Red Guards—armed factory workers—joined mutinous sailors from the Russian fleet in attacking the provisional government. In just a matter of days, Lenin's forces overthrew the provisional government without a struggle.

The Bolsheviks quickly seized power in other cities. In Moscow, it took a week of fighting to blast the local government out of the walled Kremlin, the former tsarist center of government. Moscow became the Bolsheviks' capital, and the Kremlin their headquarters.

"We shall now occupy ourselves in Russia in building up a proletarian socialist state," declared Lenin. The Bolsheviks ended private ownership of land and distributed land to peasants. Workers were given control of the factories and mines. A new red flag with an entwined hammer and sickle symbolized union between workers and peasants. Throughout the land, millions thought they had at last gained control over their own lives. In fact, the Bolsheviks—renamed Communists—would soon become their new masters.

**Checkpoint** How were the Bolsheviks able to seize power from the provisional government?

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Russia Plunges Into Civil War

After the Bolshevik Revolution, Lenin quickly sought peace with Germany. Russia signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, giving up a huge chunk of its territory and its population. The cost of peace was extremely high, but the Communist leaders knew that they needed all their energy to defeat a collection of enemies at home. Russia’s withdrawal affected the hopes of both the Allies and the Central Powers, as you read in Section 3.

Opposing Forces  For three years, civil war raged between the “Reds,” as the Communists were known, and the counterrevolutionary “Whites.” The “White” armies were made up of tsarist imperial officers, Mensheviks, democrats, and others, all of whom were united only by their desire to defeat the Bolsheviks. Nationalist groups from many of the former empire’s non-Russian regions joined them in their fight. Poland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania broke free, but nationalists in Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Central Asia were eventually subdued.

The Allies intervened in the civil war. They hoped that the Whites might overthrow the Communists and support the fight against Germany. Britain, France, and the United States sent forces to help the Whites. Japan seized land in East Asia that tsarist Russia had once claimed. The Allied presence, however, did little to help the Whites. The Reds appealed to nationalism and urged Russians to drive out the foreigners. In the long run, the Allied invasion fed Communist distrust of the West.

Vocabulary Builder
withdrawal—(with draw ul) n. the act of leaving

Thinking Critically
1. Identify Central Issues Describe Russian performance in World War I.
2. Draw Conclusions How did involvement in World War I affect events within Russia?
Brutality was common in the civil war. Counterrevolutionary forces, slaughtered captured Communists and tried to assassinate Lenin. The Communists shot the former tsar and tsarina and their five children in July 1918 to keep them from becoming a rallying symbol for counterrevolutionary forces.

**War Under Communism** The Communists used terror not only against the Whites, but also to control their own people. They organized the Cheka, a secret police force much like the tsar's. The Cheka executed ordinary citizens, even if they were only suspected of taking action against the revolution. The Communists also set up a network of forced-labor camps in 1919—which grew under Stalin into the dreaded Gulag.

The Communists adopted a policy known as “war communism.” They took over banks, mines, factories, and railroads. Peasants in the countryside were forced to deliver almost all of their crops to feed the army and hungry people in the cities. Peasant laborers were drafted into the military or forced to work in factories.

Meanwhile, Trotsky turned the Red Army into an effective fighting force. He used former tsarist officers under the close watch of commissars, Communist party officials assigned to the army to teach party principles and ensure party loyalty. Trotsky’s passionate speeches roused soldiers to fight. So did the order to shoot every tenth man if a unit performed poorly.

The Reds’ position in the center of Russia gave them a strategic advantage. The White armies were forced to attack separately from all sides. They were never able to cooperate effectively with one another. By 1921, the Communists had managed to defeat their scattered foes.

☑ **Checkpoint** How did the Red army defeat the White army to end the civil war?

**Building the Communist Soviet Union**

Russia was in chaos. Millions of people had died since the beginning of World War I. Millions more perished from famine and disease. Lenin faced the enormous problem of rebuilding a shattered state and economy.

**New Government, Same Problems** In 1922, Lenin’s Communist government united much of the old Russian empire into the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), or Soviet Union. The Communists produced a constitution that seemed both democratic and socialist. It set up an elected legislature, later called the Supreme Soviet, and gave all citizens over 18 the right to vote. All political power, resources, and means of production would belong to workers and peasants. The Soviet Union was a multinational state made up of European and Asian peoples. In theory, all the member republics shared certain equal rights.

Reality, however, differed greatly from theory. The Communist party, not the people, reigned supreme. Just as the Russian tsars had, the party used the army and secret police to enforce its will. Russia, which was the largest republic, dominated the other republics.

**Lenin’s New Economic Policy** On the economic front, Lenin retreated from his policy of “war communism,” which had brought the economy to near collapse. Under party control, factory and mine output had fallen. Peasants stopped producing grain, knowing the government would only seize it.
In 1921, Lenin adopted the New Economic Policy, or NEP. It allowed some capitalist ventures. Although the state kept control of banks, foreign trade, and large industries, small businesses were allowed to reopen for private profit. The government also stopped squeezing peasants for grain. Under the NEP, peasants held on to small plots of land and freely sold their surplus crops.

Lenin’s compromise with capitalism helped the Soviet economy recover and ended armed resistance to the new government. By 1928, food and industrial production climbed back to prewar levels. The standard of living improved, too. But Lenin always saw the NEP as just a temporary retreat from communism. His successor would soon return the Soviet Union to “pure” communism.

Stalin Takes Over  Lenin died in 1924 at the age of 54. His death set off a power struggle among Communist leaders. The chief contenders were Trotsky and Joseph Stalin. Trotsky was a brilliant Marxist thinker, a skillful speaker, and an architect of the Bolshevik Revolution. Stalin, by contrast, was neither a scholar nor an orator. He was, however, a shrewd political operator and behind-the-scenes organizer. Trotsky and Stalin differed on the future of communism. Trotsky urged support for a worldwide revolution against capitalism. Stalin, more cautious, wanted to concentrate on building socialism at home first.

Eventually, Stalin isolated Trotsky within the party and stripped him of party membership. Trotsky fled the country in 1929, but continued to criticize Stalin. In 1940, a Stalinist agent murdered Trotsky in Mexico.

In 1922, Lenin had expressed grave doubts about Stalin’s ambitious nature: “Comrade Stalin . . . has concentrated an enormous power in his hands; and I am not sure that he always knows how to use that power with sufficient caution.” Just as Lenin had warned, in the years that followed, Stalin used ruthless measures to win dictatorial power.

Checkpoint  How did the government and the economy under Lenin differ from “pure” communism?

Famine in Russia

Years of war took its toll on Russian people, like these starving families in the Volga region. An American journalist, accompanying an international relief team in Russia, described the horrible desolation. In village after village, he noted, “no one stirred from the little wooden house... where Russian families were hibernating and waiting for death.”

Checkpoint  How did the government and the economy under Lenin differ from “pure” communism?

Comprehension and Critical Thinking

1. For each term, person, or place listed at the beginning of the section, write a sentence explaining its significance.

Note Taking

2. Reading Skill: Summarize Use your completed timeline to answer the Focus Question: How did two revolutions and a civil war bring about Communist control of Russia?

3. Draw Conclusions  What were the causes of the March Revolution?
4. Recognize Ideologies  How did Lenin adapt Marxism to conditions in Russia?
5. Recognize Cause and Effect  What were the causes and effects of the civil war in Russia?
6. Recognize Effects  Why did Lenin compromise between the ideas of capitalism and communism in creating the NEP?

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For: Self-quiz with vocabulary practice
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- Writing About History

Quick Write: Clarify Cause-and-Effect Transitions  Writing clear transitions can help strengthen your points in a cause-and-effect essay. Connecting words like since, as soon as, because and until introduce causes. Therefore, consequently, as a result, and therefore introduce effects. Rewrite the sentence below to include a clear transition.

- Tsar Nicholas’ government collapsed. He did not solve key problems.