

The Russian Revolution

For over 300 years, Russia was ruled by a series of emperors, or tsars, from the Romanov family. The Romanovs, along with many of their subjects, believed they had been chosen by God for this purpose. This idea of the “divine right to rule,” as well as the dynasty’s sheer staying power, lent the regime an air of permanence. But in 1917, everything changed.

In the early 1900s, suffering was widespread in Russia. Subsistence farmers faced crop failures and land shortages, while industry workers lived and labored in miserable conditions. “A third of Russia is in a state of emergency....famine has become a normal occurrence,” author Leo Tolstoy wrote in a letter to Tsar Nicholas II. However, the tsar ignored all appeals for socioeconomic reforms.

On January 22, 1905, over 100,000 people marched to the tsar’s palace, hoping to petition for labor reforms. But the peaceful protest turned violent when armed guards fired directly into the crowd. Bloody Sunday, as the event came to be called, set off the 1905 Revolution—months of protests, strikes, and chaos. Nicholas II finally quelled the dissent by signing the “October Manifesto,” which established a representative parliament called the Duma.

But the Duma proved to be a farce; Nicholas simply overruled any decisions he disagreed with. Discontent swelled, as did revolutionary organizations and ideas. And then, in 1914, Russia entered into a military disaster: World War I.

Russia’s army faced shortages in basic supplies, from weaponry to boots, and it was crushed by Germany’s modernized military. In the face of mounting defeats, Nicholas chose to go to the front and personally oversee the fighting—but the losses only continued. As the failing war drained the economy, leading to severe food shortages back home, contempt for the tsar rose.

Contributing to this contempt was the fact that Nicholas had placed his wife, Tsarina Alexandra, in charge of government affairs in his absence. She depended on a self-proclaimed “holy man,” Grigori Rasputin—who

lacked government experience—to advise her. Rasputin’s outsized influence on policy decisions angered everyone, from nobles to peasants.

By 1917, Russia was a powder keg. And on February 23, 1917—International Women’s Day—the powder keg was ignited. Thousands of women marched on Russia’s capital, Petrograd, carrying banners that said things like, “Feed the children of the defenders of the motherland.” Protests, riots, and strikes then fanned across the capital and beyond, growing increasingly violent. As for police and military personnel, many joined in with the revolutionaries. It became abundantly clear that, unlike in 1905, the people of Russia would not be placated with false promises. Within four days, Nicholas II had abdicated his throne. The February 1917 Revolution was over, along with the Romanovs’ three-century reign.

Power in Russia now lay largely in two bodies—the newly established Provisional Government and the Soviet. The Provisional Government was composed of members of the former Duma. Primary among their goals was the effective management of the war.

The Soviet was a large, multi-factioned workers’ council that included many soldiers. The most radical faction, the Bolsheviks, was led by Vladimir Lenin. Lenin was inspired by the teachings of Karl Marx, a German philosopher who believed that a workers’ revolution would lead to a society free from capitalism and social classes. But unlike Marx, Lenin felt that this revolution should be led by an elite group, not by the workers themselves.

In October of 1917, Lenin and the Bolsheviks overthrew the Provisional Government and took over the capitol. Soon after, Lenin signed a peace treaty with Germany—and Russia entered into a brutal civil war, as moderate revolutionaries attempted to overthrow the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks emerged victorious, and in 1922, Lenin established the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or the USSR. Now, instead of a tsar, Russia had a dictator—one who believed that violence against his own people was necessary to the survival of the state.

The USSR remained a single-party state until 1991.