The Russian Revolution often refers to two events that took place in 1917. The first, known as the February Revolution, forced Tsar Nicholas II to abdicate and led to the formation of a provisional government. During the second event, commonly known as the October Revolution or Bolshevik Revolution, Vladimir Lenin’s Bolshevik Party seized power and began seven decades of one-party rule. Some scholars and Soviet critics have argued that the second event was actually a coup by Lenin and his supporters and not a true revolution.

GROWING UNREST IN THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE
In the early 1900s, cracks were beginning to appear in the tsar’s control over the Russian Empire. An attempted revolution in 1905, which saw mass worker strikes and peasant revolts, shook the monarchy and forced Tsar Nicholas II to implement political reform, including the establishment of a parliament and a new constitution.

Reform temporarily quieted the unrest, but the new policies proved ineffective and the parliament, known as the State Duma, was largely unable to override the Tsar’s decrees.

When World War I broke out in 1914, the tsar enthusiastically entered the Russian Empire into the conflict to fight against Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The war proved popular in its first months throughout much of the empire, but enthusiasm soon gave way to unrest as the Imperial Russian Army suffered heavy losses and humiliating retreats in a conflict against the better equipped and better trained armies of the industrialized nations to the west.

Protests and workers’ strikes broke out, especially in the capital, Petrograd (known as St. Petersburg until it was renamed in 1914 to sound less German). The growing unrest and opposition to the war overwhelmed domestic politics as food shortages became common and the army suffered defeat after defeat against Germany and the Central Powers.

On March 8, 1917, as loyalists began abandoning the embattled monarch, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated, ending nearly 300 years of rule by the Romanov family. A provisional government entered a power-sharing agreement with workers’ councils, known as “soviets,” which had formed in cities throughout the country during the unrest.
Throughout the spring and summer of 1917, the workers councils, or soviets, and the provisional government jockeyed for power and influence over the empire. The more moderate parties of the provisional government, which largely represented the country’s middle class, struggled to find support among workers and peasants, who tended to support the socialist parties that made up the soviets.

In the soviets, radical socialist parties were gaining momentum. In the summer, the moderate Socialist Revolutionaries were the largest faction, followed by the moderate Mensheviks, and then the Bolsheviks—the most radical socialist party. But by autumn, Bolsheviks were gaining support among soldiers and others who were becoming increasingly frustrated with the ongoing economic crisis and the provisional government’s refusal to withdraw from the war.

In the early morning hours of November 7 (October 25 in the Julian Calendar), Bolsheviks, supported by armed militia members, surrounded government buildings in Petrograd and captured the Winter Palace, forcing members of the provisional government to abandon their posts. Many of the of the provisional government leaders were arrested.

A congress of soviets convened to vote on the actions of the Bolsheviks. Socialist Revolutionaries and Mensheviks refused to participate. Nevertheless, the Bolsheviks set up a new Russian government with Lenin as its chairman and Leon Trotsky as foreign minister. Believing they could consolidate power through a nationwide vote, the Bolsheviks held an election to choose members of a new Russian Constituent Assembly, but they came in second to the Socialist Revolutionaries, who gained a clear majority. Shortly after its first meeting in early 1918, Lenin ordered the assembly dissolved and declared the soviets the sole leadership of the country. Opposition parties were banned later that year.

More resources for educators are available on the Henry M. Jackson School of International Studies website.
END OF EMPIRE AND OUTBREAK OF CIVIL WAR

When the tsar abdicated in March 1917, the Russian Empire was replaced by a quickly formed Russian Republic, which was only officially declared in September. Following the Bolshevik takeover in the autumn, the country was renamed the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.

By early 1918 the new Bolshevik leadership was desperate to end Russia’s participation in the disastrous world war. The Bolsheviks hastily signed a truce with Germany and the Central Powers, known as the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Although it stopped the bloodshed, Russia was forced to surrender huge swathes of the former empire’s territory, including Poland, the Baltics, Ukraine, and Georgia.

By late spring unrest was again enveloping Russia and opposition to Bolshevik rule was growing. Moderates, liberals, army officers, and supporters of the monarchy began to organize, soliciting support from abroad. Violence began to break out as pockets of resistance to Bolshevik control took up arms.

In July Russia’s new leaders, anxious to consolidate power and forever bury the House of Romanov, gathered Nicholas II and his family and shot them in the basement of the home where they were being held under house arrest. The executioners attempted to destroy their remains and buried them unceremoniously in a forest near Yekaterinburg.

When Germany was defeated by the Allied Powers in November 1918, Bolshevik forces, known as the Workers’ and Peasants’ Red Army, attempted to recapture territories lost during the war. The Red Army fanned out across Russia and its former territories to try and wrest control from nationalists and the White Army, a loose alliance of monarchists, moderates, and others opposed to Bolshevik rule.

War raged until 1922, leading to the deaths of more than 7 million people, most of them civilians. After the Red Army defeated the White Army and recaptured some of the Russian Empire’s former territories, including Ukraine and Georgia, the war ended. However, Bolsheviks were unable to gain control of Poland and the Baltics, which remained independent until World War II.

At the end of the war, Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership signed a new constitution that cut up Russia’s territories into a federation of four nominally independent socialist republics to be led by soviets represented exclusively by members of the Communist Party. The Soviet Union was born.

Foreign powers, including Britain and the United States, had attempted to intervene in the Russian Civil War on the side of the anti-Bolshevik White forces. Thus, relations between the victorious Bolsheviks and Western powers were complicated from the start. Britain established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union in 1924. The United States waited until 1933.

DISCUSSION IDEAS

Was the October Revolution a revolution or a coup? Discuss the difference and ask students to debate whether the event classifies as a revolution.

What caused the Russian Civil War? Discuss the factors that led to years of violence throughout the former Russian Empire.

Could the Soviet Union have avoided one-party rule?

How were the Russian Revolutions viewed in the West? What was the legacy of the October Revolution in the United States?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES


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