

Russian Revolutions of 1917

I INTRODUCTION

Russian Revolutions of 1917, two revolutions that occurred in Russia in 1917. The first revolution, in February, overthrew the Russian monarchy. The second revolution, in October, created the world's first Communist state.

The Russian revolutions of 1917 involved a series of uprisings by workers and peasants throughout the country and by soldiers, who were predominantly of peasant origin, in the Russian army. Many of the uprisings were organized and led by democratically elected councils called soviets. The soviets originated as strike committees and were basically a form of local self-government. The second revolution led to the rise of the modern Communist movement and to the transformation of the Russian Empire into what became known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The goal of those who carried out the second revolution was the creation of social equality and economic democracy in Russia. However, the Communist regime that they established eventually turned into a bureaucratic dictatorship, which lasted until 1991.

The overthrow of the Russian monarch, Emperor Nicholas II, and the ruling Romanov dynasty took place after an uprising that lasted from February 23 to 27, 1917, according to the Julian calendar then used in Russia, or March 8 to 12 according to the Gregorian calendar. (On January 31, 1918, the Russian government adopted the Gregorian calendar; events occurring before that date will be given in this article according to the Julian calendar.) The events of late February 1917 are known as the February Revolution. After the overthrow of the emperor, a shaky coalition of conservative, liberal, and moderate socialist politicians declared itself the Provisional Government, on February 27, 1917. That government initially received the support of the soviets—the councils that insurgent workers and peasants set up and elected. However, the Provisional Government proved unable to resolve the problems that had led to the February Revolution. Chief among these was the problem of ending Russia's involvement in World War I (1914-1918).

The second revolution was initiated by an armed insurrection on October 24 and 25, 1917. Known as the October Revolution or the Bolshevik Revolution, it was led by a group of revolutionary socialists called Bolsheviks. It swept aside the Provisional Government with the goal of giving "all power to the soviets." The Bolsheviks hoped that their revolution would result in more fundamental changes in Russian society and also inspire the working people of other countries to carry out socialist revolutions.

II BACKGROUND

At the start of the 20th century Russia was an empire with an undemocratic political and social system that had evolved over several centuries. This system was headed by an absolute monarch, popularly known as the tsar but officially titled emperor, who ruled with an iron hand. Maintaining the tsar's power were a vast bureaucracy, an army that swore loyalty to the tsar, and a repressive political police force that had a presence in virtually every city and town. The Russian political system, often

referred to as the tsarist regime or simply tsarism, involved the repression of civil liberties, intellectual freedom, and human rights in general. Its policies included the persecution of various religious minorities outside the Russian Orthodox Church, which was supported by the state. The tsarist regime sought to expand its domination over neighboring non-Russian peoples and to secure its position as a major world power. It brutally subordinated many ethnic and national groups, so much so that the Russian Empire was sometimes referred to as a “prison-house of nations.”

The royal family was at the top of a small but immensely powerful layer of wealthy nobles, who owned most of the land. The nobility maintained itself in luxury at the expense of the great majority of the people, who were impoverished peasants. The peasants made up about 80 percent of the population in 1917.

There were other social classes in Russia in addition to the landed nobles and poor peasants. These other classes included capitalists, workers, and professionals, and they became an increasingly important part of Russian society in the 19th century. To keep up economically and militarily with the other major world powers, the tsarist regime encouraged the development of industry in the later 19th century. One new class that resulted from the development of industry was the capitalists, or big-business men. These were the people who put up the capital, or money resources, needed to develop industry. They played a key role in the building and operation of many large factories. The capitalists (sometimes known as the bourgeoisie, or middle class) were essential to Russian economic development. Yet they were little more than junior partners in the tsarist system.

The development of industry created another major, and much larger, social class: the wage-earning working class (sometimes known as the proletariat). Many of these people worked in the new factories. Some workers viewed the private ownership of the factories and the profit making of the capitalists as inherently unfair and exploitive. The working class made up slightly more than 10 percent of the population in 1917. However, these workers lived in a few large cities, many knew how to read and write, and they were receptive to a growing variety of new social and cultural influences. Moreover, their labor was essential in producing the goods and services of Russia’s new factories and service industries. For all these reasons, the working class was a major force for social change. In growing numbers, the workers of Russia were inclined to organize trade unions to struggle for better working conditions and living standards. However, both the tsarist regime and the capitalists often repressed their efforts for reforms. This repression, combined with poor working and living conditions, led many workers to become highly political and to support revolutionary organizations.

A smaller but still important social class comprised intermediate layers of small-business people and professionals such as doctors, lawyers, teachers, and writers. Some of these people strove to achieve the “respectability” associated with the upper classes, but others sympathized or identified with the lower classes of workers and peasants. A significant number of men and women from these intermediate layers—as well as small numbers from the upper classes—became critical-minded intellectuals who were drawn in a revolutionary direction.

A Political Ferment

Peasant uprisings had occurred periodically in Russia for centuries. In addition, repressed ethnic and

national groups had revolted from time to time, and there was some religious dissent. However, in the 19th century a new kind of revolutionary movement developed. That movement was influenced by the Western European ideas of the Enlightenment concerning democracy, equality, and basic human rights.

In the mid-19th century many intellectuals and university students from the upper and intermediate classes became increasingly discontented with Russia's repressive regime and rigid society, engaging in illegal political activity, such as forming discussion groups and distributing pamphlets. Some embraced an idealistic political philosophy known as populism. These people advocated social changes that would benefit the masses of Russia's people, especially the peasants. Still others were influenced by anarchist ideas, opposing all forms of government. However, many revolutionaries were increasingly influenced by a variety of socialist ideas.

Some socialist revolutionary groups focused their attention on the peasant majority. They hoped that terrorist actions—such as assassinating the tsar or an especially tyrannical public official—would help spark a revolutionary uprising. Such an uprising would make possible the creation of a new economy largely based on traditional peasant communes. Those who held these ideas eventually formed the Socialist Revolutionary (SR) party in 1901.

Of greater historical significance were those socialist revolutionaries who identified with the ideas of German political philosopher Karl Marx. These socialists were known as Marxists. They believed that the working class—with its struggles to organize trade unions and to bring about political reforms of benefit to the majority of people—would become the primary force for revolutionary change. The Russian Marxists formed the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) in 1898. By 1903, however, the RSDLP had split into two factions. The faction called the *Bolsheviks* (from the Russian word for "majority"), led by Vladimir Ilich Lenin, favored a more centralized and disciplined party. The faction called the *Mensheviks* (from the Russian word for "minority") was more loosely organized and included a less politically cohesive mixture of radicals and moderates.

Some individuals who favored revolutionary change in Russia but who were not socialists formed a liberal party in 1905. They were known as the Constitutional Democrats (nicknamed the Cadets). This party represented primarily the educated and propertied classes.

Initially, all of these political groups—SRs, Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, and Cadets—believed that what Russia needed immediately was a revolution to replace tsarism with a democratic republic. They all believed that this first step would foster the development of a more thoroughgoing capitalist economy, a development that would "modernize" Russia. The liberals believed that democratic and capitalist development in itself was a desirable goal, while the Marxists believed that it would pave the way for socialism.

B Revolution of 1905

In 1905 it appeared that a democratic revolution might happen in Russia. In January 1905 in Saint Petersburg, then the capital of Russia, the tsar's troops fired on a peaceful labor demonstration of workers and their families. This massacre sparked a massive uprising of workers. Radical ferment,

strikes, and insurgencies spread throughout the countryside, the towns, and the cities. All the revolutionary parties suddenly gained mass followings. The tsarist regime felt sufficiently threatened to offer a variety of concessions, which included an expansion of civil liberties and the creation of an elected legislative body (with very limited powers) called the Duma. It was in this period that workers established the first soviets (democratic councils) in Saint Petersburg, Moscow, and other cities. See Russian Revolution of 1905.

Within the RSDLP, many Mensheviks and Bolsheviks alike thought that revolution was at hand. Lenin envisioned what he called an uninterrupted revolution. This process would involve the democratic revolution being pushed forward by a new workers' and peasants' government—what Lenin called a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry. Such a government would be a radical regime that would abolish the tsarist system and clear the way for thoroughgoing democracy and modernization. Leon Trotsky, the president of the Saint Petersburg soviet (and at this time a left-wing Menshevik) put forward a theory of “permanent revolution.” According to this theory, the democratic revolution could only be won if the workers took political power, with support of the peasants; the working-class government would then begin Russia's transition to socialism; and this transition would spark both attacks against Russia by capitalist countries and also revolutionary upsurges that could overturn capitalism throughout the world. In 1919 this theory would become an influential outlook among Russia's revolutionaries.

By the end of 1905, however, the tsarist regime reasserted its authority through military and paramilitary violence. It quelled peasant unrest, victimized non-Russian ethnic minorities, and repressed workers' organizations—especially the soviets that had been organized in Saint Petersburg and Moscow. The regime arrested or drove into exile thousands of revolutionary activists. But the experience and ideas of 1905 contributed to later revolutionary developments in Russia.

C Compromise and Struggle

As the tsarist regime reestablished complete control over Russia, divisions among the revolutionaries deepened. The liberal Cadets made many compromises with the regime in order to set a course for the enactment of reforms through the Duma. The SRs, on the other hand, were inclined toward a resumption of terrorist activities. Within the RSDLP, the gap between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks became wider. For the most part, the Mensheviks sought to ally themselves politically with the reformers in the Duma who wanted to develop the capitalist economy. They also tended to focus more on legislative work rather than on traditional underground activity such as publishing illegal newspapers and organizing strikes. The Bolsheviks insisted on building a more radical political alliance between the workers and peasants. Although the Bolsheviks sent deputies to the Duma and engaged in legislative work, they focused on developing their underground organization.

In 1912 the Bolsheviks split away from the Mensheviks altogether to build their own separate revolutionary party. This split coincided with further industrial development and an upsurge of working-class radicalization. Consequently the Bolsheviks were able to dramatically increase their influence in Russia's industrial centers until the outbreak of World War I (1914-1918).

D World War I

The eruption of World War I in August 1914 halted Russia's political development toward a working-class revolution. Russia joined with Britain, France, and other nations in waging war against Germany and Austria-Hungary. Issues of economic gain and political power motivated the governments and upper classes of the contending countries. In Russia, as elsewhere, enthusiasm for the war effort among the masses was whipped up under patriotic slogans of saving the nation from foreign aggressors. Opponents of the war were denounced as traitors and suppressed. The prowar patriotism swept up the Cadets, many Mensheviks, and even some SRs. Lenin's Bolsheviks opposed the war. They found themselves isolated and severely repressed, along with those Mensheviks, SRs, and others who spoke out against the war.

World War I turned into a disaster for both the Russian people and the tsarist regime. Russian industry lacked the capacity to arm, equip, and supply the 15 million men who were sent into the war. Factories were few and insufficiently productive, and the railroad network was inadequate. Repeated mobilizations, moreover, disrupted industrial and agricultural production. The food supply decreased, and the transportation system became disorganized. In the trenches, the soldiers went hungry and frequently lacked shoes, munitions, and even weapons. Russian casualties were greater than those sustained by any army in any previous war. Behind the front, goods became scarce, prices skyrocketed, and by 1917 famine threatened the larger cities. Discontent became rife, and the morale of the army suffered, finally to be undermined by a succession of military defeats. These reverses were attributed by many to the alleged treachery of Empress Alexandra and her circle, in which the peasant monk Grigory Yefimovich Rasputin was the dominant influence. When the Duma protested against the inefficient conduct of the war and the arbitrary policies of the imperial government, the tsar and his ministers simply brushed it aside.

As the war dragged on, Russia's cities experienced increasing inflation, food shortages, bread lines, and general misery. The growing breakdown of supply, made worse by the almost complete isolation of Russia from its prewar markets, was felt especially in the major cities, which were flooded with refugees from the front. Despite an outward calm, many Duma leaders felt that Russia would soon be confronted with a new revolutionary crisis. By 1915 the liberal parties had formed a progressive bloc that gained a majority in the Duma.

As the tide of discontent mounted, the Duma warned Nicholas II in November 1916 that disaster would overtake the country unless the "dark," or treasonable, elements were removed from the court and a constitutional form of government was instituted. The emperor ignored the warning. In December a group of aristocrats, led by Prince Feliks Yusupov, assassinated Rasputin in the hope that the tsar would then change his course. The tsar responded by showing favor to Rasputin's followers at court. Talk of a palace revolution in order to avert a greater impending upheaval became widespread, especially among the upper classes.

III THE FEBRUARY REVOLUTION

In February 1917 socialists organized mass protest rallies in Petrograd (as Saint Petersburg had been

renamed after the outbreak of war in 1914). These protests took place on February 23, International Women's Day, rallying women workers to demand bread, peace, and liberty. But, as a contemporary police report stated, the women workers "got out of hand." They attracted the support of large numbers of male workers as well. The police proved unable to contain the growing and increasingly volatile protests. Soon 385,000 workers were on strike, and many engaged in confrontations with the police in the streets.

Troops were brought in, but they proved unable to quell the disturbances that engulfed the city over the next five days. In fact, the bulk of the soldiers, who were largely peasants in uniform, joined the insurgency. Consequently, a demand for land reform—to break up the large estates of the nobles and distribute the land among landless peasants—also became a major revolutionary demand. The workers and soldiers organized a growing network of soviets to coordinate their efforts and to establish control throughout the city.

On February 28 the last of the troops loyal to the tsar surrendered, revolutionary soldiers arrested the tsar's ministers, and the tsar abdicated on behalf of himself and his son. Nicholas II wanted his brother, Grand Duke Michael, to assume the throne. Fearing the implications of the revolutionary upheaval, moderate politicians of the Duma urged Michael to do so. However, the grand duke recognized the popular hostility to the monarchy and declined. At this point the Duma moderates, hoping to thwart the coming to power of what one of them called "the scoundrels in the factories," established a government that became known as the Provisional Government.

The Provisional Government was made up of the same liberal leaders who had organized the progressive bloc in the Duma in 1915, as well as some moderate socialists. The prime minister, Prince Georgy Y. Lvov, was a wealthy landowner and a member of the Cadets, who favored an immediate constitutional monarchy and ultimately a republic. Lvov was largely a figurehead; the outstanding personality in the Provisional Government until early May was Pavel N. Milyukov, minister of foreign affairs and the strongest leader of the Cadets since its founding in 1905. He played the principal role in formulating policy. The most prominent of the moderate socialists was Aleksandr F. Kerensky, the minister of justice, who was associated with the SRs and had been the leader of the *Trudovik* (laborite) faction in the Duma. At this time the now powerful soviets of the working-class districts were under the control of Mensheviks and SRs, and they mobilized popular support for the new coalition regime.

The collapse of the tsarist regime thus left in its wake two centers of political authority: (1) the traditional politicians of the Provisional Government, who had little control over the people, and (2) the democratically elected soviets, which exercised more political power owing to support from the great majority of workers and soldiers. This system of dual power proved to be unstable. The instability grew as the moderate politicians proved increasingly unable to meet the rising expectations of the laboring masses.

The Provisional Government declared an end to tsarist repression and established full civil liberties. It also promised early democratic elections for a Constituent Assembly, which would decide the future structure and policies of Russia's government. At the same time, the new regime dodged the questions of land reform, relieving the workers' economic distress, and ending Russia's involvement in

World War I.

In Petrograd the network of soviets quickly reorganized itself as a single soviet, a representative body of deputies elected by the workers and soldiers of the city. The Petrograd soviet immediately appointed a commission to cope with the problem of ensuring a food supply for the capital, placed detachments of revolutionary soldiers in the government offices, and ordered the release of thousands of political prisoners. On February 28 the soviet ordered the arrest of Nicholas's ministers and began publishing an official organ, *Izvestia* (Russian for 'the facts'). On March 1 it issued its famous Order No. 1. By the terms of this order, the soldiers of the army and the sailors of the fleet were to submit to the authority of the soviet and its committees in all political matters. They were to obey only those orders that did not conflict with the directives of the soviet, and they were to elect committees that would exercise exclusive control over all weapons. Also, they were to observe strict military discipline on duty, but harsh and contemptuous treatment by the officers was forbidden. Disputes between soldiers' committees and officers were to be referred to the soviet for disposition; off-duty soldiers and sailors were to enjoy full civil and political rights; and saluting of officers was abolished. Subsequent efforts by the soviet to limit and nullify its own Order No. 1 were unavailing, and that order continued in force.

IV GROWING RADICALIZATION

The lifting of tsarist repression released thousands of experienced revolutionaries from prison or from exile in Siberia or abroad. Many of them went to Petrograd or Moscow, where they spread their radical message among the masses. They found a receptive audience in thousands of insurgent workers and soldiers.

Of special significance was the return of Lenin to Petrograd in April 1917. Lenin had lived abroad, mainly in Switzerland, from 1900 to 1905 and again from 1907 to 1917. He had become convinced that consistent struggles for radical democracy in Russia would encourage workers and peasants to struggle for socialism. Lenin also believed that the devastation of World War I would inspire working people throughout the world to fight for socialism. He rallied the swelling ranks of Bolsheviks around slogans such as "Bread, Peace, Land" and "Down with the Provisional Government—All Power to the Soviets!" His party became increasingly attractive to large numbers of bitter and disillusioned young workers, soldiers, and sailors.

At the end of May 1917, maverick revolutionary Leon Trotsky returned to Petrograd from a ten-year exile abroad. He found that the program of the Bolsheviks had come essentially to include his ideas about "permanent revolution," and he soon joined their ranks. Much of the rank-and-file membership of the Mensheviks also went over to the Bolsheviks at this time. Among the SRs, the rank and file and some of the younger leaders turned away from Kerensky and the older leaders associated with him. Various anarchist groups also came to advocate a socialist revolution.

As the people embraced more radical political ideas, growing numbers of young workers, distrustful of the upper classes and the armed forces under the Provisional Government, began arming. They organized workers' militia groups known as the Red Guards. Militant workers were also forming factory committees to assert their authority in a growing number of workplaces. As growing numbers of

soldiers and sailors became more radical, traditional discipline and authority structures within the military disintegrated. However, all this ferment was by no means the work of Lenin and his followers. The popularity of Bolshevik slogans and proposals was growing dramatically, but many workers still voted for the better-known moderate socialists in elections to the soviets. On June 3, elected delegates from the soviets throughout Russia gathered in Petrograd for the first time. At this first Congress of Soviets, only 137 of the 1,090 delegates were Bolsheviks.

A Declining Confidence in the Provisional Government

Throughout Russia's vast rural areas, soviets were also being organized in peasant villages. Here, too, people became disillusioned with the Provisional Government, which had refused to initiate land reform. Many peasants were taking matters into their own hands, seizing the great estates from the landlords and dividing the land among themselves. The government also began losing support among oppressed nationalities seeking autonomy from Russian authority. Finally, the government's patriotic appeals for a continuation of the war effort could no longer sustain popular support, particularly as military offensives resulted in additional defeats.

As confidence in the Provisional Government declined, frequent resignations, dismissals, and reshuffling within the cabinet plagued the regime. Kerensky rose to higher positions in the government, thanks to his personal popularity and revolutionary connections. He began as minister of justice, then was appointed minister of war, and finally, in July 1917, became premier. Before he could secure this position, however, the Provisional Government faced the sharpest challenge yet to its authority.

B The July Crisis and Kornilov's Revolt

The first Congress of Soviets met in Petrograd in early June 1917. Most delegates opposed Russia's continued participation in the war. The congress voted to organize an antiwar demonstration on June 18. In Petrograd on that day more than 300,000 people marched and rallied, calling for an end to the war and for the ejection of the capitalist politicians from the Provisional Government. On July 4 an even more militant protest drew 500,000 soldiers, sailors, and workers. Many of them marched in armed units, calling for the overthrow of the Provisional Government. The Bolshevik leaders believed that a confrontation with the government was premature. However, Bolsheviks were swept along in the demonstration and were closely identified with it.

Neither the Congress of Soviets nor a majority of the workers supported the extreme demand that the Provisional Government be overthrown. This lack of support made it easier for antirevolutionary forces to isolate and discredit the Bolsheviks. In the aftermath of the July 4 demonstration, the government and its supporters unleashed a fierce campaign of repression and propaganda against them. Progovernment newspapers denounced Lenin as a German agent. Troops loyal to the government raided and wrecked Bolshevik offices. Many prominent Bolsheviks (including Trotsky) were arrested, and warrants were issued for Lenin and other leaders, who went into hiding. In the midst of this July Crisis, Kerensky assumed dictatorial powers. He appointed as head of the armed forces General Lavr Kornilov, an authoritarian figure who was favored by the upper classes and opponents of the

revolution. A staunch Russian patriot, Kornilov appeared to have the ability to reestablish order.

In fact, Kornilov was conspiring with certain aristocrats and military leaders to establish order by suppressing the soviets and replacing the Provisional Government with a military dictatorship. There were efforts to patch together a compromise between Kerensky and Kornilov, but these efforts collapsed. A frightened Kerensky then called on all supporters of the soviets to mobilize against the threatened coup as Kornilov's troops approached Petrograd in late August. The soviets were given arms. The arrested Bolsheviks were freed to help defend the February Revolution. The Bolsheviks played a prominent and effective role in this effort, and the attempted coup was thwarted. Revolutionary agitators who won over Kornilov's troops were largely responsible for preventing the coup.

With armed workers and revolutionary troops controlling the streets of the capital, political realities now tilted in a much more revolutionary direction. The Russian workers and peasants saw clearly that the landowners and capitalists and their leading political representatives had actively supported Kornilov. Kerensky was badly compromised because of his earlier overtures to Kornilov. The moderate SR and Menshevik leaders were discredited for supporting Kerensky. The Bolsheviks—who had built an effective political organization and put forward the popular demands of "Peace, Bread, Land" and "All Power to the Soviets"—had greater mass support than ever before.

V THE OCTOBER REVOLUTION

In elections held in September 1917, the Bolsheviks won majorities in the soviets in Petrograd, Moscow, and many smaller cities. For the first time, there was support in the soviets for replacing the Provisional Government with rule by the soviets. A second Congress of Soviets was due to convene in late October, and it was clear that the Bolsheviks would control it. In October the Bolsheviks gained an important ally when the majority of the SRs split off to form the Left SRs.

On October 10 the Central Committee, the main leadership body of the Bolshevik party, adopted an urgent proposal by Lenin that the party begin organizing for a seizure of power. The Petrograd soviet, now led by Trotsky, established a Military Revolutionary Committee. The official purpose of that committee was to defend the city from the threat of counterrevolution. In fact, its task was to plan an insurrection that would overthrow the Provisional Government.

On the night of October 24 and 25, 1917, a coordinated effort of workers' Red Guard units, revolutionary soldiers and sailors, and other activists carried out an almost bloodless coup. This insurrection culminated in the storming of the Winter Palace—where the cabinet of the Provisional Government was meeting—and the arrest of the cabinet members. Only a small percentage of workers were involved in the overthrow of the Provisional Government. However, even opponents of the Bolsheviks at the time (as well as later historians) noted that the great majority of workers supported the seizure of power.

On October 25, while the insurrection was in progress, the second Congress of Soviets met in Petrograd. Of the 850 delegates, the Bolsheviks had 390 and their Left SR allies had 100. The 80 Menshevik delegates and 60 Right SR delegates walked out when the Congress accepted the mantle of

power conferred on it by the Bolshevik-led insurrection. Lenin addressed the gathering with the statement, "We shall now proceed to the construction of the socialist order." He concluded with the prediction that working-class revolutions would spread to other countries and with the cry, "Long live the world socialist revolution!"

VI THE NEW GOVERNMENT

Initially, soviet rule was implemented through a multiparty system. Bolsheviks, as well as delegates from various Menshevik and SR factions and anarchists and activists not affiliated with any party, had voice and vote in all sessions of soviets. Freedom of press and assembly flourished in the general political life of the country. An executive body of government was established, the Council of People's Commissars, with Lenin at its head. It was responsible to the Executive Committee of the Congress of Soviets, which was elected by the periodic meetings of the Congress of Soviets. The delegates to the Congress, in turn, were elected from various regional and local bodies and could be replaced easily if they failed to satisfy the worker and peasant voters.

The new government proclaimed Russia a soviet republic. The regime made a number of far-reaching decisions consistent with revolutionary ideals. It decided to withdraw Russia from World War I and validated the peasants' seizure and redistribution of land. It also affirmed the right to self-determination of all oppressed nationalities. The new government established policies to advance equal rights for women, to create government control of all banks, and to bring about workers' control of industry. It moved to provide health care, education, and housing to all as a matter of right. It decreed the separation of church and state, ending privileges of the Russian Orthodox Church, with freedom of worship for believers of all denominations. The regime also decided that members of the government would not have incomes higher than those of common skilled laborers.

The decisions of the Congress of Soviets on peace and land evoked widespread support for the new government, and they were decisive in assuring victory to the Bolsheviks in other cities and in the provinces. In proclaiming the right of self-determination, the Council of People's Commissars made it clear that it hoped the "toiling masses" of the various nationalities would decide to remain part of Russia.

Among the Bolsheviks, a controversy flared up over whether Mensheviks and Right SRs should be invited to join the Council of People's Commissars. A majority of Bolsheviks agreed with Lenin and Trotsky that it made little sense to seek a coalition with those who opposed the Soviet government. On the other hand, there was agreement on including Left SRs. The Cadet party was outlawed, and some restrictions on freedom of the press were imposed. Bolshevik leaders argued that these measures were justified by the proliferation of counterrevolutionary activities among those opposed to the new regime. To deal with such activities, the government set up a special police unit, the Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution, Speculation and Sabotage. This unit was known as the Cheka, from the initials of the Russian words for "extraordinary commission." Initially, however, people generally viewed the new Soviet government as being radically democratic.

Another controversy arose over the Constituent Assembly, for which the Provisional Government had promised to hold elections. This assembly was supposed to oversee the development of a constitution

that would establish a new democratic governmental structure for Russia. For months all the revolutionary parties and the soviets had been pressuring the Provisional Government to hold the elections. The Provisional Government had finally made arrangements to hold the elections on November 12, 13, and 14. The Bolshevik Revolution had occurred in the meantime, so there was some confusion over whether and how to hold the elections.

The new Soviet government allowed the elections to be held, despite doubts about how accurately the elections would reflect popular support for the October Revolution. The lists of candidates had been made up before the October split of the SRs into Left SRs and Right SRs. The SRs had the support of the peasants, and more Right SR than Left SR candidates appeared on ballots in rural areas. In the elections the Bolsheviks won overwhelmingly in urban areas and working-class districts, but they failed to win a majority of the peasant votes, which went to the SRs. So when the Constituent Assembly convened on January 5, 1918, it had a majority of delegates who opposed soviet power. On the next day, the Soviet government—with the full and active support not only of the Bolsheviks (who had since renamed themselves Communists), but also Left SRs, anarchists, and some former Mensheviks—declared the Constituent Assembly dissolved. The regime proclaimed that the soviets alone represented the democratic will of the Russian masses.

VII FROM SOVIET DEMOCRACY TO COMMUNIST DICTATORSHIP

The radical democracy that the Russian revolutions of 1917 represented was overwhelmed by the harsh realities of the next three years. Several factors led to its demise.

Lenin, Trotsky, and other leaders of the October Revolution had anticipated an international wave of revolutions. They believed that such revolutions would grow out of working-class resentment over long-standing exploitation and oppression, heightened by revulsion for the massive slaughter of World War I and inspired by the revolutionary events in Russia. They were sure that these revolutions would bring about the creation of working-class socialist regimes in more industrialized countries and that these new regimes would come to Russia's aid. A wave of radical mass strikes and uprisings in many countries did take place from 1918 to 1920, but the new Communist parties in these countries were relatively inexperienced. Attempts at socialist revolutions outside of Russia were not successful. Consequently, Soviet Russia found itself isolated in a hostile capitalist world.

The efforts of the Soviet government to pull Russia out of World War I also proved more difficult than anticipated. Representatives of the Soviet government, with Trotsky as the leading negotiator, met with German representatives from December 1917 through January 1918 at Brest-Litovsk (now Brest, Belarus). They found themselves putting forward their own revolutionary principles against the German negotiators' threats of further military action and demands for territory and resources. Trotsky hoped that working-class uprisings in Germany and Austria would soon cut the ground out from under his opponents. He therefore played for time, and he ultimately declared that Russia was simply withdrawing from the war regardless of the demands of imperial Germany. At this point, the Germans launched a military offensive that overcame the disintegrated Russian army. Germany quickly captured a broad belt of territory, as well as many prisoners and resources. The German government then put forth even harsher peace terms.

Trotsky's failure at the peace talks led to another crisis that undermined soviet democracy. After a fierce debate, Lenin persuaded a Communist Party majority in the government to accept the harsh peace terms. The Left SRs strongly opposed any agreement to the German demands, which included Russia's giving up the Baltic states, Finland, Poland, and Ukraine. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was signed on March 3, 1918, and the Left SRs angrily walked out of the government and began organizing against both the peace settlement and the Communists. The Left SRs had a far better understanding of realities among the peasants than did the Communists. Their departure from the government opened the way for serious (sometimes even criminal) misjudgments by the government in dealing with the rural population. In particular, efforts to secure grain from the countryside in order to relieve bread shortages in the cities resulted in violent conflicts that undermined support for the Communist regime.

At the same time, members of other left-wing groups also began organizing against the government, in some cases through armed violence. The Cadets and forces that wanted to restore the tsarist regime prepared for civil war. Some of these elements were working with foreign governments, including those of Britain, France, and the United States. These and other nations imposed a devastating economic blockade on Russia to strangle the Soviet government. They also gave substantial material support to counterrevolutionary armies (and even sent some of their own troops) to help overthrow the Soviet regime. During this civil war, the Communists were often called Reds (from the traditional color of left-wing banners) and the counterrevolutionaries were known as Whites. *See also* Russian Civil War.

In this situation of civil war and foreign invasion, the Communists had to build an effective military force as rapidly as possible to defend the new regime. Trotsky was given the responsibility of organizing a Red Army and leading it to victory. The hard-fought victories were heroic but costly and brutalizing. The Cheka was given expanded powers to deal with internal enemies (actual and potential) of the revolution. The death penalty, initially abolished by the Soviet regime, was reestablished. Increasing restrictions were placed on freedom of the press and other civil liberties. Opposition parties were banned, allowed to operate again, and banned again at various points. In 1918 there were assassination attempts against Lenin and other Communists, combined with even more substantial forms of violence organized by opponents of the regime. In response, the Cheka organized the countermeasure of a massive Red Terror, a campaign in which suspected opponents of the revolution were arrested and often executed. Although the peasantry had become hostile to the Communists, they supported them, fearing that a victory by the Whites would result in a return to the monarchy. Poorly organized and without widespread support, the Whites were defeated by the Red Army in 1920.

A Growth of Bureaucracy

In this same period the Communists carried out a shift in economic policy that was to cause lasting problems. Threats of economic sabotage by capitalist factory owners who were hostile to the regime led the government to take over more and more of the economy—much more rapidly than originally intended. Ordinary workers were put in charge of factories, and their inexperience as managers resulted in economic difficulties. The government's expansion into the economy also generated the growth of bureaucracy. A bureaucracy involves a hierarchy of administrators, managers, clerks, and

others who are supposed to coordinate and control complex political, social, or economic activities. Often, a bureaucracy becomes an extremely impersonal and relatively inefficient structure, notorious for its arbitrary power and unnecessarily complicated procedures. Some historians believe that as the Soviet bureaucracy grew larger and more cumbersome, what was left of political democracy and economic efficiency degenerated. This bureaucratic degeneration added to the severe strains of the civil war and the foreign economic blockade. These added strains, in turn, resulted in a devastating breakdown of much of Russia's industry.

The once vibrant working-class movement that had spearheaded the revolution evaporated. Many experienced activists went into the new Soviet government or into the Red Army, and many others perished through war and disease. In the disintegrating economy, many workers left the factories and even the cities. This reduction in the numbers of workers, together with government efforts to maintain order, resulted in the decline of the factory committees and a substantial loss of independence on the part of the trade unions. With the evaporation of multiparty politics, the soviets became a reflection and finally a rubber stamp of the only political grouping that was allowed to function, the Communists. While claiming to defend the interests of the workers and peasants, the new government increasingly found itself quelling peasant rebellions and workers' strikes, many of which were instigated by Mensheviks and SRs. Especially dramatic was the violent repression in 1921 of an uprising by sailors calling for the restoration of soviet democracy at the Kronshtadt naval base (previously a Bolshevik stronghold) outside of Petrograd (see Kronshtadt Rebellion).

Most Communists maintained a high degree of idealism. Many had hopes of a return to soviet democracy that would be facilitated by the spread of socialist revolutions to other countries. (The newly formed Communist International, established in 1919, was designed to help coordinate efforts for such revolutions.) But a sizable layer of Communist Party members was growing used to a Communist monopoly of power and to authoritarian methods. There were an increasing number of careerists, caring little for the ideals of socialism and the principles of working-class democracy, who joined the new Communist regime because it represented an avenue for personal advancement. Even among those motivated by higher ideals, there was a fear that if the Communists relaxed their grip on political power, the forces of counterrevolution would seek to drown Soviet Russia in blood.

B Legacy of the Revolutions

By 1921 Lenin's government had succeeded in winning the civil war and driving out all foreign invaders. The major task of the Soviet government now was rebuilding the country, especially getting the economy functioning. To do so involved creating a more harmonious balance between city and countryside and carrying out the tasks of industrialization and modernization. Much effort was made to extend health, education, cultural development, and other gains to increasing numbers of workers and peasants and to draw many of them into the government and upper levels of society.

For many years, the example of the Russian revolutions of 1917 inspired workers and other oppressed people throughout the world. This was true not only in the massive international Communist movement, but also among many others inclined to challenge the established order. The Russian revolutionary experiences of 1917 influenced later revolutions throughout the 20th century.

On the other hand, hopes for rebuilding soviet democracy were not realized. The Communist Party was supposed to be a highly principled working-class force that would control the new government bureaucracy. However, the bureaucratic mode of functioning, combined with the brutalizing effects of the civil war, transformed the Communist Party into an increasingly authoritarian body.

Lenin proved utterly unsuccessful in his efforts, during the last years of his life, to push back bureaucratic developments and to end the influence of Joseph Stalin, the most authoritarian of the Communist leaders. Similar efforts by other Communist leaders throughout the 1920s, most notably by Leon Trotsky and his Left Opposition, were defeated. Stalin became the USSR's unquestioned dictator. Even his onetime ally, Nikolay Bukharin, proved unable to curb the tyrant's increasingly brutal excesses. Millions, including many Communists, suffered and died after Stalin and his supporters consolidated their dictatorship in the early 1930s.

As the USSR was experiencing significant economic development and becoming a major world power, the bureaucratic and authoritarian nature of the Stalin regime gave Communism the profoundly undemocratic connotation that it has for many people today. For many, socialism came to mean not economic democracy but merely state ownership and control of the economy. Even the word *soviet* became associated simply with the USSR's dictatorial regime. Stalin's successors in subsequent Communist governments of that country later denounced his crimes, but they were never successful in overcoming the dictatorial legacy. That legacy ultimately undermined the country's future development, contributing in significant ways to the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

Many analysts argue that such a dictatorship was inherent in the nature of Lenin's ideas, Marxism, socialism, and even revolution as such. Others explain its development by pointing to different factors: deep-rooted aspects of Russian culture from tsarist times, the failure of working-class revolutions in more industrialized countries, and the impact of hostile foreign pressures. Some continue to see the Russian revolutions of 1917 as a positive example for workers and oppressed groups.

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