The Power of One: The Russian Revolution

By Nicole Magie

Why does one revolution in one place in one year matter so much? The Russian Revolution in 1917 not only transformed Russia, but also set the stage for a changing world over the next one hundred years.



Imagine This …

Imagine being a Russian peasant woman in 1916 and watching the crops rot into the ground. So many men are fighting in the Great War that there aren't enough hands to harvest the crops—even with women like you working hard in the fields. Imagine that your cousin lives in Russia's capital city of Petrograd and works with other women in the factories. Every day, she lines up outside the grocery store at dawn before she has to be at the factory for her shift. But she always leaves without enough fuel to keep her house warm and with too little food to feed her family. Imagine hearing reports from the

battlefield, where both your husband and brother are hopefully still alive and fighting. You hear the men are running out of basic supplies too—even ammunition. They are ordered to fight unarmed or by taking rifles from their comrades when they die in battle. Imagine that you and your neighbors have been living like this for a few years. And then the winter of 1916–1917 arrives—and it proves to be a bitterly cold one.

Now imagine hearing about the death of the tsar (the emperor of Russia) in 1918 and the rise of a new leader. This leader proposes an immediate plan to not only establish peace and bring the men home but also to provide necessities for families like yours. He also creates a long-term plan to shift the power from the ruling upper class. He will shift that power to poor but hard-working people like you and your family, who are laboring in the factories and the fields. This man, Vladimir Lenin, has written about his ideas for years.

But now his socialist political party— the Bolsheviks[1]—has taken leadership of the collapsed Russian Empire. Can you understand why Lenin brought hope that your desperate world could one day have peace and order?



Vladimir Lenin giving a speech in Moscow's Sverdlov Square to the Red Army who were leaving to fight in the Polish-Soviet War, 1920. By Grigory Goldstein, public domain.

The backstory of the Russian Revolution

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was an important event for the entire world, not only Russia. To see how this all came to be, let's look back about a decade. In 1905, the

Russian tsar, Nicholas II, refused to withdraw from a humiliating war with Japan. In response, many Russian people took to the streets in peaceful protests and marched to the Winter Palace in Petrograd (St. Petersburg). But on a day that became known as "Bloody Sunday," the tsar's military forces killed hundreds of protesters. This sparked massive protests and civil war across the country. The protests only ended when the tsar agreed to form an assembly of representatives known as the Duma.



An unknown artist's impression of Bloody Sunday, 1905. By Ivan Vladimirov, public domain.

During this 1905 civil war, Russian workers organized and began forming groups called soviets. These soviets (workers' groups) gave them a community identity as workers who came together for a common purpose. Meanwhile, in many other countries, nationalism was effectively unifying people based upon shared cultures and identities. But in Russia, there was almost no middle class and very little common "national" identity to build upon. Many people were not ethnic Russians, and less than half the population even spoke the Russian language. Russia was geographically massive, socially diverse, and economically divided. Political revolutionaries such as Vladimir Lenin seized upon these divisions and began to unite people into one community based upon their roles as workers.

The Russian Revolution of 1917: What happened? Why does it matter?

A decade later, Russia had lost more people than any other country in World War I. The soldiers, the factory workers, and the peasants were all feeling desperate shortages. As

the bitterly cold winter of 1916–1917 wore on, the people were beginning to break.

Protests began on March 7, 1917, with factory workers striking in Petrograd. Women took to the street the following day to celebrate International Woman's Day and joined the factory workers to protest the government and its policy of food rationing. The Russian people were fed up with the tsar and his policies, and they desperately wanted bread to feed their families. Soon the streets were filled with about 200,000 protesters. They called for Tsar Nicholas II to step down, for the Russian military to exit World War I, and for the rationing of food and fuel to end. In the following days, the city turned chaotic. Portions of the military stationed in Petrograd rebelled and joined the protesters while the officers fled to the Winter Palace.

The tsar responded by taking away the powers of the Duma. However, the Duma decided to appoint a Provisional Committee in an attempt to regain control of the city. On March 15, Nicholas II abdicated (gave up his power) and left the Provisional Committee of the Duma to govern Russia. The Provisional Committee vowed to continue fighting with the Allies against the Central Powers. But this was not what the people wanted. The Bolsheviks used this to their advantage and appealed to the Russian people for support. The result was an agreement where the Duma and the Petrograd soviet council would share power.



Women gathered for International Women's Day on 8 March 1917 in Petrograd. As more women joined the crowd, they began protesting and demanding bread from the tsar. This date marks the beginning of the Russian Revolution of 1917. By State Museum of Political History of Russia, public domain.

The first phase of the Russian Revolution of 1917 was complete, but the revolution was not over. In the months that followed, the Duma supporters and the Soviet council clashed over what reforms to institute. One of the main issues was whether to keep fighting in World War I. There were also divisions within the Soviet councils across Russia, with certain groups competing to gain control. The situation in Russia was still tense and workers continued to protest.

During this period, the question became: What group or faction will ultimately gain control of the government? The answer eventually became Vladimir Lenin's party, the Bolsheviks. They saw the continued protests as a sign of the class struggle necessary to establish their socialist form of government that would eventually be called communism.

In November 1917 the Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, took control of the capital of Petrograd. They immediately removed the Provisional Government. Then they arrested those in opposition parties. In March 1918, the Bolsheviks made another move that helped them gain more support from the people: Russia signed a treaty with Germany that ended the German invasion of Russia and pulled the Russians out of World War I. Although they were out of the global war, Russia was still in a civil war. Bolsheviks continued fighting their opponents in the Provisional Government and from other political parties until 1921. The Bolsheviks were victorious. But after almost 10 years of fighting both a foreign enemy and an internal war, the Russian people were still suffering.



Soviet propaganda poster, 1920. Showing "what the October Revolution gave to the

Now we know who was in control, but how would they run the country? The Bolsheviks under the leadership of Lenin made changes that established communism in opposition to capitalism. This meant that land and the means of production (like factories) belonged to the people. Lenin almost immediately instituted reforms to eliminate the private and individual ownership of land and factories. Communism, a form of socialism in which the state controls the economy, also changed ideas of community. Under Lenin, the Bolsheviks wanted to unite the people through class connections based on their roles as workers. Lenin viewed class as the grand unifier and wanted to reduce the importance of other types of communal connections like religion. Everyone would be one community of laborers working for the common good of everyone in the nation. Lenin promised peace, stability, and provisions, but also power to people who had never held this power.

female worker and peasant" with answers like "kindergarten" and "library" written on the buildings. Public domain.

While we know that the revolution deeply shaped this one country, what about the world? First, by removing Russia from the conflict, the revolution changed the dynamics of World War I. Second, it represents a major shift from empire to nation-state. The last three land-based empires in the world ended in 1911 (China), 1917 (Russia) and 1922 (the Ottoman Empire). Third, the Russian Revolution led to the first communist nation-state in the world. Communism became an alternative to capitalism and a huge political force during the twentieth century. The influence of communism was not only felt in Russia and other countries like China where it took hold, but also over the course of the almost half-century Cold War that played out across the world.

After the Russian Revolution

But for the moment, our story pauses in Russia. By 1922, both the world war and Russia's civil war were over, and Russia was now a nation-state. It was now the Soviet Union (aka the U.S.S.R. or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). Under Lenin, there was more bread, land, and peace but at the price of repression. There was also a new way of organizing a national community. Although Lenin died in 1924, communist leadership would continue under the Soviet Union's new leader Josef Stalin.

The transition from the Russian Empire to the Soviet Union had answered the questions of who would lead and how they would lead. Now the question was, how would they maintain power? While the notion of capitalism had been around for over a century, communism seemed fresh and young. So, how would a young communist Russia survive within a world of capitalist nations? And how would it do so within this geographically vast and socially diverse country that it was hoping—even forcing—to unite under this

new way of building community? As you continue to learn the history that followed this one moment, you'll see that these challenges had a huge impact. These challenges would not only change one country in one year. They would change the course of world history for the remainder of the twentieth century.

---

1 The Bolsheviks began as a workers' party that wanted socialist reforms for Russia. Lenin led this branch of the socialist party and called for the public ownership of the means of production (factories) and the elimination of capitalism, or the private ownership of businesses. The Bolsheviks would later become the Russian Communist Party. Communism is a political ideology that advocates for public (state) control of the economy. In theory, communism calls for the community to own all properties, including businesses, and the people share in the profits based on their contributions and needs.

Sources

Brenton, Tony. *Was Revolution Inevitable?: Turning Points of the Russian Revolution.* London: Oxford UP, 2017.

Bulliet, R.W., Crossley, P.K., Headrick, D.R., Hirsch, S.W., Johnson, L.L., Northrup, D. *The Earth and Its Peoples: A Global History* (6th ed). Stamford, CT: Cengage Learning, 2015.

Figes, Orlando. *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution: 1891-1924.* New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1998.

Marples, David R. *Lenin's Revolution: Russia, 1917-1921.* London: Routledge, 2014.

Millar, James R. (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of Russian History.* New York, NY: MacMillan, 2004.

Rappaport, Helen. *Caught in the Revolution: Petrograd, Russia, 1917-A World on the Edge.* New York, NY: Macmillan, 2017.

Reiman, M. *About Russia, Its Revolutions, Its Development and Its Present.* Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang AG, 2016.

Smele, Jonathan. *The 'Russian' Civil Wars, 1916-1926: Ten Years That Shook the World.* London: Oxford UP, 2016.

Nicole Magie

Nicole Magie is an Assistant Professor at Olivet College in Michigan. She is also a long-time member of the World History Association and the Midwest World History Association, and has written for World History Connected.

Image credits

 This work is licensed under CC BY 4.0 except for the following:

Cover: Russian Revolution of 1917: Lenin speaking to the workers of the Putilov factory, in Petrograd, 1917. Painting by Isaak Brodsky (1883-1939). National Gallery, Prague, Czech Republic © Photo by Leemage/Corbis via Getty Images.

Vladimir Lenin giving a speech in Moscow's Sverdlov Square to the Red Army who were leaving to fight in the Polish-Soviet War, 1920. By Grigory Goldstein, public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lenin_Speech_in_May_1920_(cropped).png

An unknown artist's impression of Bloody Sunday, 1905. By Ivan Vladimirov, public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Russian_Revolution,_1905_Q81561.jpg#/media/File:The_Russian_Revolution,_1905_Q81561.jpg

Women gathered for International Women's Day on 8 March 1917 in Petrograd. As more women joined the crowd, they began protesting and demanding bread from the tsar. This date marks the beginning of the Russian Revolution of 1917. By State Museum of Political History of Russia, public domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:1917_International_Women%27s_Day_-_Petrograd.jpg#

Soviet propaganda poster, 1920. Showing "what the October Revolution gave to the female worker and peasant" with answers like "kindergarten" and "library" written on the buildings. Public domain. https://no.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fil:SovietWoman1920.jpg