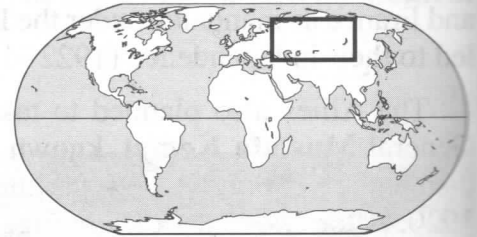


THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

One of the most important consequences of World War I was the **Russian Revolution of 1917**. This revolution was to have far-reaching effects on the world. To understand the causes of the revolution, it is necessary to first examine developments taking place in Russia earlier in the nineteenth century.



THE ROOTS OF REVOLUTION

The Russian Tsars (*emperors*) ruled as **autocrats** (*absolute rulers*). Through a network of secret police and strict censorship, new ideas were repressed. The vast majority of Russians were illiterate serfs who lived in poverty. The serfs remained bound to the land, long after serfdom had been abolished in other Western European countries. A small group of nobles owned thousands of serfs and enjoyed vast wealth. Despite earlier efforts to introduce Western ideas and technology into Russia, social conditions kept the country economically under-developed. Russian reformers, inspired by the example of Western Europe, hoped to abolish serfdom and modernize their country.

EMANCIPATION OF THE SERFS

Acting as protector of the Orthodox Christians, Russia waged a series of wars with the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. Between 1854 and 1856, Russia was engaged in the **Crimean War**, in which England and France supported Turkey against Russia. Despite its large army, Russia lost the war. **Tsar Alexander II** decided to listen to reformers and **emancipated** (*liberated*) the serfs in 1861. The "Tsar Liberator" also intended to introduce a new elected assembly and other reforms. Ironically, the liberal Alexander II was assassinated by Russian revolutionaries shortly afterwards. This put an abrupt end to all attempts at reform. The freed serfs remained landless peasants, paying rents to their former owners. Later Tsars returned to a policy of opposing all change and using harsh repression to maintain the existing social order.



Tsar Alexander II

"AUTOCRACY, NATIONALITY, AND ORTHODOXY"

Russian nationalism had important effects on its conservative rulers. They identified their empire with autocracy, the Russian nationality and the Russian Orthodox Church. The government acted as the protector of new Slav states in the Balkans. It also adopted a policy of **Russification**, forcing non-Russian people such as the Finns, Poles, and the peoples of Central Asia to adopt the Russian language and culture. Jews were persecuted in anti-semitic **pogroms** (*officially encouraged persecutions against Jews*).

PRELUDE TO THE REVOLUTION

By 1900, the Russian Empire stretched from Eastern Europe to the Pacific Ocean. Compared to the countries of Western Europe, Russia remained backward. Peasants and factory workers lived in conditions of terrible poverty, while the landowning nobles enjoyed lives of wealth and leisure. The autocratic Tsars opposed democratic reform, and secret revolutionary societies had formed among members of the educated elite.



THE REVOLUTION OF 1905

Under these conditions, Russia was ripe for revolution. The crisis came to a head after Russia was defeated in the **Russo-Japanese War** (1904–1905). When troops of the tsar trampled on unarmed demonstrators in St. Petersburg on “**Bloody Sunday**” in 1905, revolutions broke out across the country. Peasants seized lands, while workers in the cities engaged in demonstrations and general strikes. **Tsar Nicholas II** finally granted limited reforms, creating an elected legislature known as the **Duma**. However, only the very wealthy could vote for members to the new assembly.

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION OF 1917

The years after 1905 showed some signs of improvement. But Russia was not prepared for the strains of war. In 1914, Nicholas II brought Russia into the war against Austria-Hungary and Germany. Poorly trained and badly equipped Russian soldiers suffered disastrous defeats. In some cases, troops were even sent into battle without ammunition. They were told to pick up the weapons of their dead comrades. Mounting defeats led to widespread discontent in the army. Russian industries were incapable of producing needed weapons and supplies. On the home front, food supplies were dangerously low.

THE “FEBRUARY REVOLUTION” (MARCH 1917)

In 1917, worker-led food riots broke out in cities all across Russia. When soldiers refused to fire on striking workers in March 1917, Nicholas realized he was powerless to govern the nation. Nicholas gave up his throne, and the leaders of the Duma declared Russia a republic. However, the provisional government that replaced the Tsar failed to win the support of the people when it refused to withdraw from the war.

THE "OCTOBER REVOLUTION" (NOVEMBER 1917)

Vladimir Lenin was a follower of Karl Marx, living in exile in Switzerland. The Germans sent him back to Russia by rail-road, hoping he would cause unrest in Russia. This would help to end the war on the Eastern front, allowing Germany to concentrate on defeating the Western allies. Lenin's supporters, known as the **Bolsheviks**, promised "Peace, Bread, and Land": *peace* to the soldiers, *bread* to the workers, and *land* to the peasants. The Bolsheviks seized power by force in a second revolution in November 1917.

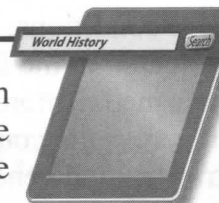


Lenin lectures a crowd of peasants.

The Bolsheviks changed the name of their political party to the **Communists**. They also changed the name of their country to the **Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.)** or "**Soviet Union**." Russia had become the world's first Communist country.

ACTING AS AN AMATEUR HISTORIAN

Here is a puzzle: why was the "February Revolution" in March and the "October Revolution" in November? See if you can use the Internet to find the answer. When you find the answer, write it below:



THE SOVIET UNION UNDER LENIN: 1917-1924

The Bolsheviks were convinced that a world revolution was about to begin, first in Germany, then in Britain, and finally in the United States. Lenin added his own ideas to Marx's original theory of Communism. He believed that a small group of dedicated party members must lead the country along the path to Communist equality. He argued that after the revolution, a "temporary dictatorship" of party leaders was needed because the workers, brought up in capitalist society, could not be trusted to know their own true interests.

THE RUSSIAN CIVIL WAR (1919–1921)

Once in power, the Communists immediately withdrew from the war against Germany. They transferred millions of acres of land to the poorer peasants. Workers were organized to control and operate factories, and all industries were **nationalized** (*taken over by the government*).

A civil war followed between those who supported Lenin's program, known as the "**Reds**," and those who wished to return to the rule of the Tsar, known as the "**Whites**." Other countries were shocked at events in Russia, just as they had been when the French Revolution had occurred 130 years earlier. Several foreign powers, including the United States, intervened, sending troops to help the "Whites." Parts of the old Russian Empire even tried to break away. The Red Army, however, enjoyed greater support from peasants and workers. Lenin also took drastic measures, like executing Tsar Nicholas II and his family in cold blood, so that the monarchy could never be restored. After two years of fighting, the Reds defeated the Whites. This victory secured the position of the new Communist government.



Cossack fighters in the White Army.

LENIN'S NEW ECONOMIC POLICY

After half a decade of turmoil, the Russian economy was in shambles. Now that the Bolsheviks had gained political control, they needed to deliver on their promises to feed the people. By 1920, Lenin realized that changes to his program were needed. Peasants were no longer growing enough food, since they were afraid it would be seized by the government. By 1921, a severe famine was facing Russia. Lenin came to the conclusion that Communist policies must be temporarily put aside to avoid disaster.

Lenin's goal was to keep the peasants satisfied and to keep the Bolsheviks in power, as well as to stabilize the economy. In 1921, Lenin introduced the **New Economic Policy**, or "N.E.P.," in which some private ownership was permitted in small-scale manufacturing and agriculture. Meanwhile, the government continued to control major industries. The N.E.P. succeeded in slowly increasing production. The policy seemed to be working when Lenin died in 1924. Although many thought Leon Trotsky, leader of the Red Army, would succeed Lenin, **Joseph Stalin** managed to gain control.



Starving peasants in front of a window sign that reads "No Bread Delivered Today."