

War and Revolution in Russia 1914 – 1921

AP World History

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In 1913, Tsar Nicholas II celebrated the three hundred years of Romanov rule in Russia. He and his dynasty ruled over a huge empire, stretching from central Europe to the Pacific Ocean and from the Arctic to the borders of Afghanistan. This mighty imperium covered one-sixth of the land surface of the globe, and was populated by almost 150 million people of more than a hundred different nationalities. However, the Russian Empire was riven by many tensions. Just five years after the celebrations, Nicholas and his family would be dead, executed by the Bolsheviks, while his empire would be defeated in the World War and wracked by revolutions, civil wars and foreign interventions. By 1921, after a period of great unrest, the Bolsheviks triumphed in Russia, and largely reunited the old empire (formally constituted as the USSR in 1923). The repercussions of the events that took place on the Eastern Front, from 1914 to 1921, however, would have a profound impact upon world history for the remainder of the century and beyond - although it was the battles of the Western Front that eventually achieved greater fame.

In 1914, Russia was hardly prepared for war. Just nine years earlier she had been defeated in a war with tiny Japan. The Revolution of 1905, when revolts and uprisings had forced the Tsar to concede civil rights and a parliament to the Russian people, had also shaken the empire. The subsequent reforms and rebuilding were far from complete, but as workers and land-hungry peasants rallied to the Russian flag and marched off to fight against the Central Powers, the initial auguries for both war and national unity were not bad. National unity, however, could only be built on victory and, in that regard, Russia's hopes were dashed early in the Great War. At Tannenberg and the First Battle of the Masurian Lakes in 1914 Russia lost two entire armies (over 250,000 men). This failed Russian advance into East Prussia did disrupt Germany's Schlieffen Plan and thus probably prevented the fall of Paris, but it also signalled the beginning of an unrelenting Russian retreat on the northern sector of the Eastern Front. By the middle of 1915 all of Russian Poland and Lithuania, and most of Latvia, were overrun by the German army.

Many factors - including the militarization of industry and crises in food supply - threatened disaster on the home front. The country's political and economic problems were greatly exacerbated by the war. Food riots, demonstrations, and a mutiny by soldiers in February 1917 forced Nicholas II to abdicate in March 1917 as war still continued. A Provisional Government led by liberals and moderate socialists from Russia's parliament called the Duma was proclaimed, and its leaders hoped now to pursue the war more effectively.

Real power in Russia after the February Revolution, however, lay with the socialist leaders of Petrograd. Anarchist and Bolshevik agitators played their own part in destroying the Russian army's ability to fight. While the new Provisional Government pursued the war, two groups emerged, the Mensheviks, and the Bolsheviks. Both were socialist, but only the Bolsheviks promoted a popular rebellion by the masses. The Mensheviks did not trust the masses to rule. By November of 1917 the ability of Russia's officers to induce their men to obey had been entirely negated by the hopes of social transformation. Many anti-war radicals, along with the Bolshevik leader, Vladimir Lenin, were ferried home from exile in Switzerland in April 1917,

courtesy of the German General Staff (which had spent roughly 30 million marks trying to foment disorder in Russia by the end of 1917). The Bolsheviks, with Lenin at their head, were able to topple Kerensky and take power in the October Revolution of 1917- without significant resistance from either the government or the army.

After taking power, the Bolsheviks promised to deliver 'Peace, Bread and Land' to the beleaguered people of Russia. With regard to the first of these, a 'Decree on Peace' (26 October 1917) was dashed off by Lenin, calling upon all belligerents to end the slaughter of World War One. The Central Powers responded to the Bolsheviks' appeal by agreeing to an armistice on the Eastern Front, a separate peace treaty with Imperial Germany and her allies was signed at the Polish town of Brest-Litovsk. This punitive treaty effectively handed over Finland, Poland, the Baltic provinces, Ukraine and Transcaucasia to the Central Powers, together with one-third of the old empire's population, one-third of its agricultural land and three-quarters of its industries. Outraged by this, the anti-Bolshevik Russians who had remained loyal to the Allies now took up arms in earnest against the Bolsheviks. They were actively assisted by Allied forces in Russia, who hoped to rebuild the Eastern Front.

During the civil war thus unleashed by the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk the Bolsheviks (Reds), who controlled Petrograd, Moscow and the central Russian heartland, soon found themselves surrounded by hostile forces (Whites) - made up of the more conservative elements in Russia - who launched a series of campaigns in 1919 that threatened to crush the revolution. The Reds, however, rebuffed these attacks, and survived, and by late 1920 had driven the Whites back into the Black Sea, the Baltic and the Pacific - causing hundreds of thousands of White soldiers and civilians to emigrate. The Reds were able to take advantage of internal lines of communication and could utilize the railways, arsenals and the economy of the most populous provinces of the former empire. In this way they managed to arm, man and maneuver an army that by 1921 had grown to almost five million soldiers. The Whites, in contrast, never commanded forces totalling more than 250,000 men at one time, were separated from each other by huge distances, and were based around the less developed peripheries of Russia. Also, crucially, the Whites underestimated the Bolsheviks' capacity to resist. By 1921 the White armies were defeated, and a new nation called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) was formed.