THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

View of St. Petersburg

Unit Overview

History has often been viewed as a series of completed events. One episode ended as the next episode began in efficient chronological order. However, historic venues rarely unfolded in such neat little packages. This is certainly true of the Russian Revolution. Russia erupted in the midst of World War I as people demanded reform, civil liberties and participation in government. Let’s see how it all happened.
The nineteenth century was a time of rapid change for most of Western Europe. Industrialization and urbanization transformed the way people lived, worked and thought. Russia, however, remained an agricultural country. The Romanov family had presided over the country since 1613 with a long line of absolute rulers called tsars. Eighty percent of the population consisted of serfs who worked the fields for the nobility or aristocracy. Because they were considered part of the estate, these peasants could not move freely within the country and were subject to harsh measures of discipline.
Enlightened Russians, known as the **intelligentsia**, began to believe that serfdom had to end in order for Russia to advance economically. The serfs had no incentive to improve their farming methods and no interest in producing more grain for the nobility. Educated Russians concluded that modernization could begin to take place only if the peasants were freed. Many Russian military officers had experienced Western political ideas while fighting in the long wars against Napoleon and hoped to see them put into practice. Since he had complete control over the lives and property of his subjects, the tsar could have simply given this order. **Alexander I**, who ruled Russia from 1801 to 1825, considered granting this change, but the opportunity was lost due to his sudden death.

Some Russians had formed secret societies with the goal of establishing a constitutional government. In 1825, they challenged the new tsar, **Nicholas I**, and some of the military even refused to take the traditional oath pledging their loyalty to the ruler. The **Decembrist Revolt**, named because it occurred during the month of December, ended with its leaders imprisoned in Siberian labor camps or executed. Nicholas I spent his thirty-year reign combating any signs of political opposition or attempts at reform. He established a secret police force, limited
education, and censored both books and newspapers. However, he could not prevent Russia’s disastrous defeat in the Crimean War in 1856. His military campaign against Turkish, British and French forces underscored the fact that Russia was woefully behind its European counterparts. It also further convinced the average Russian that the autocratic leadership of the tsars was no longer effective.

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**STOP: Answer Section B Questions**

**Reform and its Consequences**

In 1855, Alexander II became Tsar of Russia following the death of Nicholas I. The new ruler understood that reform and new policies were necessary. As a result, he issued an imperial order freeing all serfs in 1861. Half of Russia’s farmable land was divided among them while the remaining portion remained in the hands of the nobility. The Russian government then paid the nobles for any land they lost. Alexander also permitted public trials for those who had been
charged with crimes. For the first time in their history, Russians were permitted to hire their own lawyers.

Many Russians saw this as true progress, but most felt that they were still oppressed. For example, rather than offering the peasants full private ownership, the land was given to peasant communities called *mirs*. Since each mir was responsible for working the land and paying the taxes, it became almost impossible for individual members to leave. Peasants were obligated to the mir just as they had been obligated to the landowners as serfs. As the population continued to grow, most peasants quickly realized that they did not have enough land to support their families.

There was dissatisfaction among the members of the intelligentsia as well. Many censorship laws had not been removed, and Russians were still forced to discuss their political views in secret. Students, in particular, began to volunteer their time in the peasant communities where they taught workers how to read and encouraged the idea of a revolution. Hundreds were arrested for participating in these activities and were sent to Siberian prison camps. Some political societies began to advocate more radical approaches and planned to assassinate the Tsar. In 1881, a bomb was thrown at the carriage of the Tsar, and several of his guards were wounded. While Alexander II checked on the injured, a second bomb killed him.
Moscow’s Monument to Alexander II

The new ruler, Alexander III, believed that reform and more individual freedom would result in greater violence and unrest. Therefore, he enacted harsh measures to assure his control over the country. Student groups were closely monitored by the secret police, and the government strictly regulated the press. Worship outside the Russian Orthodox Church was forbidden, and anyone who spoke a language other than Russian was under suspicion. When Alexander III died in 1894, many Russians hoped the new Tsar, Nicholas II, would support a more open government and an improved standard of living.

**STOP: Answer Section C Questions**

**Mistakes in Judgement**

Hopes for a transformation under the new Tsar were quickly dashed. Nichols II made it clear that he would preserve the power of his office. However, he did encourage new industries and foreign investments. British and French
businessmen lent their financial support to the **Trans-Siberian Railway** to connect Russia with its ports on the Pacific Ocean. Nonetheless, most Russians continued to live as they had for centuries, and the gap between the rich and the poor widened.

To make matters worse, Nichols II made several choices that further eroded confidence in his leadership. In 1904, the Tsar decided that a military victory would renew faith in his government. Russia and Japan had been squabbling over Korea, and Nicholas II felt this was a war he could easily win. The Russians were dismayed when they were quickly defeated in the **Russo-Japanese War** by the Japan. As a result, popular support for the tsarist government declined even further.

Protest marches became more frequent in Russian cities as workers and students took to the streets in an attempt to be heard. On January 22, 1905, a crowd of over 150,000 approached the **Winter Palace** in **St. Petersburg** with a petition requesting an elected law-making body and improved working conditions. Nicholas was not at home, but his guards and soldiers were determined to control the situation. They fired on the crowd killing over five hundred demonstrators. When they learned of this event known as **Bloody Sunday**, workers in other Russian cities reacted, and a number of strikes occurred across the nation. To restore order, Nicholas agreed to the establishment of a Russian parliament called
the Duma. Instead of working with this legislature, the Tsar dissolved it shortly after its first meeting.

The Tsar’s most ill-fated mistake proved to be Russia’s entry into World War I. The country’s long-term feud with Austria-Hungary inspired Nicholas II to make a decision that would eventually cost him his throne. The dreams of glory and intense nationalism took precedence over reason and logic. The Russian army was the most poorly equipped in Europe. Soldiers used broom handles for military training exercises because there was a shortage of guns. German technology and advanced weaponry wiped out entire battalions of Russian troops. By the end of 1914, the Russians had lost over four million men. Nicholas moved his headquarters to the battlefront, and this also proved to be a critical error in judgment.

**STOP: Answer Section D Questions**

**Meanwhile in St. Petersburg...**

The tsar’s preoccupation with the war effort left little time for ruling the country. When he decided to direct the war personally from the front, Nicholas II placed the reins of government in the hands of his most trusted advisor, his wife. The Tsarina Alexandra was influenced by a strange Siberian peasant named Rasputin. Claiming to be a holy man, he convinced the royal couple that he could cure their son Alexei of hemophilia, a serious blood disease. Rasputin encouraged the Tsarina not to make any concessions that would lead to a constitutional monarchy. The Russian nobility resented Rasputin’s influence and arranged to have him murdered in 1916.
The unsuccessful and mismanaged war effort created dire circumstances for the Russian people. Both food and fuel were in short supply by the winter of 1916. Prices quickly escalated, and inflation became a serious problem. Meanwhile, Alexandra continued to mourn the loss of Rasputin, and Nicholas II chose not to address these concerns due to his preoccupation with World War I. By February of 1917, the lack of food caused riots and strikes in major cities including St. Petersburg, the Russian capital. The Tsar assumed that city police and palace soldiers could handle any violence resulting from the unrest as they had done in 1905. This time, however, the police joined the protesters instead of firing on them. St. Petersburg was in a state of chaos. Violence quickly spread to other Russian cities, and soldiers began deserting the army in massive numbers. When Nicholas II tried to return to the capital, his train was stopped by striking railroad workers. The Tsar realized he had few options and abdicated, or gave up his throne, on March 15, 1917.

STOP: Answer Section E Questions

Now What?
The Tsar no longer ruled the country, but just who was in charge? This was a question that divided Russians. In St. Petersburg, many believed the Duma, or legislature, was the likely choice to establish a temporary government. The group made the formation of a constitution its primary goal and named Alexander Kerensky as the leader. Another political organization also formed during this time when workers and soldiers elected councils called soviets to direct demonstrations and protests. Membership in a wide variety of political parties continued to grow as the provisional government struggled to keep order. One of these parties, known as the Bolsheviks, seemed too small and too radical to make an impact. The organization was led by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, who was better known by his nickname, Lenin. The Bolsheviks were the best organized and the most disciplined of Russia’s new political groups. This proved to be their biggest advantage as the events of 1917 unfolded.

The war required the struggling government’s immediate attention, and this sparked an intense debate within the Duma. Alexander Kerensky favored the continuation of the war effort and felt that it was the honorable approach. Those, who feared the Tsar would be reinstated if the Germans were victorious, agreed. Therefore, the Duma made the ill-fated choice to keep fighting. Their decision did
not motivate the army or inspire those who were starving, and Russia’s war effort continued its downward spiral.

In August of 1917, General Lavr Kornilov planned a military takeover of the St. Petersburg and prepared to move his troops into the capital. The railroad workers, supporters of the Bolsheviks, tore up the tracks; this made it impossible for Kornilov’s troops to reach the city. The Bolsheviks also formed police units called the Red Guards to defend St. Petersburg if necessary. Russian workers and peasants now were certain about two things: they did not want to continue the war, and they did not want to restore the Tsar.

This clarity of thought was a big boost to the Bolsheviks. Because it seemed to be the only political group dedicated these cause, party membership rapidly increased. Their slogan Peace, Land, and Bread became a rallying point due to its mass appeal. It captured the emotions of citizens who were tired of the war, peasants who hoped for more land, and workers who were frustrated with the food shortages.
in the cities. In short, it offered something to almost everyone. Lenin ordered the Red Guards to take over the government offices in St. Petersburg on the night of October 24, 1917; he also had the leaders of the provisional government arrested. With that, the Bolsheviks became Russia’s most powerful political force.

Powered by the Bolsheviks, the government acted quickly. It ordered all farmland to be divided among the peasants. The soviets overtook all major industries and ran the factories. A truce was arranged between Russia and Germany so peace talks could begin immediately. Lenin envisioned a dictatorship controlled by a small group that ruled in the name of the workers and peasants. He was determined that only Bolsheviks would participate in the new government. When elections were held in November of 1917, another party won a majority in the new national assembly. The Bolsheviks simply closed the assembly. Their authority to do so was not challenged.

STOP: Answer Section F Questions

The Opposition

There were, however, Russians who opposed the Bolshevik policies. The Treaty of Brest Litovsk, signed with the Germans in March of 1918, ended the war with the Russians giving up a large amount of territory. They also lost a large number of mines and factories in this settlement. Although Lenin was convinced that this land would eventually be returned, a large number of Russians opposed this treaty and other Bolshevik policies. By the summer of 1918, the opposition formed the White Army to combat the Red Army created by the Bolsheviks. The civil war between the Whites and Reds was a destructive and deadly conflict engulfing Russia from 1918 until 1922. The nations of Western Europe along with the United States sent small armies to assist the Whites. Over fifteen million Russians died as a result of the fighting. Nicholas II, Alexandra and their five children were executed in July of 1918. The Red Army eventually defeated the White Army in great part because the Whites could not agree on a common cause.
Once the civil war was over, Russia had a vast amount of obstacles to overcome. War and revolution destroyed factories, and trade with other nations had all but ceased to exist. Lenin understood that change was necessary. In 1921, he announced his plan referred to as the **New Economic Policy** (N.E.P.). Even though Lenin’s original concept for the country involved government ownership of farms and industrial plants, the N.E.P. permitted some private ownership. Farmers, instead of turning over their entire crop to the government, could sell their surplus and make a profit. The Bolsheviks also gave Russia a new name and moved the capital city. The nation became known as the **Union of Soviet Socialist Republics** (U.S.S.R.) or the Soviet Union with **Moscow** as its capital. The Bolsheviks began to refer to their political organization as the **Communist Party**, a name based on the writings of **Karl Marx**. After years of turmoil, Russian life seemed to return to normal.

**Trotsky v Stalin**

The turbulent years had taken their toll on Lenin’s health resulting in a series of strokes that preceded his death in 1924. In the struggle that took place within the Communist Party over Lenin’s successor, **Leon Trotsky** emerged as a powerful figure from the revolutionary movement. As the founder of the Red Army, he was
intelligent, capable and popular. On the other hand, Joseph Stalin attracted little public attention but worked behind the scenes to secure his own future. As Secretary of the Communist Party, he had placed many of his supporters in influential positions before Lenin’s death. Stalin gained enough support to have Trotsky expelled from the country and to ruin anyone who opposed him. By 1928, Joseph Stalin was in sole command of the Communist Party and the Russian government.

STOP: Answer Section G Questions

What Does It All Mean?

For centuries, Russian tsars had tried to retain their power by tighter controls and resistance to change. These autocratic methods proved ineffective as revolutionary leaders such as Lenin gained popularity by appealing to Russia’s massive population of peasants and workers. The fact that Western nations sent troops to aid the White Army in their fight against the Bolshevik forces created a deep resentment as well as a distrust of the United States and Western Europe. The Bolsheviks or Communists solidified their position by gaining a military victory over the White Army. This civil war also created feelings of resentment and distrust between the new Soviet Union and those nations such as the United States, who had supported their opposition.

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Economic change soon followed the political transformation as the world’s first Communist nation rushed to catch up in the areas of technology and industry. How would the nations on both sides of the conflict be affected by the Russian withdrawal from World War I? Would the establishment of a Communist government give the Soviet Union an economic advantage over the West? How would the United States and Western Europe respond to the political and military challenges when the Soviet Union became a major power? Historians of the twentieth century are still struggling to answer these questions.

**Additional Resources and Activities**

- Main Points Worksheet
- Royalty: Anastasia Romanov Article with Quiz
- Causes and Effects: Short-term and Long-term Worksheet