

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONS : February and October 1917

The assassination in 1881 of Tsar Alexander II, the Tsar-Liberator, was a key date leading to the Russian Revolutions of 1917. Alexander emancipated the serfs, improved human rights and started a policy of reform intended to lead to a parliamentary government. But he was targeted for assassination and the 6th attempt succeeded.

The emancipation of the serfs had unintended consequences by weakening three major supports of the Tsarist regime: the serfs, the rural aristocracy and the Orthodox Church.

The serfs were disgruntled that they did not get land with their freedom and that they had to pay for their emancipation. But with the rapid industrialisation of the late 19th/early 20th century they were free to seek work in urban factories. They also became literate. Earlier European revolutions - the 17th century English Civil War and the French Revolution of 1789 were also fuelled by the spread of literacy

The Orthodox Church which had a powerful hold over the serfs in the rural areas neglected the towns, so the workers were exposed to new ideas of socialism and Marxism.

The estates of the nobility were valued not by acreage or yield, but by the number of serfs . When the serfs were liberated and had to be paid, many landowners had neither the money nor the knowledge to manage their estates, so they sold up leaving a power vacuum in rural areas.

The assassination of his father convinced Alexander III that the only way to rule Russia was to revert to Autocratic rule stressing that the Tsar was appointed by God. He was a giant of a man who could bend a poker over his knees and crush a rouble coin in his hand so he was literally every inch an Autocrat.

He tore up the constitution waiting for his father's signature. He introduced a policy of Russification into Finland and the Baltic states under Russian rule. Russian revolutionaries were ruthlessly suppressed at home but encouraged to act as Russian agents abroad to stir up trouble. While avoiding war, Russia expanded into Asia adding 1000's of square miles to the Russian Empire. He was violently anti-Semitic. He is the ruler Putin most admires.

But violence continued. In 1887 5 men found guilty of plotting to assassinate the Tsar were executed. One was the older brother of Vladimir Ilich Ulyanov i.e Lenin.

The family was of noble rank with very mixed ancestry so Lenin often spoke contemptuously of Russian idiots. He grew up in a landed estate and studied law at university but he was drawn to revolutionary politics and was expelled. After 3 years exile in Siberia (1897-1900), he went into exile abroad. He combined Russian revolutionary ideas with Marxism.

In 1872 the Tsarist censor allowed Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* to be published in Russia arguing that '*very few people in Russia will read it and even fewer will understand it.*' But he was disastrously wrong because it sold more copies in Russia than in Germany.

Lenin's beliefs :

Disciplined revolutionary vanguard

Action could alter the course of history

Seizure of the state to bring about a social revolution

Belief in dictatorship & distrust of democracy

Contempt for liberalism and compromise with other political parties

The 2 main Socialist (revolutionary) political parties were: the Social Revolutionaries formed in 1900 tried to provoke peasant uprising and advocated a socialist society based on village commune, so strong support from peasants. Set up terrorist organisation based on The Will

of the People, the group that had assassinated Alexander II. Social Revolutionaries responsible for most political assassinations from 1900 – 1909. The other was the Social Democrats = Marxist formed in 1898. The 1903 Congress in Brussels split in 2 : Bolsheviks (which means majority) led by Lenin, and Mensheviks (meaning minority) even though they were more numerous and more democratic attracting a wider range of classes and occupations.

After Alexander III, the Colossus, came Nicholas II. As an adult he was described by his own father as *'a child . . . with infantile judgments'* so he did nothing to prepare his son for his role as Autocrat and ruler of 133 million people. Nicholas slavishly followed his father's ideas and prejudices. He had no worldly sense, no powers of concentration or interest in anything. When Alexander III died in 1894, Nicholas wept *'I am not ready for it. I don't even know how to talk to my ministers.'* Nicholas II and Gorbachev are the 2 rulers Putin despises.

Nicholas's wife, Alexandra, was the granddaughter of Queen Victoria who had largely brought her up after her mother's death. She imbibed Victoria's prudery and openly disapproved of St Petersburg society which came to detest her especially as she did not speak French, the language of the court (she and Nicholas spoke English)

Their coronation was overshadowed by a disastrous stampede of the crowd waiting for the distribution of the traditional gifts given by the Tsar. 40,000 people were trampled to death. But Nicholas and Alexandra were persuaded to attend the French Ambassador's ball that evening as France was Russia's strongest ally. So they were branded as *'cold and heartless.'*

The 1904 war with Japan revealed the incompetence, disorganisation and corruption of the Russian army, followed by the naval battle of Tsushima in May 1905 where most of the Russian fleet was sunk - the first time an Asian country had defeated a major European power and the last time ANY Russian fleet has fought a naval battle.

In January 1905 a peaceful march to the Winter Palace in St Petersburg was fired on leaving between 2000–4000 people dead and wounded. Although Nicholas was not in St Petersburg, had not given the order to fire, he was the focus of nation-wide fury.

From January to October 1905 the army was used 2,700 times to suppress peasant uprisings, and as the soldiers were of peasant stock this led to more than 400 mutinies. The soldiers' resentment at being treated as serfs was a major factor in the Revolution.

With all this turmoil Russia had to sue for peace with Japan. As in 1917, she was unable to fight a foreign war while dealing with domestic unrest.

And a new leader emerged - Lev Davidovich Bronstein (better known as Leon Trotsky) of the Menshevik branch of the Social Democrats who announced the formation of a soviet (or council) and threatened to wreck every factory that did not shut in solidarity with the victims of Bloody Sunday.

Nicholas was forced to issue the Imperial Manifesto of October 1905 which promised freedom of conscience, speech, assembly and association + an elected Parliament, the Duma, with the sole right to pass all laws, transforming Russia from an Autocracy to a semi-constitutional monarchy. The October Manifesto also promised extensive civil rights to non-Russians within the Empire arousing passionate nationalism. The Russian Empire and the Soviet Union both collapsed because of growing non-Russian nationalism.

Extremists on both sides were furious. The right wing supported Autocracy, Orthodoxy and Nationalism. The Union of the Russian People mobilized against the Socialist Left and was a forerunner of the Fascist movements of the 20th century all violently anti-Semitic.

The 4 political parties in the Duma were the 2 revolutionary parties, the Social Democrats and the Social Revolutionaries, and 2 new liberal parties, the Constitutional Democrats or Kadets, the party of political reform and the Octobrists who were monarchists. But Nicholas did his best to undermine the Duma.

In November 1905 Nicholas and Alexandra were introduced to an illiterate peasant, a so-called holy man, Gregory Rasputin. Because Alexei, their only son and heir to the throne, had haemophilia which was kept a secret and because there was no cure, Alexandra turned to religion and Rasputin. Although he smelt like a goat, and was a drunken womaniser, she came to rely on him because he could soothe Alexei's pains and send him to sleep. But very damaging to the regime were the rumours that he was Alexandra's lover

Between 1912-4, there was more militant industrial action with the Bolsheviks gaining control of the biggest trade unions in St Petersburg and Moscow.

Then on 28 June 1914 Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austrian Empire, was assassinated in Serajevo by Gavrilo Princip, one of a gang of Bosnian assassins recruited and armed by Serbia - a rogue state exporting terrorism. Austria, relying on its ally, Germany, declared war on Serbia. Russia considered herself the protector of the Slavs with particularly close relationship to Serbia. In the Yugoslav Civil War in the 1990s, Russia repeatedly blocked Nato attempts to curb Serbian aggression - and atrocities.

Because Russian volunteers had fought for Serbia's independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1876, Russia felt that she had to defend Serbia in 1914. Austrian annexation of Bosnia in 1908 was seen as a major Russian setback in its own backyard so she wanted to prevent further Austrian gains and to restore her prestige after the Japanese defeat in 1904.

Although Nicholas II set in motion the events leading to World War I and the Russian Revolution by ordering mobilisation on 25 July 1914, it was during his reign that Russia called the first disarmament conference in the Hague in 1899 leading to the establishment of The International Court of Justice which is still in existence.

The Russians (like everyone in World War I) were initially filled with patriotism and supported the war (only the Bolsheviks, particularly the exiles, opposed it). But this enthusiasm cooled following major military disasters caused by incompetent leadership, lack of food, boots, weapons and ammunition. In the first year of the war, Russian casualties (dead, wounded and taken prisoner) came to nearly 4 million.

Nicholas spent much of the time at the front with his cousin Grand Duke Nicholas, the commander-in-chief, leaving Alexandra as Regent in all but name. She was hated and distrusted as a German and was dominated by Rasputin. Because the Grand Duke threatened to hang Rasputin if he visited the front, Alexandra nagged Nicholas until he dismissed the Grand Duke and took over command himself - which appalled his ministers who were appointed and dismissed at the whim of Rasputin. So in December 1916, in an effort to save the monarchy, Prince Felix Yusupov murdered Rasputin but it was too late.

By the end of February 1917 there was an acute shortage of food and fuel in Petrograd (as St Petersburg had been renamed because its name sounded too Germanic). Railways concentrated on supplying the army, so food meant for civilians was just dumped at stations to rot. Then in bitter cold weather, 12 hundred locomotives froze so there was no more flour, coal or wood in the capital. And people queuing suddenly snapped, smashed their way into the shops and helped themselves. There followed widespread strikes with people parading with banners reading 'Give us bread' and 'Down with the German woman.'

This was the spontaneous outbreak of the February Revolution, (the better-known Revolution was in October) but the dates are confusing because according to our calendar, they took

place in March and November, but Russia still used the Julian calendar which was 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar used by the rest of Europe.

Soldiers joined the strikers and demonstrators. About 1,500 were killed and 6,000 wounded - far more than in the October Bolshevik Revolution. This spontaneous, leaderless revolution was not sparked by any political party and took the Bolsheviks by surprise. The Duma was convened, but delegates from factories and army barracks set up a soviet or council dominated by moderate Socialists and Mensheviks, with few Bolsheviks. The Duma and soviet became involved in a power struggle, with the Duma claiming to represent all the people and the soviet to represent the workers and soldiers. When the Duma ordered mutinous soldiers to return to barracks and obey their officers, the Petrograd Soviet issued Order No 1 setting up soldiers' committees to counter-balance the authority of the officers, stating that the orders of the Duma would be obeyed only if not in conflict with the Soviet's instructions.

Nicholas was persuaded by his generals to abdicate which on 1 March (by the Russian calendar) he did for himself and his son, nominating as his successor his brother Michael who promptly abdicated, thus ending the Romanov dynasty which had ruled for 304 years. The abdication was greeted with widespread rejoicing and the destruction of imperial signs.

For nearly 8 months (March to October 1917) Russia was ruled by a Provisional Government, dominated at first by liberals and then by coalitions of liberals and socialists. The leading figure was Alexander Kerensky, a Socialist first elected to the 1912 Duma. In May 1917 he became Minister of War and did much to boost soldiers' morale by touring the Front and addressing the troops. Ironically, his father had been Lenin's headmaster and wrote a glowing report on him. The Provisional Government postponed major reforms until a Constituent Assembly had been elected. It concentrated on political reforms while the people wanted social reforms. The Provisional Government had responsibility without power and the Soviets had power without responsibility. There were 2 simultaneous revolutions, the democratic political revolution and a social revolution.

The Government wanted to continue the war, but people were tired of war and wanted peace with soldiers deserting in droves. The economy was collapsing with workers on strike trying to take over the factories. Peasants and army deserters were seizing landowners' estates. With the collapse of Tsarist power (as with the collapse of Communist power in 1991) Russia broke down into anarchy and chaos.

Workers arming themselves to defend their factories became the Bolshevik Red Guards. By July 1917 there were 20,000 Red Guards in Petrograd who were to play a vital role in the October Revolution. The Russian word for red means both the colour and 'beautiful.'

When World War I broke out the revolutionary leaders were all abroad and the February 1917 Revolution found Lenin in Switzerland and Trotsky in America. The Swiss arranged for the exchange of Germans interned in Russia for the Russian Marxist exiles, which suited Germany because the revolutionaries who opposed the war could be relied on to cause trouble. As Churchill wrote, *Germany 'turned upon Russia the most grisly of all weapons. They transported Lenin in a sealed truck like a plague bacillus.'*

In March Lenin and his party left Switzerland arriving on 3 April at the Finland Station of Petrograd to a rapturous reception from crowds of workers and soldiers with a military band playing The Marseillaise. Apart from a 6-month visit to Russia in 1905-6, Lenin had spent the last 17 years in exile, so he knew little about Russia. According to the writer, Gorky, this bred in him 'a pitiless contempt for the lives of ordinary people' because he had no understanding of the problems of ordinary workers as all his life he had been a revolutionary financially supported by the Bolsheviks and the income from his mother's estate.

Trotsky arrived back in Russia in May 1917 and joined the Bolsheviks quickly rising through the ranks. He and Lenin together ensured the success of the revolution.

The day after his arrival Lenin presented his April Theses to the Social Democrats calling for a new revolution to transfer power to the proletariat and poorest peasants. It was a fixed belief that a bourgeois revolution HAD to precede the proletarian revolution so Lenin was booed but undeterred. Dissent enraged him and he would abuse opponents using crude violent language. As an orator, Lenin was not as good as Trotsky, but he had the knack of finding easy slogans to fix them in the listeners' minds e.g. All power to the Soviets and Peace, Bread and Land.

There were militant strikes in Petrograd in the factories under Bolshevik control and a great deal of vandalism. There were lynchings, mob justice and anti-semitism. According to Gorky, Petrograd 'was a cesspit, the streets filthy, with piles of stinking rubbish.

Russia was under pressure from its allies to launch an offensive on the Eastern Front, but the June offensive was a disaster and ensured the success of the October Revolution with soldiers supporting the Bolsheviks, the only ones who wanted to end the war.

In July 1917 in Petrograd major demonstration of armed workers, soldiers, Red Guards and 20,000 heavily armed sailors took the Bolsheviks by surprise with Lenin away in Finland. But even on his return, he failed to provide leadership though the Bolsheviks could easily have seized power in the capital. So the leaderless crowd dispersed. They had tried to secure all power to the Soviet and found that the Soviet leaders (most of them not Bolsheviks) did not want it.

Lenin was accused of being a German agent - and the Germans had indeed financed the Bolshevik party. Petrograd was seized with anti-Bolshevik hysteria and the Bolshevik leaders were charged with treason and arrested, but Lenin escaped to Finland.

This internal turmoil following military defeat led to Kerensky becoming Prime Minister as he was thought the only politician able to reunite Russia and prevent civil war, but he could not straddle the increasingly polarised Right and Left, so he vacillated and lost support. The Russian Empire was falling apart with Ukraine and Finland declaring independence, militant strikes, anarchy on the railway, peasant attacks on the estates of the nobility - all contributing to the belief that Russia could only be governed by force.

In August General Kornilov, the commander-in-chief of the army, attempted a coup to restore military and social discipline. Trotsky described him as '*having the heart of a lion and the brain of a sheep*' but railway workers blocked his army from entering Petrograd.

Kornilov's attempted mutiny led to a sharp decline in army discipline with 100s of officers lynched by their own men. It strengthened the Bolsheviks who proved that only they could mobilize and arm masses of workers and soldiers. They also became the majority party in the Petrograd and Moscow Soviets. Kornilov's supporters became the nucleus of the White Army in the Russian Civil War with Kornilov one of the White generals..

The Bolsheviks by rejecting all compromise with the bourgeoisie and by stressing class warfare, increased membership and the popular vote. The Petrograd Soviet was led by Trotsky. While Lenin was the master strategist working behind the scenes, Trotsky was a better public speaker. Lenin called for '*All power to the soviets*' but what he wanted was a Bolshevik dictatorship.

In September and October 1917 more violent industrial strikes, looting, crime, vandalism, peasant war against landed estates, ethnic conflicts and anti-Jewish pogroms. Now Lenin (still in Finland) advocated an armed uprising, though most Bolsheviks were opposed.

Kerensky was powerless, paralysed by fear of an uprising by the Left. He was no longer popular, but isolated and out of touch, so even the anti-Bolsheviks were not prepared to fight for him or the Provisional Government. Kerensky's order to Petrograd garrison to go to the Northern Front to oppose the German advance seemed to confirm the Bolshevik claim of a counter-revolutionary plot and led to the mutiny of the Petrograd garrison, so the Provisional Government lost military control of the capital. On the evening of 24 October (6 November by our calendar) the Bolsheviks in Petrograd set up road blocks, seized control of railway stations, the post and telegraph, the State Bank, the telephone exchange and the electricity station, so they controlled the whole city except the area round the Winter Palace where the ministers of the Provisional Government met. Bolsheviks planned to demand the surrender of the Provisional Government and if it refused, to attack and capture it at a given signal (a red light from the Peter and Paul Fortress).

The military coup of 25 October was unnoticed by most of the citizens. The popular image of a bloody struggle involving tens of thousands with thousands dead owes more to Eisenstein's largely fictional film *October* made to commemorate the 10th anniversary.

As the Soviet Congress was due to open on 25 October, Lenin hoped to present the seizure of power in Petrograd as a *fait accompli*. But the whole affair was farcical. The attack was delayed because the armed sailors on whom they depended were late. The guns from the Peter and Paul Fortress were rusty museum pieces that could not be fired. Other cannons had no suitable ammunition. A red lantern for the signal to attack could not be found. The man sent to find one got lost in the dark and fell into a muddy bog. No-one could fix the lantern to the flag pole. None of the attackers even saw it - and it wasn't red anyway.

Meanwhile Kerensky on the night of 24 October had tried to summon loyal troops to suppress the mutiny and defend the Provisional Government, so he decided to seek help in person, but there was no car, so one was 'borrowed' from outside the US Embassy. A second car from the War Ministry had no fuel which was also 'borrowed' from the English Hospital. So Kerensky escaped from the Winter Palace in a 'borrowed' car flying the Stars and Stripes.

The other ministers were on their own. didn't know where Kerensky had gone, so they tried to organise the defence of the Winter Palace although none of them had any military experience. They could not even find a plan of the Palace, so left unguarded a side door through which the Bolsheviks entered. There were about 3000 soldiers, including 200 women from the Death Battalion, inside the Palace to guard it. But morale was low, there was no food, so by early evening many of the soldiers laid down their arms and slipped away to find something to eat. The one attempt to help the remains of the Provisional Government was led by the Mayor of Petrograd followed by about 300 unarmed deputies of the Duma all formally dressed each carrying bread and salami for the hungry defenders. They were halted by a patrol of Bolshevik sailors who threatened to 'spank' them if they didn't go home - which they did in dignified silence.

3 hours after those inside the Winter Palace had refused an ultimatum to surrender, the battleship *Aurora* fired a blank shot as a signal to begin the assault. The sound was so terrifying that the ministers all dropped to the floor and the women soldiers became hysterical

As the bombardment started, the Soviet Congress opened at 10.40 p.m. The Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries denounced the attack and walked out in protest leaving the Bolsheviks in the majority. Trotsky told them they *belonged in the dustbin of history.*

At about 2 a.m. on 25 October, the Bolsheviks entered the Winter Palace, arrested the ministers and imprisoned them in the Peter and Paul Fortress. The soldiers celebrated by looting the wine cellars to the Winter Palace and other liquor stores and attacking anyone well-dressed. Gorky described it as *'a pogrom of greed, hatred and vengeance.'*

Moscow In there were 10 days of bloody street battles between the military cadets and student volunteers loyal to the Provisional Government before the Bolsheviks finally won and took over all major cities. Perhaps because there was a general belief that their government would only last at the most for a few months, at first there was little resistance. The other socialist parties were reluctant to oppose fellow socialists.

So the Bolsheviks ruled Russia until the Communist state ended on 25 December (Christmas Day) 1991 when Mikhail Gorbachev resigned as President of the Soviet Union and Boris Yeltsin became President of the state of Russia. The hammer and sickle was replaced by the tricolour flag of Russia.

A quick postscript on what happened to some of the leading figures :

Kerensky fled to France where he stayed until the German invasion of 1941 when he emigrated to America. He taught graduate classes at the Hoover Institute of Stanford University in California, dying in 1970 having outlived nearly all the major participants in the Russian Revolution.

After the abdication of Nicholas II, the Romanov family was kept under house arrest, with increasingly bad treatment once the Bolsheviks took power. In 1918 they were housed in Ekaterinburg in the Eastern Urals and there on 16 July they were all executed in an absolute bloodbath by a unit of Bolshevik secret police, the Cheka, later to become the KGB. According to Trotsky, they were killed on the personal orders of Lenin. The bodies had sulphuric acid thrown on them and buried. 6 days later the Anti-Bolshevik White Army occupied Ekaterinburg where they found evidence of the execution but could not find the bodies which were only discovered in 1979, but not revealed until 1991 when they were identified by DNA supplied by Prince Philip, whose grandmother was the sister of Alexandra. In 1998 in a ceremony attended by Boris Yeltsin and about 50 Romanov relatives, the remains were finally buried in the family crypt in St Petersburg. And Nicholas II was declared a saint of the Russian Orthodox Church.

But if you want to know how the Bolsheviks consolidated their power and ruled Russia from 1917 -1991 you will have to go to the History course in Pinelands Library on Thursday 20 July at 2.30 p.m.