

Russia: WWI and Russian Revolution

World War I

In 1914, Czar Nicholas II (the ruler of Russia) made the fateful decision to drag Russia into World War I. Russia was unprepared to handle the military and economic costs. Its weak generals and poorly equipped troops were no match for the German army. German machine guns mowed down advancing Russians by the thousands. Defeat followed defeat. Before a year had passed, more than 4 million Russian soldiers had been killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. Russia's involvement in World War I revealed the weaknesses of czarist rule and military leadership.

On the war front Russian soldiers mutinied, deserted, or ignored orders. On the home front, food and fuel supplies were dwindling. Prices were wildly inflated. People from all classes were clamoring for change and an end to the war. Czar Nicholas was not capable of tackling these enormous problems.

Russian Revolution

In March 1917, women textile workers in Petrograd led a citywide strike. In the next five days, riots flared up over shortages of bread and fuel. Nearly 200,000 workers swarmed the streets shouting, "Down with the autocracy!" and "Down with the war!" At first the soldiers obeyed orders to shoot the rioters but later sided with them.

The local protest exploded into a general uprising—the March Revolution. It forced Czar Nicholas II to abdicate his throne [step down]. A year later revolutionaries executed Nicholas and his family. The three-century czarist rule of the Romanovs finally collapsed.

In November 1917, Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin ordered that all farmland be distributed among the peasants. Lenin and the Bolsheviks [communists] gave control of factories to the workers. The Bolshevik government also signed a truce with Germany to stop all fighting and began peace talks. In March 1918, Russia and Germany signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Russia surrendered a large part of its territory to Germany and its allies. The humiliating terms of this treaty triggered widespread anger among many Russians. They objected to the Bolsheviks and their policies and to the murder of the royal family.

The Bolsheviks now faced a new challenge—stamping out their enemies at home. Their opponents formed the White Army. The White Army was made up of very different groups. There were those groups who supported the return to rule by the czar, others who wanted democratic government, and even socialists who opposed Lenin's style of socialism. Only the desire to defeat the Bolsheviks united the White Army. The groups barely cooperated with each other. At one point there were three White Armies fighting against the Bolsheviks' Red Army. Conversely, the Bolshevik Red Army was expertly commanded. From 1918 to 1920, civil war raged in Russia. Several Western nations, including the United States, sent military aid and forces to Russia to help the White Army. However, they were of little help. In 1920 the Bolsheviks won the revolution bring communism to Russia. They renamed Russia the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

Communism

Communism is a political and economic system of organization. In theory, property is owned by the community and all citizens share in the common wealth according to their need. In practice, this was difficult to achieve. German philosopher Karl Marx saw communism as the end result of an essential historical process. Russian revolutionary Vladimir Lenin built on Marx's theories and sought ways of applying those theories. Ultimately, however, Lenin's communist state—the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)—became a one-party, totalitarian system.



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