

# THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION



[Stalin, Lenin and and Trotsky](#) (Dominio público)

## **1 The russian empire at the begining of XX Century**

In 1900 Russia was a poor country compared with Western Europe. The peasants were no longer serfs, but their life was still poor and primitive. They had no say in the government. Tsar Nicolas II had absolute power in Russia, he had complete control over the government.



Ivan Vladimirov. [Artistic impression of Bloody Sunday in St. Petersburg](#) (Dominio público)

Educated people believed that big reforms were necessary in Russia. In 1905 Russia's defeat in a war with Japan provoked rebellion. Rebellion broke out, after troops fired on striking workers in the capital, St.

Petersburg (Bloody Sunday). The Tsar created a parliament called the Duma with the promise of a more democratic government, but this did not happen. In 1917 Russia suffered as a result of the impacts of the First World War. More than 1.5 million soldiers had died by the end of 1917. Inflation greatly increased prices and there were hunger and food shortages.

## 2 1917 Revolutions

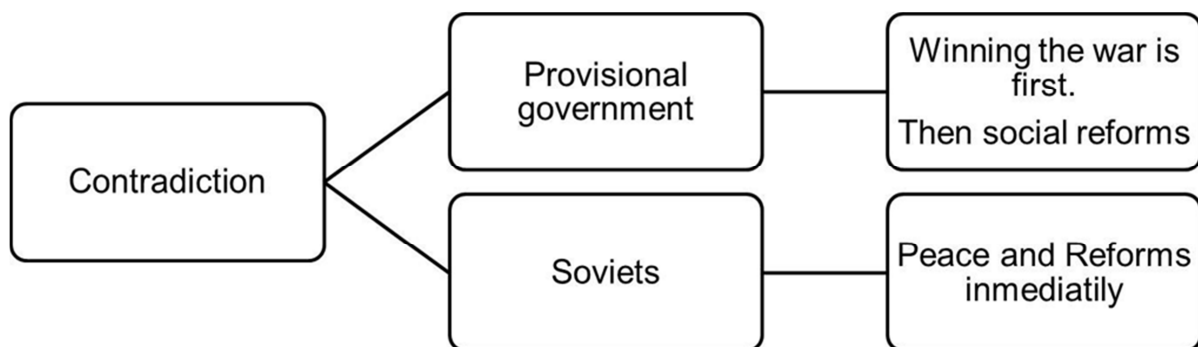
### The Bourgeois February Revolution

In 1914 the Russian Empire joined World War I. Neither the economy nor the army were ready to face the German army. After a series of defeats, in 1916 the Tsar himself took control of the army. This was his biggest mistake. From this moment on, everybody blamed him for the continuous and bloody defeats, the terrible conditions suffered by the soldiers at the front, and the shortages at home'

In February 1917 riots broke out in Petrograd. The Tsar lost support and control: his soldiers refused to fire on the mobs or deserted to join the rioting workers. In March the Tsar gave up the throne (abdicated) and a provisional government was formed under the leadership of Kerensky. A republic was declared.

The provisional government made promises to begin political and social reforms. Yet, on the other hand, they also kept Russia in the war in spite of the fact that most of the Russian population, especially the February protesters, were against the war

This government faced opposition from the revolutionaries, who wanted power for themselves. Among them was the SDLP (Social Democratic Labour Party), a Marxist party: – they wanted to set up a communist state based on the ideas of the 19th century political thinker Karl Marx. – The party split into Bolsheviks (the majority) who wanted a small party and were led by Lenin; and Mensheviks (the minority) led by Martov, who wanted a mass party. The soviets were dominated by the revolutionaries.



Disputes inside the government and the army led to a coup by general Kornilov. These problems caused a new wave of strikes and demonstrations in July 1917, which were harshly repressed by Kerensky's government. The new government was repressing workers much like the previous government had done.

## The Workers' October Revolution

Meanwhile the Provisional Government kept Russia in the war, Lenin wrote a document called the April Thesis, promising “peace, bread, land and freedom”. He wanted:

- the end of the capitalist war.
- power for the soviets: elected committees of workers, peasants and soldiers.
- A revolution against the Provisional Government as soon as possible (he adapted Marx's ideas to the Russian context, this was called marxism-leninism).

Leon Trotsky set up the Red Guards, a Bolshevik military force. On the 23rd of October (1917) a revolution took place. The Bolsheviks, led by Lenin, attacked the winter Palace in St. Petersburg and seized power. Bolsheviks moved the capital to Moscow and made peace with Central Empires: Treaty of Brest–Litovsk (Unit 5)



[Otto Jula. Cruiser Aurora \(CC BY-SA\)](#)

## 3 Civil War and the formation of the USSR

In 1918 Russia was divided into two factions:

- White Russians: The counterrevolutionary elements,
- The Red Army. At the beginning of the civil war Lenin asked Leon Trotsky, a young Bolshevik leader, to create a new army from the Red Guards, an army of workers. Trotsky created one of the best armies in history through discipline, organization and ideology. Furthermore, war communism was introduced. This meant the nationalization of industry, the collectivization of lands and requisition of all rural production. The whole Royal Family was executed



Hoodinsky. *Russian Civil War* (CC BY)

The Bolsheviks finally won the Civil War in 1921.

The Bolsheviks expected communist revolutions to break out all over Europe but, except for a small one in Germany, they did not. However, communist parties did exist in other countries. As allies of the Soviet government, they worked for an international revolution from the Third International (Komintern).

The Kronstadt naval base mutinied. They wanted free speech and press, free elections for soviets, free trade unions, the sale of peasants' grain ... but the Red Army ruled by Trotsky attacked them and put down the mutiny.

In 1921 Lenin introduced a New Economic Policy to restore order and increase prosperity after the chaos of Revolution, Civil War, and War Communism.

- Peasants could sell surplus food produce and pay tax on profits.
- It allowed small non-state-owned businesses (such as shops ...) and they could make a profit.
- Vital industries (coal, iron, railways ...) stayed in state hands.

By 1928 the economy recovered to the level of 1914.

In 1924 a new constitution established the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics). Each republic had a government but they all had to be communist, and the system was run centrally by the Politburo (senior council)

Lenin died in 1924.

### **USSR under Stalin**

After Lenin's death there was a struggle for power between Stalin and Trotsky. Trotsky wanted revolution to spread to other countries. Stalin was content for Communism to stay within just one country for the moment. Stalin controlled the party. Trotsky was isolated and thrown out of the Communist Party (1927). Trotsky was finally murdered in Mexico by Ramón Mercader, a fanatic Spanish Stalinist.

Under Stalin the state planned industry and agriculture with a commission called Gosplan. A Five-Year Plan set targets for all basic industrial factories and workers. They started in 1928. In 10 years the USSR had almost doubled its industrial output but the price was misery and low living standards for Soviet workers.

Private property disappeared. It was important to increase food production to supply workers in towns and cities. In 1929 Stalin began collectivising all farms (kolkhos). Another type of collectivisation were the state farms (sovkhos): owned completely by the state, peasants worked as labourers, so they received wages even if the farm did badly.

Some peasants refused this change and did not want to give up lands, especially the kulaks (richer peasants). Stalin called them enemies of the people. Around 10 million were shot or sent to Labour Camps, many died from starvation or cold. Many kulaks burned their crops and killed livestock. This caused a famine in Ukraine where 5 million people died. By 1937 collectivization was almost completed, kulaks had been eliminated and the peasants were afraid of Communist powers.

Stalin turned the Soviet Union into a personal dictatorship where the communist ideal was still alive but filtered by his powerful personality. He ruled over the USSR using three tools.



[Stalin Poster](#) (CC BY-SA)

- **Cult of personality.** Stalin became omnipresent by means of propaganda. There were pictures of him everywhere. He was the father, the husband, the grandfather of every Russian. This presence was reinforced by the World War II.
- **The Party.** During Stalinism, the only way to be promoted, the only way of being someone was by strict adherence to the ideas of the Communist Party
- **The terror.** Stalin set up a secret service network that controlled every citizen of the Soviet Union. The NKVD was managed by Lavrentiy Beria. In the late 1930s they purged many members of the party (Moscow Trials) by sending them to concentration camps in Siberia (Gulags)

## Webgrafía

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