

Russia 1917-1924

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The February Revolution of 1917

Background:

Note - *The Russian calendar was thirteen days behind the one used in the West. The dates given are from the old (i.e. Russian) calendar that was in use until 1918.*

Russia had entered the war with universal popular enthusiasm among all classes. Support for the Tsarist regime was very strong. The German name of the capital **St. Petersburg** was changed to the more Russian sounding **Petrograd**.

However a series of events were to undermine this support until it eventually crumbled.

1. The Tsar took personal command of the army in the summer of 1915 and left the government in the hands of his wife, the hated Tsarina (who also had the misfortune of being German). She was called "**the German woman**".
2. The Tsarina was not only unpopular but she was also under the influence of the strange monk **Rasputin**, who had hypnotic powers. These powers he used with some degree of success to cure the **Tsarevich, Alexei** (the heir to the throne), of **haemophilia**. The absence of the Tsar meant that Rasputin's influence was almost total. He dismissed ministers at will and brought complete discredit to the whole Tsarist system of government. The Tsar knew what was going on but refused to take any action. Rasputin was murdered in December 1916.
3. The offensive of 1916 had cost the Russians a million casualties and discontent was rife in the army. The soldiers lacked proper military training and the supply of arms and artillery were inadequate.
4. The whole war effort had been organised in a most haphazard way. Manpower was conscripted indiscriminately without any regard for the needs of industry, agriculture or communications. The countryside was dispossessed of horses to serve the army's needs, leaving the peasants with no means of tilling the land. Distribution problems had led to a breakdown in food supplies to the cities. By 1916 Petrograd and Moscow were receiving only a third of their fuel and food requirements. This was made worse by **hyper inflation** that saw prices increase fourfold during the war. These factors created serious discontent among the working classes in the cities. There were a number of strikes that had to be put down by troops.

By the start of 1917, political parties were totally dissatisfied with the Tsar and his government. *The main parties at the time were:*

- a. **The Kadets** who wanted to give more powers to the Russian parliament or **Duma**. This party could be compared to the Liberals in Britain. They greatly admired the British system of government and wished to imitate it, i.e. a constitutional monarchy – power of the Tsar would be greatly reduced and important decisions would be made by parliament. They were led by the respected Prince Lvov.

- b. The **Social Revolutionaries (SRs)** were a party that wanted peasant ownership of the land in the form of communes. There was no comparable party in Western Europe. Alexander **Kerensky** was a leading figure in this party. Extreme members of the party used terrorism to achieve their aims.
- c. The **Social Democrats** – followers of Karl Marx. They believed that the industrialisation of Russia would lead to the collapse of the Land-owning class and that the Tsarist regime would also collapse with it. The party had split over tactics into the **Bolsheviks** (majority) and the **Mensheviks** (minority) **in 1903**. The Bolsheviks were revolutionaries and were led by Lenin. The Mensheviks favoured peaceful methods and were similar to the SPD in Germany or the Labour party in Britain.

The February (March) revolution 1917

The discontent outlined above led to Revolution and the overthrow of the Tsar.

In January, 300,000 workers staged a demonstration on the anniversary of the 1905 "Bloody Sunday" massacre in Petrograd. Conditions were not helped by a particularly severe winter. During February, a strike for higher wages started at the huge **Putilov** engineering works. The Tsar departed from Petrograd for his headquarters at **Mogilev** and was absent from the capital for the next few crucial days.

Petrograd was soon paralysed with 240,000 on strike. From his headquarters the Tsar ordered that the strikes were to be crushed by troops. Forty people were killed as troops fired on rioters. The same evening the Petrograd garrison began to mutiny.

Feb 27-28: The key dates as all military command within the city collapsed as troops joined the strikers. Crucially the Tsar had lost effective control in the city.

At the same time the Petrograd **soviet** (council) was revived and quickly established itself as the real power in the city. It had full control over the railways and had the loyalty of the troops. The Tsar, against advice, sent **General Ivanov** to the city to restore order. However his troops deserted to the revolutionaries.

At the beginning of March, the Tsar left **Mogilev** to personally deal with the crisis but after taking advice from his leading generals, he decided to abdicate at **Pskov**. **A Provisional government** was set up under the leadership of **Prince Lvov**. This government was to rule until a **constituent assembly** was elected to draw up a new constitution. Nicholas and his family were placed under house arrest.

Quotes on the February Revolution

Norman Stone:	"Russia was not advanced enough to stand the strain of war, and the effort to do so plunged her economy into chaos."
Dmitri Volkognov	"The Russian government's failings in the war and its weakness at home led to the self-destruction of the autocracy on a wave of discontent."