

Module 03: 1917 — Did the War Cause a Revolution?

Context

Russia Under the Tsar

The narrative below provides a brief overview of the main developments between the outbreak of World War I in August 1914 and Russia's withdrawal from that conflict in March 1918. On the eve of the war, Russia remained one of the most politically antiquated regimes in Europe. An autocratic system of government accorded nearly unlimited power to the tsar, who expected obedience and reverence from his 163 million subjects. The population under his rule included representatives of nearly seventy non-Russian ethnic groups dispersed over more than eight million square miles of territory. The overwhelming majority of the population relied on agriculture for their livelihood, although state-sponsored industrialization programs in the late nineteenth century had stimulated urbanization and social diversification, as the ranks of professionals and other "middling" orders increased along with those of the industrial working class. While supporting some measure of economic modernization, the government remained steadfastly hostile to any form of independent civic organization or political activity, whether it derived from liberal hopes for a parliamentary system and the rule of law, or the more radical socialist ideologies embraced by Russian workers.

The Russo-Japanese War

The aspirations of a rapidly changing society and the growing tensions between the population and a regime intent on avoiding political reform burst into the open in 1905, as the autocracy grappled with a humiliating defeat in the Russo-Japanese war. The country erupted in revolution after troops guarding the Winter Palace gunned down unarmed demonstrators on what became known as "Bloody Sunday." Faced with widespread rebellion in the countryside, debilitating strikes in the cities, and liberal professionals' demands for civil and religious liberties, Tsar Nicholas II reluctantly agreed to the establishment of a national legislative body and the rule of law. For the next decade, a tenuous alliance between the crown and conservative elements in the Duma, as the new parliament was called, underpinned Russia's "constitutional experiment." Ruthless repression of political radicalism and reforms intended to transform the communally oriented peasantry into freeholding farmers muted the political clout of the lower classes, although repression only enhanced the appeal of insurrectionary political parties — such as the Bolsheviks — among workers.

Entering World War I

Scholars have long debated the long-term prospects for the survival and evolution of constitutionalism in Russia in the absence of a devastating military conflict, but everyone agrees that World War I brought out the broader structural deficiencies of Russia's industry, polity, and modernization programs. Russia mobilized rapidly and intensively for a war everyone hoped would be brief, but which proved protracted and exhausting. The armed forces conscripted nearly seven million men in 1914 alone. More than eighteen million would serve during the course of the war. The enthusiasm for the war sweeping through Europe in the late summer of 1914 also engulfed Russia. Although patriotic support for Russia's cause ran high in many sectors of society, it soon dissipated in the face of enormous blunders in the military and political spheres.

The "Russian Steamroller"

In the fall of 1914, crushing defeats in the Battle of Tannenberg and the Battle of the Masurian Lakes drove the Russian forces out of East Prussia. Although the Russians did advance toward the Austro-Hungarian border in Galicia, the "Russian Steamroller" — the nightmare of an endless flow of men — that had so haunted the members of the German General Staff proved to be neither unstoppable nor inexhaustible. In the course of the "Great Retreat" of 1915, Austro-German forces pushed the Russians out of eastern Poland at a cost of nearly one million Russian casualties and another million prisoners. Problems of supply and logistics, especially where munitions were concerned, plagued the Russian army. Chronic shortages of firearms meant that soldiers often relied on the guns of their dead comrades. Ineptitude began at the very top of the Russian general staff, where the minister of war insisted that the armed forces had mobilized efficiently and had adequate supplies, despite mountains of evidence to the contrary.

The "Progressive Blok"

Under these grim conditions, peasants in uniform proved much more susceptible to political radicalism than those who stayed on the land. In urban areas, popular dissent increased as the cost of living rose and problems with food supply and speculation intensified. Both the bottom and top of society recognized the inability of the tsar and his officials to prosecute war effectively. Despite their pledge of unity with the autocracy, the upper stratum of society and their representatives in the government were alarmed at the disastrous inefficiencies of the war effort and demanded a change in personnel. In July 1915, a "Progressive Blok" of 300 Duma

representatives and a group from the State Council was formed. The Blok pledged its loyalty and support for the autocracy if it would appoint a united cabinet, cooperate with the legislature, adhere to legality, and issue an amnesty for political prisoners.

Political Opposition

Offended by critiques of the war effort, Nicholas II assumed personal control over military operations in the fall of 1915. He was, therefore, personally identified with military defeat and ineptitude, which became a significant factor in the erosion of his authority over the next eighteen months. Rather than relying more on politicians and a public eager to help, he handed over control of the home front to his wife, Alexandra, and her confidante, the dissolute monk Grigorii Rasputin, as he himself went to the front. In the course of 1916, Nicholas II appointed four prime ministers. One of them, Stuermer, was close to Rasputin and was also suspected of German leanings (wrongly, as it turned out.) In November, liberal leader Pavel Miliukov openly defied the regime, accusing the government, on the floor of the Duma, of going to absurd lengths to avoid the demands of a well-intentioned, supportive, and loyal opposition. He charged the autocracy with preferring even chaos to joining forces, asking rhetorically, "Is this stupidity, or is this treason?" The murder of Rasputin by a group of court conspirators in December 1916 had little effect on the course of events but served as a good indicator of how desperate the situation had become.

Strikes and Unrest

In January and February of 1917, various pressures coalesced against the tottering regime. For the propertied classes, the autocracy's ineptitude in prosecuting the war fueled widespread disaffection and concern for the country's future in the postwar world. In the lower levels of society, in the army, in cities, and in the countryside, tolerance of long-term deprivation, rationing, and a subsistence existence was running out. After more than a year of relatively little labor unrest, strikes again swept the country. The majority of the strikes linked economic grievances to political concerns and agendas. On International Women's Day (February 23), women textile workers protested shortages while standing in line for bread, instigating a wave of riots and demonstrations that soon engulfed the capital. On February 25, reservists sent to quell the disturbances fraternized with the protesters instead, and there were no other troops on hand. Ever suspicious, Nicholas II worried that the dissidence might find a leader. He issued an order from the front to dismiss the Duma, which quickly reconvened in an

extraordinary session. While the ad hoc session attempted to restore order, workers throughout the city formed councils (Soviets) on the model of 1905.

The Abdication of Tsar Nicolas II

On March 2, the tsar yielded to the counsel of his generals and cabinet, abdicating the throne for himself and his hemophiliac son, Alexis. When his brother Michael declined the succession the following day, the three-century rule of the Romanovs came to an end. Liberal, conservative, and non-Marxist members of the fourth Duma quickly organized a provisional government. Headed by Prince Giorgii Lvov, the new cabinet included Miliukov, the Octobrist, Alexander Guchkov, and Aleksander Kerensky, who supported the Socialist Revolutionary Party.

The Petrograd Soviet's Order No. 1

The Petrograd Soviet agreed to support the Provisional Government in so far as (*po stol'ko po skol'ko*) it was provisional and dual (i.e. shared power with the Soviet). The agreement of "dual power" was underpinned by the Soviet's Order No. 1, issued on March 1 as the formalization of the Soviet's relationship with the army. Order No. 1 addressed the concerns of soldiers, which included increasing the power of enlisted men and putting elected committees in charge of distributing weapons and supervising officers in each unit. Most importantly, Order No.1 asserted that the Soviet had the authority to cancel orders of the government.

Expectations After the February Revolution

Over the next six months, the contradictory expectations of different social groups over the meaning of the February Revolution worked themselves out in dynamic and complex ways. The upper echelons of society hoped for a revitalized war effort and the formation of a modern government. Indeed, many Duma delegates had lobbied for the tsar's abdication not in the name of revolution, but in order to prevent one. The conservative "flavor" of the Lvov government was deliberate in order to avoid giving the military at the front the perception of a radical change. Ordinary workers and peasants, in contrast, saw the developments in February as the prologue to an end of the war as well as an end to oppression in the factories and exploitation in the countryside. As the Provisional Government attempted to consolidate its authority, the implications of the tensions proved insurmountable. The period between March and April revealed the inherent instability of the "dual power" structure, as well as the contradictory goals of different social groups. During these months, the liberal-leaning Provisional Government's commitment to

a "rule of law" proved to be a weak restraint in a society with a long history of coercive authoritarianism. Similarly, its promise of political democracy seemed inadequate given the practical urgency of workers' and peasants' grievances. But because the Provisional Government was unable and unwilling to use coercive measures to consolidate control, some concessions were made to the workers, peasants, and soldiers who formed the constituency of the predominantly socialist Soviet. These included increased wages, the adoption of an eight-hour workday, and the legalization of trade unions and factory committees. The formation of soldiers' committees (authorized by Order No. 1) created a secondary network for communication and authority within the military, further eroding the formal command structure.

The Emergence of the Bolsheviks

Russia's participation in the war remained the most urgent and contentious issue. Under the leadership of moderate Socialists, the Soviet adopted a program of "revolutionary defensism" at the end of March. Urging troops to fight "to defend the revolution" while the government negotiated a democratic peace without territorial annexations, the position ran counter to both the Bolsheviks' more militant denunciation of the war and the Provisional Government's attempts to reinvigorate the Russian campaign. In April, the Bolshevik leader, Vladimir Lenin, returned to Russia and issued the "April Theses," which called for an immediate peace, land reform, the nationalization of wealth, and the formation of a Soviet Republic. The radicalism of Lenin's program, along with Miliukov's note to the allies insisting that Russia remained committed to winning the war and could gain control of Constantinople and the Dardanelles, precipitated a crisis. Miliukov was dismissed and a coalition formed to bring moderate Socialists into the Provisional Government. From that point on, the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, emerged as the political party with the most consistent and compelling message.

The Economic Crisis

Economic chaos and collapse contributed to the instability and subsequent reorganizations of the Provisional Government over the next few months. The stock market and internal markets collapsed as banks and foreign investors declined to gamble on loans to the beleaguered government. Inflation outstripped the wage gains workers won in the first weeks after the February Revolution. And as the economy unraveled, many were laid off. For peasants, the paramount objective was land reform. The addition of moderate Socialists from the Menshevik and Socialist Revolutionary Party to the governing coalition raised the peasants'

expectations that land reform would be forthcoming, and their frustrations intensified when nothing happened.

The "July Days" Rebellion

A final Russian offensive in late June precipitated a second crisis, after which the moderate Socialist Aleksander Kerensky became prime minister. Encouraged by radical Bolshevik elements, and against the better judgment of the party leadership, sailors from the Kronstadt naval base marched on Petrograd. Troops loyal to the Provisional Government crushed the "July Days" rebellion, giving the Provisional Government the chance to portray the Bolsheviks as insurrectionaries and German agents, arrest their leaders, and send Lenin back into hiding. The political defeat, however, coincided with a deepening economic crisis that affected workers, soldiers, and peasants. The crisis saved the Bolsheviks, who were able to profit from the mistakes of their fellow Socialists. The army, with its large constituency of peasants, had originally favored the Socialist revolutionaries. When the party followed the Mensheviks into a coalition with the Provisional Government and backed the disastrous June offensive, the allegiances of many soldiers and peasants shifted.

The Victory of "Soviet Power"

Elections in September returned a Bolshevik majority in the Petrograd Soviet, and Lenin began to urge his followers to seize power. On the eve of the opening of the Second Congress of Soviets, Bolshevik troops marched on the Winter Palace. As the Provisional Government crumbled, the Bolsheviks went to the Congress to proclaim the victory of "Soviet Power." Most of the other Socialist delegates refused to "accept" that power, which enabled the Bolsheviks to declare, "we are the soviet government."

The Second Revolution

Historians still debate the meaning of the second revolution, which is often portrayed as a "conspiracy" or "coup d'état." Lenin's thirst for power and his commitment to the role of professional revolutionaries as the vanguard of armed insurrection and revolutionary change are often cited as the decisive elements of the Bolshevik victory. Other scholars emphasize the complexity and severity of the overlapping social, economic, and military crises gripping a war-torn nation. Regardless of how historians interpret the events, the resonance of the Bolsheviks' message and explanatory perspective must not be underestimated. Their appeal

certainly derived in part from their Marxist ideology, but their ability to portray reality convincingly was crucial. While the Provisional Government touted the virtues of civil liberties and continued to work for victory on the battlefield, millions of Russians grappled with insecurity, food shortages, and unimaginable hardships. Similarly, the "rule of law" offered little to the masses but protected the interests of propertied elites, thus perpetuating the economic relationships of bourgeois capitalism. Many were therefore willing to exchange a commitment to constitutionalism in the future for the promise of real change now, especially if that included organic restructuring in the interests of workers and peasants.

The Impact of Lenin's Regime

Like the Lvov government in February, Lenin's fledgling regime began to rule in the midst of a disastrous war and a disintegrating economy, while struggling to consolidate and defend its hold on political authority. Overcoming such challenges would require the acceptance of a punitive peace with Germany, followed by swift mobilization for a brutal civil war. The Bolsheviks' descent into authoritarian dictatorship and the implementation of their revolutionary agenda for transforming the former empire began in the waning moments of World War I, and the consequences and impact of their revolution would profoundly influence the events of the twentieth century.