

restoring order and establishing a new state

March 2 Nicholas II abdicates the throne; provisional government formed

Key People

Nicholas II - Last Russian tsar; abdicated as a result of the February Revolution

Alexander Kerensky - Member of the provisional government and Petrograd Soviet; wielded significant political power after Nicholas II's abdication

International Women's Day 1917

With Russia faring poorly in World War I and facing severe food shortages, strikes and public protests happened in the country with increasing frequency during 1916 and early 1917. Violent encounters between protesters and authorities also increased.

On February 23, 1917, a large gathering of working-class women convened in the center of Petrograd to mark International Women's Day. The gathering took the form of a protest demonstration calling for "bread and peace." While the demonstration began peacefully, the next morning it turned violent as the women were joined by hundreds of thousands of male workers who went on strike and flooded the streets, openly calling for an end to the war and even to the monarchy. Feeding on their outrage with each passing day, the demonstrations became larger and rowdier, and the outnumbered police were unable to control the crowds.

Violence and Army Mutiny

With news of the unrest, Tsar Nicholas II, who was away visiting his troops on the front, sent a telegram to Petrograd's military commander on February 25, ordering him to bring an end to the riots by the next day. In their efforts to carry out the tsar's order, several troops of a local guard regiment fired upon the crowds on February 26. The regiment fell into chaos, as many soldiers felt more empathy for the crowds than for the tsar. The next day, more than 80,000 troops mutinied and joined with the crowds in many cases directly fighting the police.

The Duma and the Petrograd Soviet

During this period, two political groups in Russia quickly recognized the significance of what was developing and began to discuss actively how it should be handled. The Duma (the state legislature) was already in active session but was under orders from the tsar to disband. However, the Duma continued to meet in secret and soon came to the conclusion that the unrest in Russia was unlikely to be brought under control as long as Nicholas II remained in power.

During the same period, the Petrograd Soviet, an organization of revolutionary-minded workers and soldiers dominated by the Menshevik Party, convened on February 27. They immediately began to call for full-scale revolution and an end to the monarchy altogether.

The Tsar's Abdication

Despite the mutinies in the army and government, there was still no consensus that the monarchy should be dismantled entirely; rather, many felt that Nicholas II should abdicate in favor of his thirteen-year-old son, Alexis. If this occurred, a regent would be appointed to rule in the boy's place until he reached maturity. Therefore, both the Duma and military leaders placed heavy pressure on the tsar to resign.

Nicholas II finally gave in on March 2, but to everyone's surprise he abdicated in favor of his brother Michael rather than his son, whom he believed was too sickly to bear the burden of being tsar, even with a regent in place. However, on the next day Michael also abdicated, leaving Russia

Late that evening, Bolshevik troops made their way to preassigned positions and systematically occupied crucial points in the capital, including the main telephone and telegraph offices, banks, railroad stations, post offices, and most major bridges. Not a single shot was fired, as the junkers assigned to guard these sites either fled or were disarmed without incident. Even the headquarters of the General Staff—the army headquarters—was taken without resistance.

The Siege of the Winter Palace

By the morning of October 25, the Winter Palace was the only government building that had not yet been taken. At 9:00 A.M., Kerensky sped out of the city in a car commandeered from the U.S. embassy. The other ministers remained in the palace, hoping that Kerensky would return with loyal soldiers from the front. Meanwhile, Bolshevik forces brought a warship, the cruiser Aurora, up the Neva River and took up a position near the palace. Other Bolshevik forces occupied the Fortress of Peter and Paul on the opposite bank of the river from the palace. By that afternoon, the palace was completely surrounded and defended only by the junker guards inside. The provisional government ministers hid in a small dining room on the second floor, awaiting Kerensky's return.

The Bolsheviks spent the entire afternoon and most of the evening attempting to take control of the Winter Palace and arrest the ministers within it. Although the palace was defended weakly by the junker cadets, most of the Bolshevik soldiers were unwilling to fire on fellow Russians or on the buildings of the Russian capital. Instead, small groups broke through the palace windows and negotiated with the junkers, eventually convincing many of them to give up. Although some accounts claim that a few shots were fired, little or no violence ensued. The ministers were finally arrested shortly after 2:00 A.M. on October 26 and escorted to prison cells in the Peter and Paul Fortress. Kerensky never returned and eventually escaped abroad, living out his life in continental Europe and then as a history professor in the United States.

The Second Congress of Soviets

Although Lenin had hoped that the revolution would be over in time to make a spectacular announcement at the start of the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets in the late afternoon of October 25, events unfolded differently. The Congress delegates were forced to wait for several hours as Bolshevik forces tried to remove the provisional government from the Winter Palace. Lenin became increasingly agitated and embarrassed by the delay. Late in the evening, the Congress was declared open, even though the Winter Palace had still not been taken. Furthermore, despite the Bolshevik leaders' efforts, dedicated Bolsheviks constituted only about half of the 650 delegates at the Congress. Lively debate and disagreement took place both about the Bolshevik-led coup and also about who should now lead Russia. The meeting lasted the rest of the night, adjourning after 5:00 A.M. on October 26.

The Congress resumed once more late the next evening, and several important decisions were made during this session. The first motion approved was Lenin's Decree on Peace, which declared Russia's wish for World War I to end but did not go so far as to declare a cease-fire. The next matter to be passed was the Decree on Land, which officially socialized all land in the country for redistribution to peasant communes. Finally, a new provisional government was formed to replace the old one until the Constituent Assembly met in November as scheduled. The new government was called the Soviet of the People's Commissars (SPC). Lenin was its chairman, and all of its members were Bolsheviks. As defined by the Congress, the SPC had to answer to a newly elected Executive Committee, chaired by Lev Kamenev, which in turn would answer to the Constituent Assembly.

Life After the Revolution

Life in Russia after October 25, 1917, changed very little at first. There was no widespread panic

The Third Congress of Soviets

The assembly was replaced by the Third Congress of Soviets, 94 percent of whose members were required to be Bolshevik and SR delegates. The new group quickly ratified a motion that the term “provisional” be removed from the official description of the SPC, making Lenin and the Bolsheviks the permanent rulers of the country.

Until this point, the Bolsheviks had often used word democracy in a positive sense, but this changed almost instantly. The Bolsheviks began to categorize their critics as counterrevolutionaries and treated them as traitors. The terms revolutionary dictatorship and dictatorship of the proletariat began to pop up frequently in Lenin’s speeches, which began to characterize democracy as an illusionary concept propagated by Western capitalists.

The Bolsheviks’ Consolidation of Power

In March 1918, even as Lenin’s representatives were signing the final treaty taking Russia out of World War I, the Bolsheviks were in the process of moving their seat of power from Petrograd to Moscow. This largely symbolic step was a part of the Bolshevik effort to consolidate power.

Although symbolism of this sort was a major part of the Bolsheviks’ strategy, they knew they also needed military power to force the rest of the country to comply with their vision while discouraging potential foreign invaders from interfering. Therefore, they rebuilt their military force, which now largely consisted of 35,000 Latvian riflemen who had sided with the Bolsheviks when they vowed to remove Russia from World War I. The Latvian soldiers were better trained and more disciplined than the Russian forces upon which the Bolshevik forces had previously relied. These troops effectively suppressed insurrections throughout Russia during the course of 1918 and formed the early core of the newly established Red Army.

The other major instrument of Bolshevik power was the secret police, known by the Russian acronym Cheka (for Extraordinary Commission to Combat Counterrevolution and Sabotage). Officially formed on December 20, 1917, the Cheka was charged with enforcing compliance with Bolshevik rule. At its command, Lenin placed a Polish revolutionary named Felix Dzerzhinsky, who would soon become notorious for the deadly work of his organization. Tens of thousands of people would be murdered at Dzerzhinsky’s orders during the coming years.

The Roots of Civil War

Although the Russian Civil War is a separate topic and not dealt with directly in this text, some introduction is appropriate because the war evolved directly from the circumstances of the Russian Revolution. No specific date can be set forth for the beginning of the war, but it generally began during the summer of 1918. As the Bolsheviks (often termed the Reds) were consolidating power, Lenin’s opponents were also organizing from multiple directions. Groups opposing the Bolsheviks ranged from monarchists to democrats to militant Cossacks to moderate socialists. These highly divergent groups gradually united and came to fight together as the Whites. A smaller group, known as the Greens, was made up of anarchists and opposed both the Whites and the Reds.

In the meantime, a contingent of about half a million Czech and Slovak soldiers, taken prisoner by the Russian army during World War I, began to rebel against the Bolsheviks, who were attempting to force them to serve in the Red Army. The soldiers seized a portion of the Trans-Siberian Railway and attempted to make their way across Siberia to Russia’s Pacific coast in order to escape Russia by boat. In the course of their rebellion, they temporarily joined with White forces in the central Volga region, presenting the fledgling Red Army with a major military challenge. In response to these growing threats, the Bolsheviks instituted military conscription in May 1918 in order to bolster their forces.