Russia's road to revolution

A look at the build-up to the 1917 revolution, exploring its economic, social and political roots

Political censorship

Before the 1905 revolution, not only was there no parliament or form of representation of the people, it was illegal to form or belong to a political party. Trade unions were banned, as were strikes and political demonstrations. All newspapers, journals and books were subject to official censorship. Open political discussion could only take place abroad. Indeed, after the assassination crisis of 1881, political repression was increasing, not decreasing. Such repression was especially focused on national minorities like the Jews, who were subjected to a policy of Russification (privileging Russian nationality, religion, language and culture over those of the ethnic minorities).

Economic and social change

After the 1861 emancipation of the serfs, economic and social change speeded up. Peasants and landowners were unhappy with the terms of emancipation and remained so for decades afterwards. The peasants, in particular, had a deep desire to take over the landowners' land which they saw as rightly theirs, since they worked on it and the landowners usually did not.

In addition, industry began to develop. This created a middle class composed of financiers, lawyers, managers, entrepreneurs and capitalists, and a working class who laboured in factories, mines and the service industries in rapidly expanding cities. Trying to contain these new pressures in an increasingly repressive political system was the root cause of Russia's revolutionary instability.

After 1905

The immediate result of this instability was the 1905 revolution. Despite this 'warning', the concessions forced out of the tsar — such as the Duma (parliament) — were withdrawn as much as possible. Prior to 1914. no real solutions to the deep, underlying tensions had emerged. However, the stresses of the First World War intensified all pressures on the autocracy. In February 1917, Duma politicians in the Progressive Bloc linked up with the British and French embassies and the army general staff to instigate a coup, as a result of which the tsar abdicated on 2 March. Instead of stopping the revolution from spreading, the coup provided the starting signal for spontaneous revolutions to spread rapidly across the Russian empire.



1860 1865 1870 1880 1890 1885

1855

The accession of a new tsar. Alexander II, and defeat in the Crimean War lead to adoption of reforms

1861

Emancipation of the serfs. Peasants and landowners are disappointed by the terms of the settlement

March 1881

Alexander II assassinated. Alexander III takes over

April 1881

Manifesto of Unshakeable Autocracy rejects all tendencies towards reform

1896-97

The first significant strikes against low wages and poor working conditions take place in St Petersburg

1894

Nicholas II succeeds his father as tsar. He declares reforms to be 'senseless dreams'

1899

The first signs of economic downturn are felt

1901-05 Strikes and peasant disturbances build up all over the empire

9 January 1905

Bloody Sunday in St Petersburg. Peaceful demonstrators are fired on by police with hundreds killed. Strikes and revolts spread across the country

October 1905

General strike threatened in St Petersburg. Tsar forced to issue the October Manifesto which appears to offer significant reforms

December 1905

Armed uprising of workers in Moscow is met with violent repression by mperial Guards regiments

1906

A year of bloody repression. Many thousands die. Political reform instituted in the shape of the Duma (parliament)

3 June 1907

The Second Duma is dissolved and a new electoral law gives the main electoral power to the landed elite

1912

Lena Massacre in Siberia. Hundreds of striking miners and members of their families are shot by police and security guards

August 1914

1915

Russian armies

retreat, along with

millions of refugees

and ethnic deportees

First World War breaks out across Europe. Russia's initial success turns into serious defeats by December

1916

1915

formed

The Brusilov Offensive has some success but diverts resources away from civilians to the military, causing rapid inflation and unrest

1910

August Crisis. Tsar

becomes commander-

in-chief. In the Duma.

the Progressive Bloc is

1917 February revolution

January-February 1917

Petrograd (St Petersburg)

Street disturbances

and strikes spread in

The tsar abdicates on 2 March. The revolution begins

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