

Revolution and civil war

The March Revolution

The events

By the end of 1916 to early 1917 the discontent in Russia was becoming very serious. Politicians in the Duma demanded that the Tsar introduce reforms. They wanted a new form of government. The working people of Petrograd went on strike and rioted, protesting especially about the price and scarcity of food.

The Tsar was completely incapable of dealing with these serious problems. In March 1917 discontented soldiers joined the rioters. The government had lost control. Twelve members of the Duma decided that they should take over. They forced the Tsar to abdicate. The revolution had occurred, but Russia's problems were, of course, by no means solved.

How did it happen?

Revolutions are very important events in History. Do you think it is possible for a revolution to happen without someone organising it very carefully? Historians disagree in their explanations for the revolution in Russia in March 1917. Here are three explanations:

- 1 The Empress and Rasputin were mainly responsible.
- 2 The First World War helped to bring the revolution about more quickly.
- 3 There was no obvious cause—the revolution was spontaneous. Which cause do you think was most important—the royal government, the war or 'it just happened'?

Note: In 1917 Russia was still using an inaccurate calendar. By that calendar, the March Revolution occurred in February and the November Revolution in October.



Alexander Kerensky, leader of the provisional government, March–November 1917

The Provisional Government

Continuing problems

Members of the Duma organised themselves into a Provisional Government (a temporary government until a new system of government could be organised). Kerensky was the prime minister.

But they discovered that governing Russia was very difficult, for the following reasons:

- 1 The First World War was still being fought and was going very badly. Many soldiers were deserting.
- 2 Prices were still rising and food was becoming very short in the towns.
- 3 The peasants were becoming so discontented that they started to take over the land from the landlords.
- 4 In Petrograd a Council of Workers, Peasants and Soldiers was formed as an alternative government. This was known as the Petrograd Soviet. 'Soviet' is the Russian word for Council.

The arrival of Lenin

In the spring and summer of 1917 the Bolsheviks, the main Communist party, were not very strong inside

Russia. Their leader, Lenin, was still in exile in Switzerland.

However, when the revolution broke out he arranged to travel back by train to Russia so that he could take control. In April he arrived at the Finland Station in Petrograd. A welcoming committee met him in the special room that had originally been set aside for the Tsar. An eyewitness wrote this description of the occasion:

'Lenin walked, or rather ran, into the "Tsar's Room" in a round hat, his face chilled, and a luxurious bouquet in his arms.' A representative then gave a little speech of welcome. Lenin replied: 'Dear comrades, soldiers, sailors and workers, I am happy to greet in you the victorious Russian revolution. . . . The Russian revolution achieved by you has opened a new epoch. Long live the worldwide socialist revolution!' Then Lenin was carried on top of an armoured car away from the station in a triumphal procession.

Compare Lenin's speech with the last words of *Communist Manifesto* on page 29. They both show the belief that the Communist (or socialist) revolution would be *world-wide*.

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The November Revolution

The Bolsheviks organise

Lenin immediately set about plans to take over control of the government. An attempt in July was unsuccessful and he had to escape to Finland for fear of being arrested.

By the autumn, however, the Bolsheviks were very much more powerful:

- 1 Their promises of reforms made them popular.
- 2 Another great leader of the Bolsheviks, Trotsky, was chairman of the Petrograd Soviet.
- 3 Thousands of workers had been given weapons to form 'Red Guards'. The Provisional Government could not rely on the loyalty of the army.

The Bolsheviks take over

Trotsky carefully organised a new revolution. On 6 November important buildings like the telephone exchange and government offices were captured. There was little violence. The warship *Aurora* fired a few shells at the Winter Palace, the government headquarters. Similar uprisings were organised in other main towns. Within ten days the Bolsheviks had taken over from the Provisional Government.

The careful organisation of the Bolshevik revolution is clear from the following eye-witness account by the American newspaper correspondent, John Reed:

Petrograd presented a curious spectacle in those days. In the factories the committee-rooms were filled with stacks of rifles, couriers came and went, the Red Guard drilled. . . . In all the barracks meetings every night, and all day long interminable hot arguments. Men literally out of themselves, living pro-

digies of sleeplessness and work—men unshaven, filthy, with burning eyes who drove with fixed purpose full speed on engines of exultation. So much they had to do, so much!

Lenin was the head of the new Bolshevik government. He took three most important actions:

- 1 He issued a decree giving the land to the peasants.
- 2 He declared that the war would be brought to an end at once.
- 3 He arranged elections for a Constituent Assembly (this is a kind of parliament for drawing up a constitution for a new system of government). But the Bolsheviks did not win a majority so Lenin stopped it meeting!



A Red Guard standing in front of the throne in the Winter palace. The title of this painting is 'The inevitable'. Do you think pictures like this are important as propaganda?

Lenin addressing a crowd. The man standing to the right of the platform is Leon Trotsky. In later years, after Trotsky had quarrelled with Stalin, this photograph was shown with the figure of Trotsky blotted out. Why do you think this was done?



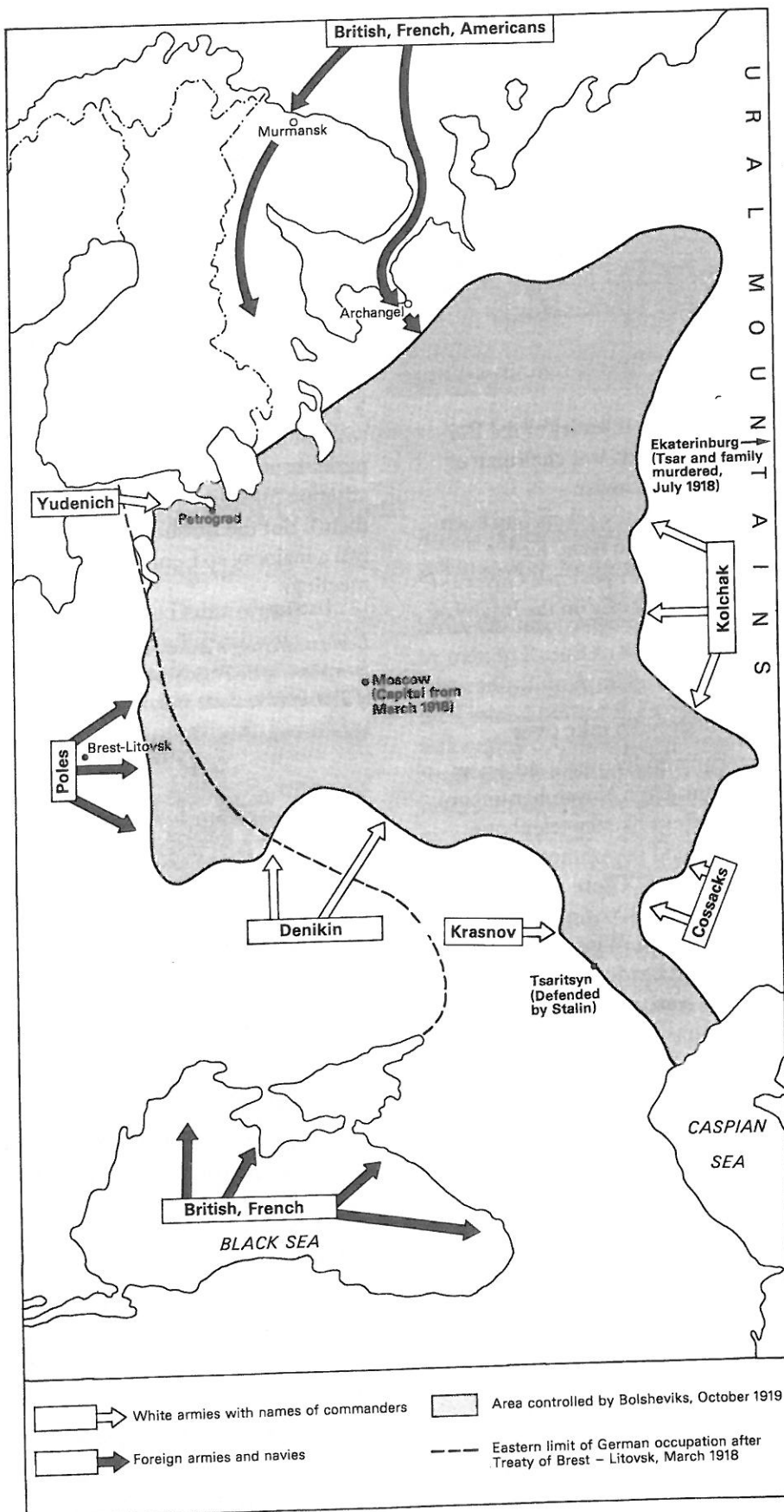
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Civil war

Many people disliked or were afraid of the Bolsheviks:

- 1 The supporters of the Tsar who wanted the return of the royal government.
- 2 Other politicians who wanted at least a share in the government.
- 3 The rich people because their land was being taken from them.
- 4 The Allies. The First World War was still being fought in the West. In 1918 the Bolsheviks signed the peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk to end the war with the Central Powers (see p. 12). The Allies thought that any other government in Russia would continue the war. The Allies were also frightened that, as Lenin forecast, Communist revolutions would break out in other countries.

Civil war therefore broke out in Russia and lasted until 1920. The Bolsheviks (or Communists as we shall now call them) controlled the central block of European Russia as shown on Map 2. The Red (Communist) Army was commanded by Trotsky. The anti-Communist, White armies had no central command and were therefore very inefficient. So, despite being attacked by so many armies and navies as you can see on the map, the Red Army eventually won. But during the war the Russian people suffered in the most horrible ways. Both sides committed cruel acts, disease spread and the disorganisation of farming led to hunger, and eventually, widespread starvation. At the start of these troubles, in 1918, the royal family were taken to Ekaterinburg, beyond the Ural Mountains, and shot.



Map 2 The Russian Civil War

Name _____

REVOLUTION AND THE CIVIL WAR

TRUE AND FALSE WORKSHEET (PGS 30 -32)

Late in 1916 and early 1917 both the politicians and the working people of Petrograd wanted the same thing.

The Tsar could not handle the problems because he lacked support from both the army and the Duma.

Of the three "explanations" for the Russian Revolution in 1917 the one that is least correct is that "it just happened."

Prime Minister Kerensky discovered that, done efficiently, Russia was no more difficult to govern than any other country.

Kerensky's government was supported by all peasants as well as the workers and soldiers from Petrograd.

The Bolsheviks were not very strong inside Russia partly because their leader was still living elsewhere.

After the revolution began, Lenin returned to Russia in such a way so as to avoid attracting attention to himself.

Lenin's returning speech showed that he agreed with Karl Marx about the extent of the revolution.

By the fall of 1917 the Bolsheviks were more powerful because they bribed many important politicians and military leaders.

Once action was started by Trotsky, it took less than two weeks for the Bolsheviks to seize control from the previous government.

When Lenin took control of the Bolshevik government he made reforms which won him incredible support in the new Constituent Assembly.

After the revolution began every single Russian turned against the Tsar and supported the Bolsheviks.

The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk made Lenin and his government very unpopular in France, England and other allied nations.

The so-called White Army was not very successful against the Bolsheviks, mostly because they lacked central command.

As often is the case in war, the main loser in the Civil War part of the Russian Revolution was the general population of the country.