

The Bolshevik Revolution: Lasting Effects

Before 1917, Russia was ruled by an autocracy, in which the Russian Czar (king) and his family held near absolute power. Over the course of 1917, however, the Russian world was turned inside out by two consecutive Revolutions.

The year 1916 had been a terrible year for Russia. The country was mired in World War I, it was losing ground to the Austrian and German militaries, and it was crumbling internally from disorder and desperation. In March of that year, events came to a head when steel workers in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) went on strike to protest conditions at the plant. Over the next few days, the protest snowballed into a much larger event as it merged with the annual International Women's Day protest in the city. Soon even the police charged with ending the protests began to join the protesters. By mid-March, the Tsar had lost power for good, and the Russian legislative body took control with a popular socialist, Alexander Kerensky at the head.

The new government in Russia wasn't the only source of power in the country. There was also a citizen council, called a "Soviet," in Petrograd. This Soviet was far more sensitive to the industrial workers and the poor in the city. Between March and the summer of 1917, tensions grew between the legislative body that officially controlled the country and the Soviet in the capital city that had unofficial power. During this time of tension, a skillful radical named Vladimir Lenin rose to power by calling for "All Power to the Soviet" and "Bread, Peace, Land."

In early November, Lenin and his party, the Bolsheviks, decided to make a move for power. The Bolsheviks spread out over the city, seizing key strategic locations. Within just over 24 hours Lenin announced the creation of a new government he called the Council of People's Commissars. This second revolution allowed radicals like Lenin to put his years of Marxist theorizing to work entirely uprooting Russian institutions and society. He abolished private ownership of land, nationalized the banks, dissolved the stock market and rights of inheritance, made gold a government monopoly, transformed criminal courts into "revolutionary tribunals," and confiscated church land.

