

# Russia 1894-1941

## How Strong was the Tsarist regime in 1914?

It is true that the Russian government had many weaknesses. The empire was VAST (125 million people spread across 2000 miles). The government was inefficient – the Tsar, Nicholas II, insisted on reading every decree personally, so important decisions were often delayed for months. The army had recently been defeated in a war with Japan (1904) and the secret police were chaotic (occasionally they arrested each other by accident). The economy was backward (mainly peasant farmers) and could barely produce enough food to feed people; where industry was developing, in towns such as St Petersburg, living and working conditions were so awful that the workers were angry and rebellious.

There were many opposition parties. The Cadets were middle class people who wanted Russia to have a parliament like England. The Social Revolutionaries wanted a peasant revolution. And the Communists (split into moderate Mensheviks and fanatical Bolsheviks) wanted a working class revolution. There was continual unrest. In 1905 there had been a revolution, and the Tsar had been forced to allow a parliament (called the Duma), but by 1914 he was ignoring it. In 1911 the Prime Minister, Stolypin, was assassinated. Workers organised themselves and elected committees called 'soviets'.

Nevertheless, in 1914 the Romanov dynasty had ruled Russia for 300 years, so it cannot have been totally weak! It was supported by the army, by the Church, by the secret police, and by the natural conservatism of the peasants, who worshipped the Tsar as appointed by God. What you may want to notice is that all the foundations of the Tsar's power were the ancient, historical things that were weakening and going out-of-date (army, church, peasantry), where all the things that threatened his power were the modern things that were growing stronger (industrialisation, communism).

## Why did the rule of the Tsar collapse in February/March 1917?

Perhaps the main thing which led to the collapse of the Tsarist regime was the First World War. If the Tsar's government before 1914 was weak, the war pushed it to breaking point. The war took men from the farms and food to the front, and it clogged up the railway system, so that people starved in the towns. Prices rose, and there was famine in the winter of 1916-1917.

Huge Russian defeats at Tannenberg and the Masurian Lakes made the government look incompetent, especially when Tsar Nicholas insisted in taking personal charge of the army. In the meantime, the army which was needed to keep control of the people became disillusioned and rebellious. Back in St Petersburg, Nicholas left the government in the hands of the Tsarina, who was completely in the power of Rasputin. The nobles who had supported the monarchy found themselves humiliated. The Church was scandalised.

In March 1917, things reached a head. Many workers went on strike. On 8 March, marches held as part of International Women's Day got out of hand and turned into riots. At first troops fired on the crowds, but on 12 March they mutinied and joined the rioters. That same day the Duma also deserted the Tsar and set up a 'provisional government'. That same day, also, the workers and soldiers of St Petersburg set up a Soviet of 2500 elected deputies.

Too late, the Tsar got on a train. He did not even manage to return to St Petersburg; members of the Duma met him and forced him abdicate. He had been toppled by a popular revolution, and the people rejoiced in the streets.

## **Why did the Provisional Government last for only 8 months?**

The provisional government was made up of middle class politicians who wanted a parliament. They gave political freedom. But they were not revolutionaries – they did not give land to the peasants, and they tried to carry on with the war. They also failed to bring more food into the towns.

At the same time, the provisional government found itself opposed by the Soviet – in fact the Soviet 'Order Number 1' ordered workers and soldiers to obey the provisional government only if the Soviet agreed with it. In April 1917, the Bolshevik leader Lenin returned to Russia and promised the people 'Peace, Bread and Land', which was what they wanted to hear – the Bolsheviks had catchy slogans such as 'All Power to the Soviets', and they had their own newspaper Pravda (meaning 'truth'). By September 1917, the Bolsheviks had 2 million members.

The provisional government began to fall apart. Even 'death squads' executing deserters couldn't stop soldiers deserting from the army and in June the Russia attack on the Austrians failed. In July, Bolshevik riots were put down with difficulty, and in September the provisional government had to ask the Bolsheviks to help them stop a rebellion by the tsarist general Kornilov.

## **How were the Bolsheviks able to seize power in October/November 1917?**

In later times, it suited the Bolsheviks – in the famous film *Oktybar* – to represent the 'October revolution' as a popular uprising similar to February/March. In fact, the 'revolution' was a bloodless, *coup d'état*. However, although the people didn't bring in the Bolsheviks by a spontaneous uprising, we must remember that neither did they do anything to support the provisional government.

On the night of 6<sup>th</sup> November, the Red Guards took over the bridges and telephone exchange, cutting off St Petersburg from the rest of the country. Then, on 7 November, the Bolsheviks took over the banks and government buildings.

By the night of 7<sup>th</sup> November, all that was left of the provisional government was the ministers sitting in the Winter Palace, defended by the women's 'Death Battalion'. The cruiser Aurora (controlled by a Bolshevik committee of its sailors) pointed its guns at the Palace, and the Red Guards (with a troop of sailors from the Kronstadt naval base) attacked. The 'Death Battalion' hid and cried and the ministers surrendered – in the end, the provisional government fell as much because nobody was prepared to support it, as because of the military actions of the Bolsheviks.

## **How did Lenin impose Communist control on Russia?**

Lenin declared the new communist government on 8 November 1917. The parliament planned by the provisional government – called the 'Constituent Assembly' – went ahead as planned, but, when the Bolsheviks only won 175 seats and the Social revolutionaries won 370, Lenin closed it down and set up instead what he called the 'dictatorship of the proletariat'. Lenin and his 'Politburo' (cabinet) ruled by decree: 'dictatorship of the proletariat' was in effect dictatorship by the Bolshevik party.

Immediately the Bolsheviks took power there was a counter-revolution. 'The Whites' – a loose alliance of many different groups: Social Revolutionaries, Mensheviks, tsarists, army officers and nobles, helped by armies from Britain, France and America, worried that the Bolsheviks were going to try to cause world revolution. A group of Czech prisoners-of-war escaped and wandered round central Russia fighting and looting. The war lasted 3 years. Three main White armies – led by generals Yudenich, Denikin and Wrangel – closed in on the new Bolshevik state. They almost won. The war caused famine and disease – perhaps 5 million people died.

The Bolsheviks organised themselves. Trotsky recruited and trained an army of 300,000 men. An especially tough form of communism called 'War Communism' was introduced to maximise production – strikers were shot, workers were subjected to military discipline, food was rationed and peasants were made to give all their surplus food to the government. Meanwhile, Trotsky organised a 'Red Terror' – the Bolshevik secret police (the CHEKA) executed more than 7000 people it suspected of being enemies, and took Red Army generals' families hostage to make sure they stayed loyal. The Tsar and his family were killed. Newspapers were censored.

In this way, the Bolsheviks slowly won the war. In 1919, the Red Army defeated Kolchak's army, and the foreign armies were recalled. The last White army was defeated in 1920.

## **How successful was Lenin in creating a new society in Russia?**

As far as possible, while he was fighting the Civil War, Lenin also set up a communist state run according to communist principles. He immediately (1917) made peace with Germany – the Treaty of Brest Litovsk was very harsh, and took Russia's best industrial and agricultural land (Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania). Land was taken from the nobles and given to the peasants and factories were put under the control of elected committees of workers (although under war communism the government took control of the larger factories). A Labour Law introduced the 8-hour day. Lenin banned religion, killed the priests and tried to destroy the Orthodox Church. He allowed free love, divorce and abortion. There was a huge campaign to try to teach everyone of read, and Science was encouraged in all schools.

In 1921, however, there was a crisis. Sailors at the Kronstadt Naval Base – Lenin's greatest supporters – rebelled. Lenin realised that he pushed people too far, and he relaxed war communism and brought in the 'New Economic Policy'. Peasants were allowed to sell their surplus food for a bit of profit (some, called kulaks, became quite rich). Small businesses and restaurants were allowed to open up. Different races in the USSR were given freedom to practice their own national culture and religion. The NEP angered some old Bolsheviks, who said it betrayed Communism.

## **How far did Stalin set up a personal dictatorship in Communist Russia?**

When Lenin he died in 1924, everyone expected the brilliant Trotsky to succeed him, especially as Lenin had published a will saying that he feared Stalin was not fit to be leader because he would not use the power properly. However, Stalin had used his position as Secretary of the Communist Party to build up support (and he also made Trotsky look bad by telling him the wrong date for Lenin's funeral).

The Communist Party was divided at this time into the 'leftists' (led by Zinoviev and Kamenev) who wanted to start a world revolution straight away, and the 'rightists' (led by Bukharin, Rykov and Tomsky) who wanted 'communism in one country' (ie to build up Russia's power first). Stalin used these divisions to gain power – first he allied with the leftists to get Trotsky dismissed, then he joined the rightists to get the leftists discredited. Finally, he turned against the rightists and had them dismissed.

Once in power, Stalin became obsessed with power and obedience. Everywhere there had to be propaganda praising him for causing everything that was good – even for bringing the spring. He demanded continuous applause. History books were changed to remove the names and pictures of discredited people. The CHEKA (which was renamed the NKVD) continued to arrested opponents.

Then, in 1934, a rival of Stalin's – Kirov – was assassinated in Moscow. Although many historians believe that Stalin ordered the killing, he used it as the excuse to begin the 'Great Purges'. Twenty million people were put to death. In 1937 the commander-in-chief of the army and 7 generals were shot. In 1938 all the admirals and half the Army officers were executed or sent to the gulag (the system of concentration camps). Political opponents were put in great 'Show Trials', where they admitted to impossible 'crimes' against Stalin. Church leaders were imprisoned and churches closed down, and the Muslim faith was persecuted. All areas of the USSR were 'russified' and national differences were forbidden. Ordinary people who were accused by a nasty neighbour were carried off to the gulag. Instead, *apparatchiks* (party members) got the new flats, jobs and holidays.

## **To what extent did Stalin make the USSR a great economic power?**

In 1931 Stalin prophesied – correctly, as it turned out – that Russia had 10 years to modernise before it was attacked. He therefore set about modernising Russia's economy.

Firstly he had to increase the amount of food that Russia produced; he not only needed to feed the Russian people, but to export food to earn much-needed foreign currency. The millions of tiny peasant farms created by Lenin were too small and poor to be efficient. Therefore, in 1927, Stalin announced that he was going to collectivise farming – he was going to gather all the tiny farms in each village into one big kolkhoz (collective) which would be able to introduce machinery and new ideas.

A scheme for voluntary collectivisation was ignored, so in 1929\ Stalin announced that collectivisation would be compulsory. Many peasants – particularly the rich kulaks – were furious at giving their land a stock away to the collective. Many burned their barns and killed their animals, so the immediate cause of collectivisation was a huge drop in production, and famine. Stalin backed off for a year (peasants were allowed to own a small plot of land), but in 1931 he started collectivisation again. There was more resistance and another famine (5 million people died in the Ukraine) but Stalin forced through his scheme by declaring war on the kulaks, who were killed or sent to labour camps. By 1934 all 7 million kulaks had been 'eliminated' By 1939, 99% of the farms had been collectivised, but grain production was only just beginning to rise above 1914 levels, and there were still only half as many sheep and cattle as in 1928.

Secondly, Stalin introduced a series of 5-year Plans to try to improve industry. The state planning department (GOSPLAN) drew up targets for production of basic industrial items such as electricity, coal, oil and steel, and local factories were told to increase production. Foreign experts were called in, and workers were bombarded with propaganda – they were urged to become 'Stakhanovites' (named after a coal worker who cut an amazing 102 tons of coal in one shift). Crèches were set up so that women could join the workforce, and for the big engineering projects (such as hydro-electric dams) slave labour from the gulag was used. But other enthusiastic Communist 'pioneers' volunteered to go and found new industrial towns in places like Siberia.

Production increased – 1927-1937 electricity by 700%, coal by 250% and oil by 400%. But the plans concentrated on heavy industry, and people had to do without consumer goods. Often increased production was achieved by ignoring safety (100,000 men died building the Belomor Canal), wages fell and life in the labour camps was terrible.