

**THE RUSSIAN  
REVOLUTION: A Very  
Short Introduction**

*S. A. Smith*

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

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**The Russian Revolution: A Very Short Introduction**

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S. A. Smith

# THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

A Very Short Introduction

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# Introduction

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The Russian Revolution of 1917 saw the overthrow of the tsarist autocracy in February and the seizure of power by the Bolshevik party in October. The Bolsheviks proceeded to establish the world's first Communist state on a territory covering one-sixth of the globe, that stretched from the Arctic to the Black Sea, from the Baltic to the Far East. Their revolution proved to be the most consequential event of the 20th century, inspiring communist movements and revolutions across the world, notably in China, provoking a reaction in the form of fascism, and after 1945 having a profound influence on many anti-colonial movements and shaping the architecture of international relations through the Cold War. This book sets out to provide for the reader coming to the subject for the first time an analytical narrative of the main events and developments from 1917 to 1929, when I. V. Stalin launched his 'revolution from above', bringing crash industrialization and the forced collectivization of agriculture to the Soviet Union. It seeks to explain how and why revolution broke out in 1917; how the Bolsheviks came to power and established a regime; and how, finally, that regime evolved into a gruesome form of totalitarianism. The book attends to the ideals and aspirations that animated the contenders for power and the issues and conflicts with which they had to grapple. But it seeks to go beyond politics narrowly defined. The October Revolution set out to do nothing less than destroy an entire social system and replace it with a society superior to anything that had existed hitherto in

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human history. The book explores the far-reaching reverberations of that project on the economy, peasant life, work, structures of government, the family, empire, education, law and order, and the Church. More particularly, it explores what the revolution meant – the hopes it inspired and the disappointments it brought – for different groups such as peasants, workers, soldiers, non-Russian nationalities, the intelligentsia, men and women, and young people. The perspective is that of the social historian, but the central concern is political: to understand how ordinary people experienced and participated in the overthrow of one structure of domination and how they experienced and resisted the gradual emergence of a new one. Each chapter is punctuated with a couple of quotations from documents that have come to light since the fall of the Soviet Union; they are intended to give a flavour of the range of responses of those who found themselves caught up in the revolution.

In 1991 the state to which the Russian Revolution gave rise collapsed, allowing historians to see the history of the Russian Revolution in its entirety for the first time. That shift in perspective, together with the passing of the 20th century, suggests that it is a good time to reflect more philosophically on the meaning of the revolution. Somewhat unusually for an introductory text, therefore, it touches on certain fundamental questions, such as the role of ideology and human agency in revolution, the interplay of emancipatory and enslaving elements in the Bolshevik project, and the influence of Russian culture on the development of the Soviet Union. The book incorporates advances in research and interpretation made by western scholars since the 1980s – particularly in the sphere of social and cultural history – and the work of Russian scholars who were freed from the trammels of Soviet censorship in 1991. The introductory nature of this text and the tight constraints of space preclude the standard scholarly apparatus of reference. I thus wish to apologise to – and thank – the many specialists on whose work I have drawn without customary acknowledgement.

Readers should note that up to 1 February 1918 dates are given in the old style. On that date the Bolsheviks changed from the Julian calendar, which was 13 days behind that of the West, to the western calendar. The October seizure of power (24-5 October 1917) thus took place on 6-7 November 1917, according to the western calendar.

Warmest thanks go to Cathy Merridale and Chris Ward who read the manuscript and offered characteristically astute and helpful comments. Needless to say, responsibility for any errors remains my own.



Map 1. European Russia on the eve of 1917

## Chapter 1

# From February to October

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On 23 February 1917 thousands of female textile-workers and housewives took to the streets of Petrograd, the Russian capital, to protest about the bread shortage and to mark International Women's Day. The following day, more than 200,000 workers were on strike and demonstrators marched from the outlying districts into the city centre, hurling rocks and lumps of ice at police as they went. By 25 February, students and members of the middle classes had joined the protesters, who now bore placards proclaiming 'Down with the War' and 'Down with the Tsarist Government'. On 26 February, soldiers from the garrison were ordered to fire on the crowds, killing hundreds. The next morning, the Volynskii regiment mutinied, its example quickly followed by other units. By 1 March, 170,000 soldiers swarmed among the insurgents, who were by this stage attacking prisons and police stations, arresting officials, and destroying tsarist 'symbols of slavery'. A revolution had broken out, but not until 27 February did any of the revolutionary parties manage to give leadership to it. Looking back to the revolution of 1905, the moderate wing of the Russian Social Democratic and Labour Party (RSDLP), the Mensheviks, called on workers and soldiers to elect delegates to a soviet, or council. Thus was born the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.

On the same day, members of the duma, or parliament, alarmed at disorders on the street, resolved to capitalize on the crisis in order to



extract political concessions from the tsar. Significantly, they persuaded the army generals that nothing short of Tsar Nicholas II's abdication could ensure the successful continuance of the war. On 2 March members of the *duma* went ahead without a formal mandate and established a provisional, or temporary, government. The next day, since his brother could not be persuaded to take the throne, Nicholas abdicated and the 300-year-old Romanov dynasty came to an ignominious end. In 1905 the autocracy had withstood the revolutionary movement for 12 months; in February 1917, deprived of the support from the army, it survived for less than 12 days.

The collapse of the autocracy was rooted in a crisis of modernization. From the 1860s, and particularly from the 1890s, the government tried hard to keep abreast militarily and economically of the major European powers by modernizing Russia's economy. By 1913 Russia had become the fifth largest industrial power in the world. However, economic modernization was carried out in an external and internal environment that was deeply threatening to the autocracy. The empire was challenged by Japan in the Far East, leading to war in 1904; by Germany in central Europe and the Ottoman empire; and in the decade up to 1914 by instability in the Balkans. Internally, the modernization was manacled by the deep social tensions that scarred this backward, poverty-stricken country. The government hoped that it could carry out modernization whilst maintaining tight control over society. Yet the effect of industrialization, urbanization, internal migration, and the emergence of new social classes was to set in train forces that served to erode the foundations of the autocratic state.

The difficulties of modernization were nowhere clearer than in agriculture. On the eve of the revolution, three-quarters of Russia's population was still engaged in farming. Russia had been the last country in Europe to abolish serfdom, but the emancipation of 1861 had left peasants feeling cheated, since the landed gentry kept roughly one-sixth of the land – usually the best-quality land – and since the peasants



1. International Women's Day, 8 March 1917

had to pay for the land they received at a price above its market value. Between 1850 and 1914 the population of the empire grew rapidly from 74 million to 164 million, putting intense pressure on land resources, especially in the central and Volga provinces where the black earth was very fertile. The average peasant allotment shrank by one-third between 1861 and 1900. The fact that by 1917 the landed gentry had lost almost half their land – much of it sold to peasants – and rented most of the remaining land to peasants, made little difference to how peasants felt.

In spite of increasing land hunger, peasant living standards were actually rising very slowly after 1891, although not in the central black-earth provinces. The rapid expansion of the market – stimulated by the construction of railways – allowed peasants to supplement their income from farming with work in industry, trade, handicrafts, or on the farms of the well-to-do; it also stimulated commercial production of grain, making Russia the world's leading grain exporter by 1913. Yet the average peasant still lived a life of poverty, deprivation, and oppression, one index of which was that infant mortality was the highest in Europe. Moreover, notwithstanding the expansion of commercial farming, agriculture continued to be technically primitive, based on the three-field system and strip farming, with little use of fertilizer or machinery. In spite of clear signs that agriculture was beginning to commercialize, then, the agrarian system as a whole remained backward and the peasantry deeply alienated.

By 1914, 18% of the empire's population was urban. Towns grew rapidly, mainly as a result of peasant migration, and this put immense strain on the urban infrastructure. Overcrowding, high rents, and appalling squats were the norm in the big cities. Incompetent municipal authorities, beset by an inadequate tax base (there was no income tax until 1916), proved unable to cope with rising levels of disease and mortality. St Petersburg – which changed its name to Petrograd during the First World War – enjoyed the dubious distinction of being the most

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unhealthy capital in Europe. In 1908 more than 14,000 people died in a cholera epidemic. In the burgeoning towns, the traditional system of social estates, which defined the fiscal and military obligations of the tsar's subjects according to whether they belonged to the nobility, clergy, merchantry, or peasantry, was breaking down. New classes, such as the professional and commercial middle classes, the industrial bourgeoisie, and the working class, were emerging, posing demands on the system that it was not designed to accommodate.

As early as the 1830s a social group had emerged that stood outside the system of social estates. This was the characteristically Russian group known as the intelligentsia, defined less by its socio-economic position than by its critical stance towards the autocracy. Liberal and socialist in its politics, it did much in the course of 70 years to erode the legitimacy of the autocracy, not least by providing a steady flow of members to the terrorist and socialist groups that struggled to overthrow the system by violent revolution. By the turn of the 20th century, the intelligentsia was becoming less clearly defined, as professional and commercial middle classes emerged, as the middle and upper ranks of the bureaucracy became professionalized, and as mass commercial culture developed. The professional and commercial middle classes had been slow to develop in Russia, but by the time revolution broke out in 1905 they were making their mark on society. A civil society was emerging, manifest in the professional associations of lawyers, doctors, and teachers, in voluntary associations of a charitable or reformist type, in the expansion of universities, and especially in the explosion of publishing.

In 1905 the intelligentsia and the middle classes together campaigned for the autocracy to give them civil and political rights and establish a constitutional political order. They thus played a role similar to that which in western Europe had been performed by a more economically defined bourgeoisie. In Russia, however, the capitalist class was politically unassertive, deeply segmented by region and branch of

industry, and tied to the traditional merchant estate. Industrialists in key sections of the mining, metallurgy, and engineering industries relied on the state for orders, subsidies, and preferential tariffs, and showed little will to confront it.

The growth of an industrial proletariat posed a challenge of a different kind. In 1917 there were still only 3.8 million workers in Russia's factories and mines, yet their concentration in particular regions and in relatively large enterprises gave them a political clout out of all proportion to their numbers. Mainly recruited from the peasants – 'snatched from the plough and hurled into the factory furnace' in L. D. Trotsky's memorable phrase – they varied considerably in the extent to which they were tied to the land, involved in urban culture, educated, and skilled. There were big differences, for example, between the skilled metalworkers of Vyborg district in Petrograd, the textile-workers of the Moscow industrial region, and the workers from the mining settlements of the Urals. Nevertheless the proportion of workers who had severed their ties with the village and who were becoming socialized into the urban-industrial environment was increasing. Towns provided workers with cultural opportunities, such as evening classes, clubs, libraries, theatres, and mass entertainment, and exposed them to the subversive political ideas of Social Democrats and Socialist Revolutionaries. The wretched conditions in which workers lived, the drudgery of their work, and their pitiful wages heightened their sense of separateness not only from the government, but from privileged society in general.

Following the general strike of 1905, the autocracy conceded limited legalization of trade unions, but employers showed little desire to reform the authoritarian system of industrial relations. Moreover, since the response of the authorities to strikes and demonstrations was to send in police and Cossacks, workers were easily politicized, seeing in the state and capitalists a single mechanism of oppression. Deprived of the chance to pursue improvement by gradualistic means, Russian

workers became the most strike-prone in Europe in 1905-6 and again in 1912-14, the annual number of strikers was equivalent to almost three-quarters of the factory workforce.

In October 1905, under intense pressure from the 'all-nation struggle' of the labour movement and the middle-class and gentry opposition, Nicholas II, in the October Manifesto, conceded an elected legislature, or duma, plus substantial civil rights. The revolution had exposed the vulnerability of the autocracy, but it also rekindled the reformist energies of the bureaucracy. Nowhere was this more apparent than in Prime Minister P. A. Stolypin's bold legislation to allow peasants to separate from the agricultural commune by consolidating their land holdings into private plots. Many of the middle classes, alarmed by the extent of worker and peasant insurgency, were ready to work with a constitutional monarchy in the interests of social reform. Yet the massive unrest in the countryside in 1906-7, which saw the burning and looting of gentry estates, together with the radicalism shown by peasants in elections to the first and second dumas in 1906 and 1907, demonstrated the perils of controlled modernization.

From February to October

Once the revolutionary storm had died down, Stolypin in June 1907 launched a 'coup' against the duma, limiting its power and drastically reducing peasant representation. Thereafter the regime became steadily more isolated. The middle classes continued to support the faltering efforts at reform, but felt betrayed by the way in which Nicholas and his ministers clawed back the concessions granted in the October Manifesto. Workers, needless to say, remained profoundly alienated from the regime and from the wealthy and privileged classes. More worryingly, the autocracy was losing its traditional supporters. The 1905 revolution had destroyed peasant loyalty to their 'little father' the tsar, and the Stolypin reforms failed by 1914 to create a layer of conservative farmers who might have provided a new base for the regime. The authority of the Orthodox Church was in decline and the once liberal gentry, debt-ridden and aghast at peasant insurgency,

harried the bureaucracy for failing to protect its interests. Finally, the project of orderly modernization was also threatened by the appearance of nationalism among the non-Russian peoples of the empire.

In 1906 the tsarist state was weak but not necessarily doomed. Orderly modernization in a world of intensifying competition between empires and in a society torn by social conflict was never going to be easy. But it might have succeeded had the resolve of the regime not been undermined by the unwillingness of the tsar to tolerate any weakening of his authority. The tsar sincerely believed that, as God's appointed representative, he did not have the right to compromise his power. The omens were evident in the first line of Basic Law of 1906, which ostensibly enshrined a constitutional monarchy: "To the All-Russian Emperor belongs the Supreme Autocratic Power." Consequently, by 1907, with the revolutionary crisis at an end, the regime began to retreat from its commitment to open up the political process to new social forces. By 1913-14, Russia's cities were once again awash with conflict. Nevertheless the autocracy collapsed not because of its unwillingness to reform, nor even because of the intrinsic contradictions of controlled modernization, acute though these had become, but because of the First World War.

The war marked a watershed in Europe's history, destroying empires, discrediting liberal democracy, preparing the way for the totalitarian politics of the 1920s and 1930s. It exposed all the belligerents to the severest of tests and found the Russian autocracy wanting. The war had a devastating impact on the empire. Over 14 million men were mobilized; about 67 million people in the western provinces came under enemy occupation; over 6 million were forcibly displaced, of whom half a million were Jews expelled from front-line areas. The eastern front was less static than the western, but neither side was able to make a decisive breakthrough and offensives proved hugely costly. Perhaps 1.3 million died or were lost without trace – a higher mortality than any other belligerent power (although Germany had a higher number of

counted dead) – and the total number of casualties reached over 8 million. The mass slaughter and seething hatreds to which the war gave rise fatally compromised the chances of democracy after the autocracy had been overthrown.

They drove us and we went. Where was I going and why? To kill the Germans! But why? I didn't know. I arrived in the trenches, which were terrifying and appalling. I listened as our company commander beat a soldier, beat him about the head with a whip. Blood poured from the poor man's head. Well, I thought, as soon as he begins to beat me, I'll skewer him with my bayonet and be taken prisoner. I thought who really is my enemy: the Germans or the company commander? I still couldn't see the Germans, but here in front of me was the commander. The lice bit me in the trenches. I was overcome with dejection. And then as we were retreating I was taken prisoner.

F. Starunov, a peasant conscript in the First World War

From February to October

Russian soldiers fought valiantly and generally successfully against Turks and Austrians, but proved no match for the German army in matters of organization, discipline, and leadership. General Brusilov's offensive of June 1916, however, testified to the resilience of the Russian soldiers and by that stage the army had overcome the shortage of shells that had dogged its first months in the field. When the February Revolution came, it was not as the result of military defeat, or even of war weariness, but as the result of the collapse of public confidence in the government.

In November 1915, after a disastrous first year of battle, Nicholas took personal command of the armed forces. Though diligent, he had neither the ability nor imagination to coordinate the external and the home fronts and stubbornly resisted calls from the Duma for a 'government of public confidence'. The empress Alexandra interfered erratically in



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