

# Peace, Land, Bread: The Russian Revolution

*"Peace! Land! Bread!" This was the battle cry of the 1917 October Revolution that would change the history of Russia and indeed the entire world – the cry of workers and peasants fed up with a failed system and the trials of war.*

## Peace



For almost 200 years after the reign of Peter the Great, Russia was ruled by a Tsar, a title with the equivalent rank of an emperor and the power of an autocrat, or absolute control of the government. In 1894, Nicholas II inherited the throne from his father, Alexander III, continuing the rule of the Romanov Dynasty, his family that had controlled Russia for over 300 years. Even though it was guaranteed that Nicholas would eventually become Tsar, he was inadequately prepared to run the government.

As domestic politics became tense, the Russian government got to work expanding its borders as a means of distraction from pressing issues. The empire eventually bumped up against Japan, a neighbor with similar imperial ambitions. During the Russo-Japanese War that followed from 1904 through 1905, Russia suffered a humiliating defeat and forced to accept an unfavorable peace treaty. World War I broke out in 1914, and the delicate political situation in Russia deteriorated even further. Russia was still trying to recover from its military fiasco with Japan and was grossly unprepared for a major military conflict on its western border. By March of 1917, 10 million peasants had been forced into military service with over 1.5 million killed and another 4 million seriously wounded. Women were pushed into urban factories with jobs to support the floundering war effort. The Russian people grew tired of fighting wars that did not directly affect them, and they blamed Nicholas personally for the defeats the army endured. They wanted peace.

## Land

Since the time of Ivan the Terrible during the Middle Ages, the Russian tsars granted noblemen dominion over their land and peasants, making them tied to the land. In Western Europe, this was called feudalism, but in Russia, it became known as serfdom. After centuries of peasant uprisings and protests against the slavery-like practices of serfdom, Tsar Alexander II (Nicholas II's grandfather) issued the Emancipation of the Serfs in 1861. However, Alexander II was assassinated in 1881, and his son Tsar Alexander III instituted policies that ensured life for Russian peasants and the lower classes remained just as miserable.

As industrialization created a growing class of similarly-oppressed workers, tension and anger escalated within Russian society. Karl Marx, author of the Communist Manifesto, had written that workers should rebel and take power away from the rich. He believed that nothing should be privately owned and that everything should be commonly owned. A group of people called the Bolsheviks believed that the royal family should be overthrown and communism introduced. The Bolsheviks were led by Vladimir Lenin, who had been forced to leave Russia to avoid being imprisoned.



Lenin continued to be leader of the Bolsheviks while in exile – publishing communist leaflets and raising money for their cause. By the time Nicholas II ascended the throne in 1894, fears of riots and revolution were real and immediate. The Russian people were beginning to demand rights and freedoms.



As Tsar, Nicholas rejected any proposals for a constitutional monarchy, court reforms, or the participation of peasant assemblies, called *zemstovs*, in the government. People who spoke out against the government were sent to prison. Rioters were attacked by the Cossacks, ethnic Russians with military training who were essentially used as a police force. In 1905, unarmed peasants attempting to petition the Tsar for national reforms were shot at by the Imperial Guard, sparking a revolution against the rule of the Tsar. In order to keep his position, Nicholas was forced to accept a Duma (parliament), but nothing really changed. Nicholas kept

power and if members of the Duma disagreed with him, they were sent away. Eventually, Nicholas dissolved the Duma in 1906. A second Duma was formed in 1907, but they met only four times over the next decade.

## **Bread**

While Nicholas was fighting at the front, he left his wife, Empress Alexandra, in charge. As a result, the Romanovs became very unpopular. Food and fuel shortages were rampant, and high unemployment meant that huge numbers of people were living in poverty. In February 1917, people rioted on the streets in Russia. They were joined by soldiers and members of the Duma. Nicholas II was forced to abdicate and a new provisional government took over. Many Bolsheviks believed that the Russian people would not accept a Socialist government and supported the provisional government led by Alexander Kerensky, who was named President of Russia. The workers, soldiers and peasants elected their own councils called Soviets. The Soviets were as powerful as the government.



Kerensky did not end the war as the people had hoped, but instead planned a new offensive against the Germans. In April 1917, Vladimir Lenin returned from exile, angered that Russia was still fighting in the war and that many Bolsheviks supported the provisional government. In October, the Bolsheviks seized the Winter Palace, the headquarters of the provisional government and forced Kerensky out of power. In December 1917, Lenin signed the treaty of Brest-Litovsk which took Russia out of the war. In 1918, Nicholas II, the last Tsar of Russia, his wife Alexandra and their five children were murdered by the Bolsheviks after spending over a year in confinement as political prisoners.

Many Russians did not support the Bolshevik government and tried to oppose the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks were known as “Reds” while those that opposed them were the “Whites”. There was civil war between the reds and whites, and the new Russia tried to restructure their economy under a policy that became known as war communism. In an effort to supply the Red Army with food and weapons to help it fight the Civil War against the Whites, the Bolsheviks took control of factories, mines, workshops and railways; they eventually took over the banks as well. People were forced to work in factories, while private ownership and trade became outlawed. Grain was taken from the peasants using force, and food was rationed in order for the Bolsheviks to take control of industry and food production in Russia. Armies from Britain, France and America supported the Whites, but the Bolsheviks were more powerful. By 1922, the Bolsheviks were in charge of a new country that would be renamed the Soviet Union.

*Did this new state deliver on its promises to the people? They did manage to get Russia out of WWI – the peace the soldiers demanded, although in the context of civil war that was little comfort. Land was given in theory, and then taken away in practice; bread proved hard to find amid the deprivations of War Communism. But the battle cry of "peace, land, bread" had done its job – the revolution of 1917 was complete.*