

1 The coming of the revolution

The Russian Revolution suddenly broke out in February 1917. It was not unexpected. Russians had long discussed revolution, and by late 1916 a sense existed across the entire political and social spectrum that some kind of upheaval could happen at any time. The crisis in Russia was obvious even abroad. “In December, 1916 and still more markedly in January, 1917, there were signs that something important and significant was going on . . . [in Russia that] required exploration, and the rapidly growing rumors of coming political changes called for more accurate knowledge and fuller interpretation.”¹ Thus wrote Nicholas Murray Butler of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in the United States of the decision to send the Norwegian, Christian Lange, on a fact-finding mission to Russia at the beginning of 1917. Still, when the new year dawned no one inside or outside Russia expected that within two months not only would the old regime be overthrown, but that this would set in swift motion the most radical revolution the world had yet seen. This fast-moving and far-reaching revolution grew out of a complex web of long- and short-term causes which also helped shape its direction and outcome. The latter in turn profoundly affected the global history of the century to follow.

The autocracy

The Russian Revolution was, first, a political revolution that overthrew the monarchy of Nicholas II and made the construction of a new governmental system a central problem of the revolution. At the beginning of the twentieth century Russia was the last major power of Europe in which the monarch was an autocrat, his power unlimited by laws or institutions. Since at least the early nineteenth century the Russian tsars had fought the increasing demands for political change. Then, in 1894, the strong-willed Alexander III died unexpectedly, leaving an ill-prepared Nicholas II as Emperor and Tsar of all the Russias.

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Nicholas came to the throne at a time when a rapidly changing world demanded vigorous and imaginative leadership to steer Russia through turbulent times. This leadership Nicholas, mild-mannered, of limited ability, disliking governance, and drawn more to the trivia of administration than to major policy issues, was unable to provide. Yet Nicholas clung stubbornly to his autocratic rights, supported vigorously in this by his wife, Alexandra. Alexandra constantly exhorted him to “Never forget that you are and must remain autocratic [*sic*] emperor,” to “show more power and decision,” and shortly before the revolution, to “Be Peter the Great, John [Ivan] the Terrible, Emperor Paul – crush them all under you.”² All her exhortations, however, could not make Nicholas a decisive, much less effective, ruler. They could only reinforce his resistance to needed reforms. Government drifted, problems remained unsolved, and Russia suffered two unsuccessful wars and two revolutions during Nicholas’ two decades of rule. A personally kind man and loving husband and father, he became known to his subjects as “Nicholas the Bloody.”

Not only was Nicholas’ government poorly run, but it gave little in the way of civil or other rights to the population, who were seen as subjects, not citizens. The government closely controlled the right to form organizations for any purpose, even the most innocuous. Censorship meant an almost complete absence of open political discourse, forcing it into illegal, often revolutionary channels. Alexander II, as part of the Great Reforms of the 1860s, had allowed the formation of *zemstvos*, noble-dominated local elected councils. These exercised limited power of self-government at the local level, including working to improve roads, primary education, health and medical care, agricultural practices, and other local affairs. However, the monarchs resolutely refused to share supreme political power with popular institutions and after 1881 restricted the *zemstvos*’ authority. Shortly after coming to the throne in 1894 Nicholas dismissed hopes for creation of a national *zemstvo*, a national elected assembly, as “senseless dreams.” Rather than create a more modern political system in which the populace became citizens instead of subjects, with at least a modest stake in political life and the future of the state, Nicholas clung to an outmoded autocratic view of God-given ruler and loyal subjects.

Nowhere was the outdated vision of Nicholas’ government more apparent than in its treatment of the many non-Russian peoples of the empire. The Russian Empire was a vast multiethnic state in which nationalist sentiments stirred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These initially focused on demands for cultural and civil rights and nationality-territorial autonomy. The government responded with repression and “Russification,” a variety of policies limiting use of local languages, forcing use of Russian, discriminating on religious grounds,

imposing changes in local administrative structures, and in other ways attempting to “Russify” non-Russian populations. These measures temporarily hindered development of nationality-based movements while increasing resentments. When the means of repression were removed in 1917, nationalism burst forth as a significant part of the revolution.

The economy and social classes

The Russian Revolution was also, and profoundly, a social revolution. One reason Russia so needed good leadership was that both the economic and social systems were in transition and placing tremendous stresses on the population. Shaken by defeat in the Crimean War of 1854–56, Alexander II launched Russia on a cautious path of reform and modernization known as the Great Reforms. The centerpiece of the reforms was the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. Emancipation gave the peasants their personal freedom and a share of the land, which amounted to about half overall. The peasants, however, were dissatisfied with the emancipation settlement, believing that by right all the land should be theirs. Their claim on the rest of the land remained a source of rural discontent and drove peasant revolution in 1905 and 1917.^a

Emancipation did not bring the expected prosperity for either the peasants or the state. Rapid population growth – the population more than doubled between 1860 and 1914 – in the absence of increased productivity created new hardships. The condition of the rural peasantry varied, but overall little if any per capita economic gain was made. Moreover, the peasantry, over 80 percent of the population at the turn of the century, lived always at the edge of disaster. Families could be pushed over by illness, bad luck, or local conditions, while great disasters periodically swept large regions: the famine of 1891–92 alone claimed 400,000 lives. Peasant poverty, the persistence of disparities in land, wealth and privileges between peasants and landowning nobles, and the peasant lust for the land still held by private landowners fueled peasant violence in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917.

By the 1880s many Russian leaders came to realize that Russia could not remain so overwhelmingly agrarian. Industrialization of the country was essential if Russia were to sustain great-power status in a world in

^a Extremely diverse rural systems existed in Russia: the landless agrarian laborers of the Baltic regions, the relatively prosperous emigrants of West Siberia and German farmers of the Volga, the nomadic herding cultures of Central Asia, the Cossack communities, and others. Discussion in this work centers on the Russian and Ukrainian peasantry, who made up a majority of the rural population, upon whom both government and revolutionaries focused their attention, and who drove the peasant revolt of 1917.

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which power and industry were increasingly linked. In the 1880s the government took steps to spur industrial development, augmenting efforts of private entrepreneurs through tariffs, fiscal policies and direct investment. Russia enjoyed phenomenal growth. During the 1890s Russian industrial growth rates averaged 7–8 percent annually, and for the period 1885–1914 industrial production increased by an average of 5.72 percent annually, exceeding the American, British, and German rates for those years. Percentage growth rates, however, told only part of the story. While Russian iron smelting grew rapidly in percentage terms, total output was still far below those same three countries. Moreover, labor productivity grew only slowly and per capita income fell in the second half of the nineteenth century compared with West European countries.³ Russia underwent an industrial revolution in the last three decades of imperial Russia, but the economic picture could be seen in either optimistic or pessimistic light, depending on how and against what one measured.

Industrialization brought with it enormous strains on the society. Tariffs, higher prices and higher taxes held down the standard of living of an already poor population who had to wait for any future benefits it might bring them. Sergei Witte, minister of finance from 1892 to 1903 and chief architect of the system, acknowledged the stresses in a secret memorandum to Nicholas in 1899: while Russia was developing “an industry of enormous size” to which the entire economy’s future was tied, “Its services cost the country too dearly, and these excessive costs have a destructive influence over the welfare of the population, particularly in agriculture.”⁴ Moreover, with industrialization came a social transformation with enormous political implications. The old hierarchy of legally defined estates (*sosloviia*) – noble, clergy, merchant, peasant, and other – lost much of its meaning and was being replaced by a newer social structure based on profession and economic function in the new industrial age. This emerging class structure created identities and aspirations that played a major role in the coming of the revolution and in its outcome.

A key part of the new social structure was the industrial workforce. This critically important class did not even exist as a classification under the old estate system, which grouped them according to the estate from which they had come, usually as peasants or one of the categories that included urban lower classes such as artisans or day laborers. Despite such outdated classifications the industrial workers were a very identifiable new class and several important features made them a potent revolutionary force. One was the wretched condition in which they worked

and lived. The social tensions inherent in adjusting to the new urban and factory conditions were great enough, but the terrible circumstances under which the working class labored and lived made them even worse. The factories offered long hours (twelve or more), low pay, unsafe conditions, a harsh and degrading system of industrial discipline, and a total absence of employment security or care if ill or injured. Housing was overcrowded, unsanitary, and lacked privacy. Many workers lived in barracks, some employing the “ever warm bed” system by which two workers shared the same bunk, moving between it and their twelve- to thirteen-hour shifts. Families often shared single rooms with other families or single workers. The conditions of industry not only left them poor, but also robbed them of personal dignity. Alcoholism was rampant, as was disease. Their social-economic plight was reflected even in the differences between the middle- and upper-class districts of the city center with their paved streets, electric lights, and water system, and the outlying workers’ districts where dirt (or mud) streets, kerosene lamps, and filth and disease prevailed.

Efforts by workers and their champions from among the educated classes to organize to improve their lives generally met repression by the government. Indeed, government industrialization policies depended on the economic advantages of cheap labor, of which there seemed an inexhaustible supply. It reflected also the mentality of a ruling class accustomed to thinking of poverty and hard labor as the natural condition of peasants (as most workers were or had recently been). The government failed to create an arena for labor organizing where workers could try to redress their grievances through legal means. This contributed to political radicalization. Because the regime mostly denied workers the right to organize and pursue economic interests legally, they were forced to resort to illegal actions and linkage with the revolutionary parties. The emerging working class was not merely a deeply aggrieved, growing segment of the population, but one that increasingly saw a connection between the political system and their own wretched condition.

An important feature of this new industrial working class was its concentration in a relatively small number of industrial centers, including St. Petersburg and Moscow. This enhanced workers’ ability to have an impact politically if they were organized. Within the cities the factories provided a potent focus for organization and mobilization. This was reinforced by the fact that Russian factories tended to be much larger than their Western counterparts. The industrial system brought them together not only in the larger factory but also in smaller workshops and foundries within it, giving them an inherent organizational structure. The factories

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thus functioned as natural organizing centers and as bases for revolutionary activity before and during 1917.

Many of the new industrial workers retained close ties to the peasantry, a connection reinforced by the steady flow of recruits from the villages. Some workers returned annually to participate in the harvest and general village life, while others worked in the city only a short time before returning permanently to the village, where their wives and children had often remained. Organized brotherhoods (*zemliachestva*) based on rural regions of origin played an important role in the lives of many urban workers. These ties helped keep alive among urban workers the peasant values of egalitarianism and collective action, as well as a shared hostility to the “masters,” whether landowners or industrialists. This helped create the broad lower-class versus upper-classes mentality that played so important a role in 1917.

While peasant attitudes and ties continued to be important, equally or even more significant was the emergence of a specifically working-class identity and values. By the early twentieth century a layer of permanent, more highly skilled, better-educated workers emerged. They led the way in attaining literacy, forming study circles, organizing strikes and demonstrations, and even turning to politics by linking up with the revolutionary parties and by reading their political tracts. The revolutionaries explained the political world and its importance to them. These parties, through their reading circles and discussion groups, opened for some workers a window into a different, better world. Moreover, they explained how to achieve it. Marxism in particular gave an explanation of why they had become workers, why their condition was what it was, and told them why and how it must change. A working-class identity developed, not merely as a result of social-economic circumstances, central as those were, but also because of the efforts of revolutionary parties to cultivate a working-class identity among them. This reinforced the lessons of their labor experience, where the state aided employers in suppressing strikes, blocking unions, and enforcing workplace subservience, leading some workers to draw the conclusion that economic improvement required political change. Out of these experiences came the worker-activists who provided leadership for their fellow workers and a linkage between the revolutionary parties and the mass of workers. They played a central role in the revolution.

The industrial revolution also combined with social and economic forces at work since mid-century to produce a diverse and growing middle class – middle classes might be a better term – although the term and concept of middle class did not exist in the Russia of the time. An important part of these new middle classes grew out of the professions,

which blossomed in Russia in the second half of the century: teachers, doctors, pharmacists, lawyers, agronomists, and others. Industrialization added a new and diverse middle class of engineers, bookkeepers, technicians, white-collar employees, managers, shopkeepers, and small entrepreneurs. These “middle-class” elements came from diverse social origins and not only suffered from a relatively weak sense of common identity and goals, but also lacked political movements devoted to developing a middle-class identity. Indeed, the primary political party spokesman for the interests of these groups after 1905, the liberal Constitutional Democrats, always insisted that the party stood “above classes.” An identity was growing, however, encouraged especially in the twentieth century by the growth of professional associations as well as of social, cultural, leisure, and sporting clubs that served the new middle classes — more than 600 were listed in Moscow in 1912.⁵ These provided forums for exploring their common interests and discussing broader social and political issues. The education and the social-economic significance of this growing middle class gave it importance and provided the social basis for the emergence of a liberal movement demanding political rights and constitutionalism.

Another way to look at the changing society is through the concept of “educated society,” which roughly corresponds to what the Russians called *obshchestvo*. “Educated society” encompassed both the new middle classes and large portions of the old nobility and even part of the government bureaucracy. It cut across the traditional legal castes and to some extent even the new economic classes, and its “sense of identity rested on a keen perception that the Russian ‘nation’ differed from the Russian ‘state’” and reflected the “presence of educated Russians determined to work for the common good, for ‘progress.’”⁶ They led the way in demanding a voice in public affairs for themselves as spokesmen for society at large, and asserted that the old imperial regime could no longer properly manage the affairs of state, at least not as well as they could. The bungled handling of the famine of 1891–92 was especially important in energizing them and in confirming their view that the old regime was bankrupt, and later the Revolution of 1905 and handling of the war effort after 1914 reinforced that belief. Increasingly the spokesmen of the new educated class were referred to as “public men,” a reflection of a new self-image. Their view of themselves as new leaders of society against a corrupt regime was hampered, however, by the fact that for the lower classes the notion of “educated society” largely overlapped with that of “privileged Russia.” Educated Russians of the upper, middle, and professional classes were, to the peasants and workers of the lower classes, “them.” This helped set the stage for the sharp social antagonisms of

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1917 between “educated” or “privileged” society and “the masses” of workers, peasants, soldiers, and even some of the urban lower middle classes.

An important subset of educated society, and one reason for the middle classes’ poor sense of identity, was the “intelligentsia.” This primarily intellectual element had evolved out of small circles of nobles in the middle of the nineteenth century discussing public issues to become the most politically involved part of educated society. The intelligentsia was generally characterized by opposition to the existing order in Russia and a strong desire to change it. Out of its radical wing emerged the revolutionary parties, and from the more moderate wing came the political reformers and liberal parties. One of the fundamental beliefs of the nineteenth-century intelligentsia was hostility to “the bourgeoisie,” an idea growing out of both noble contempt and West European socialist thought. This mentality persisted, despite the fact that by the early twentieth century the intelligentsia came from all legal classes and were in fact primarily middle class in social-economic terms; mostly they were professionals and white-collar employees of all types. Nonetheless, the ongoing negative image of “bourgeoisie” hampered development of a clear and positive middle-class identity and political movement. Indeed, the term was used as a pejorative in 1917 by both the industrial workers and radical intelligentsia leaders of the socialist parties.

In addition to these social class developments, many other changes were sweeping through Russia of the early twentieth century, consciously or unconsciously challenging the old order and preparing grounds for revolution. A rapid expansion of education by the early twentieth century led to both increased basic literacy and a rapid growth in the number of graduates from university and higher technical institutes. Education, at all levels, opened access to a wide range of information and ideas that directly or indirectly challenged traditional beliefs and social structures, introducing a powerful force for instability in the Russian Empire. Rapid urbanization uprooted people of all classes from established patterns and relationships and created new ones. People saw their world increasingly defined by the jobs they held and by new kinds of social, economic, professional, cultural, and other organizations to which they belonged. For the educated elites, major new directions in arts and literature not only confirmed a cultural flowering but also spoke to the sense of rapidly changing times. The emergence of a feminist movement, a proliferation of art galleries and museums, impressive new shopping arcades, and other features of a changing urban society reinforced that sense. Russia on the eve of war and revolution was a rapidly changing society, with all the attendant dislocations and anxieties. Little wonder that some writers

described it as a rapidly modernizing country of immense potential, while others saw a society hurtling toward disaster.

The revolutionary movement

The conjuncture of the development of the intelligentsia, the monarchy's refusal to share political power, and the social and economic problems of Russia produced organized revolutionary movements of exceptional persistence and influence. The most important early revolutionary movement, Populism (*Narodnichestvo*), grew out of the conditions of the middle of the nineteenth century and called for the overthrow of the autocracy and a social revolution that would distribute the land among the peasants. The Populists' problem was how to find a way to mobilize and organize the scattered peasant masses to make a revolution. This led some revolutionaries, organized as "The People's Will," to turn to terrorism. In 1881 they assassinated Alexander II. The result, however, was that the revolutionary movement was temporarily crushed, and the governments of Alexander III and then Nicholas II turned toward ever more reactionary policies and away from even the moderate reforms of Alexander II. The revolutionary intelligentsia in turn was forced to rethink revolutionary theory and practice. From this emerged the main revolutionary parties of twentieth-century Russia, the ones that played the key roles in 1917: the Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs) and the Social Democrats (SDs), the latter soon dividing into two major parties, the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks.

The SR Party organized in 1901 as a party stressing a broad class struggle of all toilers (peasants and urban workers) against exploiters (landowners, factory owners, bureaucrats, and middle-class elements). This helped them develop a following among urban industrial workers as well as among peasants. They gave special attention to the peasantry, however, with a demand for socialization of the land and its equal distribution among those who worked it. This guaranteed the SRs the support of the overwhelming mass of the population, the peasants (and thus of the soldiers in 1917). Beyond that they called for a variety of social, economic, and political reforms, including the abolition of monarchy and its replacement by a democratic republic. Indeed, their program was often summarized in the slogan "Land and Liberty," a slogan that figured prominently on banners in 1917. Two major problems, however, made it hard for the SRs to use their peasant support in a revolutionary situation such as 1917: the difficulty of effectively mobilizing widely dispersed peasants for political action, and the party's own loose organizational

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structure and disagreements on specifics of the general program. Indeed, in 1917 the party split into right, center, and left wings.

The rethinking of revolutionary tactics after 1881 led some Russian radicals to Marxism and the Social Democratic movement. Looking at the beginning of industrialization in Russia, G. V. Plekhanov worked out a theory explaining that Russia was becoming capitalist and thus was ripe for the beginning of a socialist movement that focused on the new industrial working class rather than the peasants. Vladimir Lenin carried this a step further in 1902 with *What Is to Be Done?*, in which he argued for forming a small party of professional revolutionaries from the intelligentsia and the workers. It would cultivate the necessary revolutionary consciousness among industrial workers, create a network of underground workers and party organizations, and provide leadership in the revolution. Simultaneously several Marxist groups, divided by ideology and strategy, developed in the Russian Empire. In 1903 one group, including Plekhanov, Lenin and Iulii Martov, organized the Second Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP or, more commonly, SDs). It opened in Belgium, but under police pressure moved on to London. There the organizers split. Lenin demanded a more restrictive party membership, while Martov argued for a broader (but still restricted) one. Lenin's faction became known as the Bolsheviks (Majorityites, based on a key vote at the congress), while Martov's in time became the Mensheviks (Minorityites).

In the years after 1903 the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks fought over many points of doctrine and became in fact separate parties, the two main Marxist parties, each claiming to be the true voice of the Social Democratic movement. Underlying the specific differences between the two parties were fundamentally different outlooks about party organization and relationship to the workers, which significantly affected behavior in 1917. Lenin proceeded to create a party emphasizing the importance of disciplined, tightly knit, trained professional revolutionaries drawn from both the intelligentsia and the workers themselves as the latter gained revolutionary consciousness under Bolshevik leadership, and in practice led firmly by Lenin himself. Martov, Plekhanov, and others slowly developed Menshevism as a somewhat more diffuse, often divided, movement. By 1917 Menshevism emerged as more genuinely democratic in spirit and with a moderate wing willing to cooperate with other political groups for reform. Personal animosities from the years of partisan ideological squabbling among the Social Democratic intelligentsia, especially the emigres, would carry over into the actions in 1917. Indeed, in 1917 as in 1903 and after, Lenin's hard line and domineering personality would polarize political life.