

## Tsar Nicholas II's Incompetence

The rising ideas of the Pan-Slav movement had led Russia to issue treaties of protection to Serbia. Nicholas wanted neither to abandon Serbia to the ultimatum of Austria-Hungary, nor to provoke a general war. In a series of letters exchanged with the German Kaiser (the so-called "Willy and Nicky correspondence") the two proclaimed their desire for peace, and each attempted to get the other to back down. Nicholas took concrete measures in this regard, demanding that Russia's mobilization be only against the Austrian border, in the hopes of preventing war with the German Empire. It proved too late for personal communications to determine the course of events. The Russians had no contingency plans for a partial mobilization, and on July 31, 1914, Nicholas, under political pressure from abroad, and military pressure at home, took the fateful step of confirming the order for a general mobilisation. As Germany and Austria-Hungary had mutual defence treaties in place, this led almost immediately to a German mobilization and declaration of war, and the outbreak of World War I.

The outbreak of war on August 1, 1914, found Russia grossly unprepared, yet an immediate attack was ordered against the German province of East Prussia. The Germans mobilized there with great efficiency and completely defeated the two Russian armies which had invaded. The Russian armies, however, later had considerable success against both the Austro-Hungarian armies and against the forces of the Ottoman Empire.

Gradually a war of attrition set in on the vast Eastern Front, where the Russians were facing the combined forces of the German and Austro-Hungarian Empires, and they suffered staggering losses. Nicholas, feeling that it was his duty, and that his personal presence would inspire his troops, decided to lead his army directly. He assumed the role of commander-in-chief after dismissing his uncle from that position, the highly respected and experienced Nikolai Nikolaevich (September 1915) following the loss of the Russian Kingdom of Poland.

His efforts to oversee the war left domestic issues essentially in the hands of Alexandra. As a German she was unpopular, and the Duma was constantly calling for political reforms. Political unrest continued throughout the war. Cut off from public opinion, Nicholas did not understand how suspicious the common people were of his wife, who was also the victim of destructive rumours about her dependence on Grigori Rasputin. Nicholas had refused to censor the press and wild rumours and accusations about Alexandra and Rasputin appeared almost daily.

All of the incompetence of Tsar Nicholas II had accumulated and would ultimately lead to the beginning of the Russian Revolution and his forced abdication of the throne.

# February Revolution

The First World War had a disastrous impact on the Russian economy. Food was in short supply and this led to rising prices. By January 1917 the price of commodities in Petrograd had increased six-fold. In an attempt to increase their wages, industrial workers went on strike and in Petrograd people took to the street demanding food. On 11th February 1917, a large crowd marched through the streets of Petrograd breaking shop windows and shouting anti-war slogans.

The situation deteriorated on 22nd February when the owners of the Putilov Iron Works locked out its workforce after they demanded higher wages. Led by Bolshevik agitators, the 20,000 workers took to the streets. The army was ordered to disperse the demonstrations but they were unwilling to do this and in some cases the soldiers joined the protestors in demanding an end to the war.

Other workers joined the demonstrations and by 27th February an estimated 200,000 workers were on strike. Nicholas II, who was at Army Headquarters in Mogilev, ordered the commander of the Petrograd garrison to suppress "all the disorders on the streets of the capital". The following day troops fired on demonstrators in different parts of the city. Others refused to obey the order and the Pavlovsk regiment mutinied. Others regiments followed and soldiers joined the striking workers in the streets.

On 26th February Nicholas II ordered the Duma to close down. Members refused and they continued to meet and discuss what they should do. Michael Rodzianko, President of the Duma, sent a telegram to the Tsar suggesting that he appoint a new government led by someone who had the confidence of the people. When the Tsar did not reply, the Duma nominated a Provisional Government headed by Prince George Lvov.

The High Command of the Russian Army now feared a violent revolution and on 28th February suggested that Nicholas II should abdicate in favor of a more popular member of the royal family. Attempts were now made to persuade Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovich to accept the throne. He refused and on the 1st March 1917, the Tsar abdicated leaving the Provisional Government in control of the country.

# October Revolution

On 8th July 1917, Alexander Kerensky became the new leader of the Provisional Government. Kerensky was still the most popular man in the government because of his political past. In the Duma he had been leader of the moderate socialists and had been seen as the champion of the working-class. However, Kerensky was unwilling to end the war. In fact, soon after taking office, he announced a new summer offensive. His commitment to continue the war upset other groups in Russia that were adamantly against the war.

Soldiers on the Eastern Front were dismayed at the news and regiments began to refuse to move to the front line. There was a rapid increase in the number of men deserting and by the autumn of 1917 an estimated 2 million men had unofficially left the army.

On 19th of July, Kerensky gave orders for the arrest of leading Bolsheviks who were campaigning against the war. This included Vladimir Lenin, Gregory Zinoviev, Lev Kamenev, Anatoli Lunacharsky, and Alexandra Kollontai. The Bolshevik headquarters at the Kshesinsky Palace was also occupied by government troops. After the dissention in the military had taken place, disgruntled generals planned on revolting and asked the Bolsheviks for help. Lenin instructed the Bolshevik army and commanders that the revolting generals were to be stopped at Petrograd, instead of help.

Under pressure from the nobility and industrialists, Alexander Kerensky was persuaded to take decisive action. On 22nd October he ordered the arrest of the Military Revolutionary Committee. The next day he closed down the Bolshevik newspapers and cut off the telephones to the Bolshevik headquarters.

Leon Trotsky, one of the leaders of the Bolsheviks now urged the overthrow of the Provisional Government. Lenin agreed and on the evening of the 24th of October 1917, orders were given for the Bolsheviks to begin to occupy the railway stations, the telephone exchange and the State Bank. The following day the Red Guards surrounded the Winter Palace. Inside was most of the country's Cabinet, although Kerensky had managed to escape from the city.

At 9 p.m. the Bolsheviks began to open fire on the palace. Little damage was done but the action persuaded most of those defending the building to surrender. The Red now entered the Winter Palace and arrested the Cabinet ministers.

On 26th October 1917, the All-Russian Congress of Soviets met and handed over power to the Soviet Council of People's Commissars. Vladimir Lenin was elected chairman and other appointments included Leon Trotsky for Foreign Affairs.

# Lenin's Economic Policy

The Bolshevik revolutionary takeover in October 1917 was followed by over two years of civil war in Russia between the new Communist regime (with its Red Army) and its enemies--the conservative military officers commanding the so-called White armies. The struggle saw much brutality and excesses on both sides with the peasants suffering most from extortionate demands of food supplies and recruits by both sides.

The repressive and dictatorial methods of the Bolshevik government had so alienated the mass of peasants and industrial working class elements that the erstwhile most loyal supporters of the regime, the sailors at the Kronstadt naval base, rebelled in March 1921 to the great embarrassment of senior Bolsheviks. Though the rebellion was mercilessly crushed, the regime was forced to moderate its ruthless impulses.

The New Economic Policy (NEP) was the result, a small concession to the capitalist and free market instincts of peasant and petty bourgeois alike. Moreover, victory in the civil war was assured by this stage, thus allowing a relaxation of the coercive methods symbolized by the War Communism of the previous two to three years.

The New Economic Plan (NEP) had specific goals for the country and for communism. They included, but were not limited to:

- Ease public resentment against the emergency measures of the civil war that took food forcefully from the peasants
- To regularize supply and production through a limited reintroduction of the market system (capitalism)
- To increase the "grass-roots" economy (economy led by the work and production of peasant farmers and factory workers) and to generate more money to industrialize Russia
- To lay the foundation for the transition to socialism at some unspecified time in the future

The New Economic Plan (NEP) was not to create the communism suggested by Marx in "The Communist Manifesto," but rather to strengthen the Russian economy to where it could be self-sufficient and strong enough to support the beginnings of a world wide communist revolution.

# Stalin's Rise to Power

After the October Revolution of 1917, Stalin, already a member of the central committee since 1912, entered the Soviet cabinet as people's commissar for nationalities and began to emerge as a leader of the new regime. During the civil war from 1918 to 1920 he played an important administrative role on the military fronts and in the capital. He was elected (1922) general secretary of the central committee of the party, enabling him to control the rank-and-file members and to build an apparatus loyal to him.

Stalin's significance in the revolutionary movement and his relation to Lenin have been subjects of great controversy. He was highly regarded by Lenin as an administrator but not as a theoretician or leader. Toward the end of his illness, which began in 1922, Lenin wrote a testament in which he strongly criticized Stalin's arbitrary conduct as general secretary and recommended that he be removed. However, he died before any action could be taken, and the testament was suppressed.

On Lenin's death, Stalin, Kamenev, and Grigori Zinoviev formed a triumvirate of successors allied against Trotsky, who was a strong contender to replace Lenin. After Trotsky was ousted (1925) as commissar of war, Stalin, now allied with Nikolai Bukharin, turned on Kamenev and Zinoviev. In a desperate attempt to counter Stalin's power, Zinoviev and Kamenev joined forces with Trotsky. Their efforts failed and they were forced to resign from the central committee of the Communist party. Stalin subsequently broke with Bukharin and engineered his fall from power.