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### Article

## Russian Revolution and the Fall of Tsarist Autocracy (1917)

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### Introduction

At the beginning of the 20th century Tsarist Russia was one of the great powers of Europe. However it was a great power that was universally seen to be backward in comparison with Britain, Germany and France. As late as 1905, there were no legal political parties and no centrally elected Parliament. The powers of the state were vested entirely in the hands of the autocratic but weak willed Tsar Nicholas II. While it was clear that Russia was gradually submitting to the influences of the West and moving towards a constitutional monarchy, the transition was a painfully slow one. This was no doubt a result of the low level of popular participation in the political order and the absence of a clear political identity. The towns had no tradition of political organization or self-government and the nobility was not a sufficiently cohesive class to force reforms from the throne. The bourgeoisie and the professional classes constituted but a small section of the population and were not an influential group. The peasantry which had little voice in the political system constituted 80 percent of Russia's population.

### Peasants and Agriculture

According to Orlando Figes, there existed in rural pre-revolutionary Russia a distinct peasant consciousness centred on two ideas: a belief that the land rightfully belonged to

those who tilled it and a desire for volia or liberty --- the freedom of the village from all external powers: the Tsarist state, the gentry and the Church --- and the peasants' right to rule themselves through the mir or the commune. These were the ideas that motivated the peasants to participate in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917-18. Despite the Emancipation of the Serfs in 1861 the peasants were to become extremely hostile to the Tsarist regime through the latter half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The terms of the Emancipation stipulated the payment of redemption dues to the state to compensate it for the lump sum paid to the landowners as remuneration in 1861. These redemption payments coupled with agricultural taxes and the allotment dues as payment for land transferred to them constituted a heavy financial burden on the peasant causing him to lose his land and fall into debt. The collection of redemption dues also imposed restrictions on labour mobility enforced by the mir preventing landless peasants from migrating to towns in search of work.

Rural discontent was compounded by the issue of the technological backwardness of agriculture which resulted in lower yields and retarded the growth of modern industry after 1861. Coupled with the rising pressure of the population on the available land, it created the problem of land hunger which was to manifest itself in the spontaneous land seizures of 1905 and 1917.

The effect of the overall backwardness of agriculture therefore was to produce a radicalized peasantry which responded to the calls to revolution and the creation of a weak industrial base which was not supported by a modernized agricultural sector.

### **The Revolutionary Working Class**

Much of the radicalism of the Russian peasantry would have been transferred into the class of the urban proletariat. Sheila Fitzpatrick observes the close connection that existed between the working class and the peasantry --- the typical worker-peasant was a labourer who sought employment in the urban factories during the off-season. Many permanent workers also retained land in the villages. As Orlando Figes notes, the peasants who migrated to towns were often unused to the harsh discipline of the factory and carried the resentment and frustration that results from dislocation. The conditions of work in the factories were miserable. According to Marc Ferro, little attention was paid to standards of

hygiene or safety and workers did not possess insurance. Wages were chronically low and most Russian workers had a 10 hour working day, excluding overtime.

The Tsarist administration was unsympathetic towards the workers and took few steps to meet their needs. It may be noted that most factories in Tsarist Russia were state owned or state run. This meant that the state was held responsible for the oppression of the workers in the factories. The Tsarist industrial sector was small but highly concentrated both geographically and in terms of the size of industrial plants. The effect of this was to breed solidarity amongst the workers. The Tsarist regime outlawed strikes and trade unions, stifling any legitimate means of expression of the workers' discontent. This naturally meant that strikes became politicized and ever more radical, especially when the state deployed troops to repress them. In the absence of trade unions and through growing discontent towards the regime, the workers increasingly began to turn towards the revolutionary intelligentsia for leadership.

### **The Revolutionary Tradition in Russia**

The Russian intelligentsia through the 19th century was largely socialist in its orientation. The dominant intellectual strain in the ideology of the intelligentsia was the category of socialist thought known as Populism. The Populists and Narodniks combined a repudiation of capitalist industrialization with an idealization of the Russian peasantry. They wished to protect the mir or the village commune which they believed to be an egalitarian institution and a possible path to socialism in Russia from the destructive impact of capitalism. The early 1870s saw a spontaneous Populist movement --- the 'going to the people' when thousands of students and members of the intelligentsia left the cities to visit the villages, partly with the hope of disseminating revolutionary propaganda. Although the movement was suppressed, it did succeed in familiarizing the masses with revolutionary thought. In 1881, a group of Populist terrorists assassinated Tsar Alexander II.

It was in the last two decades of the 19th century as Russia embarked upon its task of capitalist industrialization that the Marxists emerged as a distinct group repudiating utopian idealism, terrorist tactics and the peasant orientation of the Populists and emphasizing instead on the necessity of capitalist industrialization as a prelude to socialism. They asserted that the mir was already in a state of decline and that capitalist forces were already in evidence in Russia. They supported capitalist development drawing those who admired

the industrial urban world. The emphasis on the revolutionary role of the working class also made it popular amongst the radicalized urban proletariat.

In 1903, there was a split in the Russian Marxist movement as the Bolsheviks who emphasized on the circumvention of the stage of a bourgeois liberal democracy and the need for a full time core group of professional revolutionaries characterized by centralization, discipline and ideological unity distinguished itself from the Mensheviks who were more orthodox Marxists. While the Marxists both Bolshevik and Menshevik operated from outside Russia due to the repressive policies of the regime particularly in the aftermath of the 1905 revolution, their ideas had a direct impact on the Russian masses and in particular appealed to the increasingly militant working classes.

### **The 1905 Revolution**

The defeat of Russia in the ill-advised Russo-Japanese war in 1904-05 precipitated a revolution in 1905. Wartime shortages, rising prices, higher taxes and imminent defeat gave rise to a wave of discontent which manifested itself in the illegal Liberation movement led by professionals as well as members of public organizations such as the zemstvos and the nobility. A peaceful demonstration of St. Petersburg workers came under fire on 9 January sparking a revolution.

The Revolution saw a number of workers' strikes bringing industrial production to a standstill; peasant seizures of manorial lands, student demonstrations, unrest in the non-Russian regions and mutinies in the armed forces. At the forefront of the Revolution were the liberals who led the movement and negotiated on its behalf with the regime. The Revolution ultimately ended when the Tsarist authorities conceded the principle of a constitution and promised to create a national elected parliament, the Duma. This had the effect of dividing the liberals who withdrew from revolutionary activity to organize the new Octobrist and Kadet Parties. The regime took advantage of this to launch a fierce wave of repression in the towns and countryside as the liberals stood by and watched. The Russian nobility whose lands had been targeted by the peasants sided with the autocracy and ceased to exist as a distinct political force.

The regime ultimately succeeded in subduing the workers, peasants and soldiers who began to understand that the liberals were not the most reliable of revolutionary allies.

Despite the apparent failure of the Revolution of 1905, it was of great significance in the broader context of the narrative of the fall of Tsarism in Russia. For the first time the state witnessed the full force of the radicalized masses and realized how tenuous its grip over the country really was. This led the government to concede to the creation of the Duma and introduce the Stolypin Reforms by which the regime hoped to divide the peasantry and create a class of loyalist small peasant proprietors. It also had the effect of radicalizing the workers and peasants further and confirming them in their hostility towards the state, a condition of the repressive measures taken up after 1905.

Most importantly, the experience of 1905 created a new form of political organization - the Soviets. The Soviets emerged first in the industrial cities of Moscow and St. Petersburg where they functioned as a council of workers' representatives elected in the factories to act as a kind of emergency municipal government while the machinery of the state lay paralysed and coordinate the urban strike movement. The Soviets although they were dispersed towards the end of 1905 were to again play an important role in the events of 1917. The experience of Soviet activity was an important precedent to the workers and peasants of Russia in the time of the February Revolution as well as subsequently.

### **Russian Industrialization**

Alec Nove notes that the process of industrialization commenced a full century after the Industrial Revolution in Britain. Despite this, the Russian economy grew remarkably quickly after the industrialization became a part of official state policy. However industrial growth in Russia was hampered by the fact that it was mostly carried out under the auspices of the state. The share of foreign investors in the new industries was disproportionately large and private Russian investors contributed a negligible portion of the capital. The industrial capacity of the country was also highly limited in 1914 for industrialization was concentrated in a few major areas --- Moscow, St. Petersburg, Kiev, Odessa, Baku in the south and the Ukrainian part of the Russian territories were the main industrial centres. The rest of Russia remained largely rural and non-urbanized. The industrial sector also suffered from the problem of sectoral imbalance; engineering lagged behind the metallurgical, textile, fuel and food processing industries necessitating the import of industrial equipment from abroad. The consumer goods industry was also underdeveloped. Russian industrial weakness was a precondition for her lack of military power. The 20th century saw the advent of a new form of warfare which necessitated the gearing of the entire economy of a

warring nation to the cause of the war effort. The economic strength of a nation was therefore crucial for its victory.

### **The First World War**

When war broke out in 1914, initially there was a surge of popular patriotism. The workers' strike movement which had reached a fever pitch earlier in the year was called off. Many of the prominent socialist leaders openly voiced their support for the regime as nationalism overcame revolutionary sentiment. It was only Lenin and the Bolsheviks who took a 'defeatist stand' asserting that it was an imperialist war and that the best prospect for the workers was a Russian defeat which might provoke revolution. Predictably, the Bolsheviks as well as the other socialists who took an anti-war stance failed to garner popular support and were either arrested or voluntarily went into exile.

As in 1905 however, the popular mood quickly turned sour. The Russian army was extremely weak, being composed largely of untrained soldiers who were forcibly conscripted from amongst the peasantry and dispatched to the front. Their weapons were obsolete and the leadership, drawn predominantly from the aristocracy was weak and confused. Tsuyoshi Hasegawa observes the changes that the First World War brought about in the army; the officer corps increasingly came to be recruited from the urban middle class and opposition sentiments spread in the army. As the soldiers saw their generals fumbling and committing blunders, they began to lose respect for them. A series of defeats at the hands of the Germans lowered their morale. The peasants who had little experience of military discipline increasingly began to revolt against it.

News of the workers' strikes and peasant discontent also spread to the army, radicalizing the soldiers. The Russian soldiers who came to be influenced by revolutionary ideas during the First World War were to play an important role in the events of 1917 by colluding with the workers and defying orders to suppress uprisings. The war crippled the economy of the Tsarist state. Food supply fell drastically as the industrial strength of Russia was diverted to the war effort rather than the production of consumer goods. Prices of food and bread especially rose tremendously and increases in wages were only nominal. The unavailability of consumer goods also led to the breakdown of rural-urban exchange. The introduction of rationing in Petrograd met with strong opposition and the strike movement revived in 1916 as trade unions and factory committees led the workers against the regime.



The policies of the Tsar during the First World War were also responsible for the growing hostility towards the regime after the army began to suffer its first losses against Germany. The Tsar personally took command of the army and went to the war front in a misguided attempt to motivate the generals and the soldiers. This only led to the unpopularity of the Tsar himself who was now seen to be responsible for embroiling the country in a protracted and destructive war. This move on the part of the Tsar also weakened the control of the regime at the centre, making it easier for soldiers stationed in Petrograd and the Kronstadt sailors to rebel when the revolution of February 1917 broke out. The war also threw into sharp relief the weak personalities of the Tsar and Tsarina. The latter was widely mistrusted for her German origins. As political propaganda spread news of the Rasputin scandal, the popularity of the Tsar suffered another major blow. The February Revolution began on the 23rd of February 1917 with the strikes of women workers in the Vyborg district who demanded bread. Two days later, it had become a general strike. The refusal of the soldiers to open fire on the striking workers decided the course of events. By the end of February, the Tsar was forced to abdicate and with this the Tsarist regime came to an inglorious end. A Provisional Government consisting of the members of the Duma Committee was formed and officially seized power from the Tsar.

The fall of the Tsarist autocracy has been attributed by scholars such as E.H. Carr and Dominic Lieven to the internal contradictions of the Tsarist regime and the incompetence of the government itself. However other writers such as Marc Ferro emphasize the role of war as a transformative factor in the historical trajectory of the war. A. Gerschenkron has argued that Russia was by no means a failure in terms of industrialization in 1914 and that it was the World War that aborted its transition to developed and mature industrialization. This speaks against the argument that presents Russia's economic weakness as a case for the internal contradictions in the Tsarist state. The industrial backwardness of Russia was undoubtedly a major factor, but by no means the chief reason for the collapse of the Tsarist state. It was in the First World War that the contradictions of the system were exposed precipitating a crisis but it was equally, as we have seen the result of numerous other factors which interacted with each other to produce the Revolution of 1917.

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