

UNIT 7: THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTIONS

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INTRODUCTION: The historical significance of the Russian Revolution

The years between 1917 and 1945 was an unstable period marked by the Russian Revolutions (the February 1917 Rev and the October 1917 Rev), the post-war crisis in most of European countries, the spread of communism, the economic crisis of 1929 and the rise of totalitarian regimes (Fascism, Nazism, Stalinism) that led to the Second World War

Historians agree that the events that happened in Russia are one of the most relevant in contemporary History, as they created the first communist state in the world (the Soviet Union) that will have a great influence throughout the 20th century until its dissolution in 1991. .

1.- RUSSIA BEFORE THE REVOLUTION

The **Russian Revolution** was the result of several elements that characterised the early-20th century Russia. The effects of liberal revolutions that had affected most of Europe were almost inexistent in Russia, where the tsar ruled with an absolute power. Industrialisation was delayed and concentrated in some cities. Yet, the Russian empire was the largest continental empire in the world, and played an important role in the international scenario. Foreign affairs will have major consequences and will trigger the beginning of the end of the tsarist regime.

1.1.-The Tsarist regime



In the late 19th century, Russia was a vast empire ruled as an **absolute monarchy**. The tsar Nicholas II (1896-1917) held an autocratic regime where he had all the power and government. While most of Europe had been introducing liberal measures throughout the 19th century, in Russia was no Parliament nor elections. The tsar was supported by the Orthodox church, the army and an outdated bureaucracy. Political parties were forbidden and the secret police persecuted the opponents.

The **economy** was semi-feudal, where a wealthy minority of noblemen owned most of the agricultural land, which was worked by a peasant majority (80%). Their living conditions were very hard and most of them were illiterate. Rural areas were completely backward, tools were rudimentary and productivity was low. Industrialisation had been delayed in comparison to the other European countries, focused on heavy industry and railway construction, which led to the emergence of the proletariat in the cities. However, there was only a small bourgeoisie because industrial development was promoted by foreign investment and the state.

In the late 19th century, clandestine political parties were founded, opposing the tsar.

-The **Socialist Revolutionary Party**, led by Kerensky (→important role in the February Rev).

-Marxists formed the **Russian Socio-Democratic Workers Party**, that split in two groups:

-the **Mensheviks**, more moderate, who wanted to implement gradual reforms in a liberal regime that would make a gradual transition to socialism.

-the **Bolsheviks** were more radical. They rejected cooperation with the bourgeoisie and wanted to establish a **proletarian dictatorship**. They wanted an immediate revolution. **THEIR LEADER WAS LENIN**. **Anarchism** also spread through the use of violence and terrorism against important figures of the regime (such as the tsar **Alexander II**, killed in 1881 by an anarchist terrorist).

1.2.-The 1905 Revolution

In 1905 Russia was defeated by Japan in the **Russo-Japanese War**, in a time of a deep economic crisis. There were protests against the tsar's absolutist regime, they demanded improved living conditions and political reforms, but not an end of tsarism. However, they were violently repressed by the government (Bloody Sunday). The following months were marked by strikes and protests. Workers and soldiers formed revolutionary councils (*soviets*) in St. Petersburg. These popular assemblies later became very important in Russian history. The tsar finally made a few concessions, the main one was the creation of a Parliament (**Duma**) via universal male suffrage, but it was not really respected by the sovereign. He continued to govern without the Duma. The situation worsened and criticism against the tsar increased. A liberal party was founded after the 1905 revolution (*the Constitutional Democratic Party (kadets)*), that wanted to establish a parliamentary monarchy in Russia. It was mostly composed of middle-class people.

1.3.- The effect of WWI in Russia

The participation of **Russia** in the **First World War** worsened the economic and political problems that the empire was already experiencing. The involvement of Russia in war was a natural consequence of the interest in the Balkans, supporting the Serbians and hence confronting with the Austro- Hungarian empire. The war was quite unpopular and left many casualties (more than 2 million). **Discontent** and protest grew, as Russian soldiers did not have enough food or military equipment. Additionally, **military disasters** against the powerful German army followed, and frustrated soldiers led many **mutinies**. **Desertions** increased in the front, along with **strikes** in the cities, as civilians were suffering from **food shortage**, increase of prices and **starvation**. Protest were harshly repressed.

IN YOUR NOTEBOOK, ANSWER THE QUESTIONS:

- 1.- *What were the reasons for political unrest in tsarist Russia?*
- 2.- *List the signs of Russian economic weakness.*
- 3.- *Explain the difference between Mensheviks and Bolsheviks*
- 4.- *What were the causes and consequences of 1905 Revolution?*
- 5.- *List the effects of the participation of Russia in WWI.*

2.- THE 1917 REVOLUTIONS

2.1.-The February Revolution and the formation of the provisional government

A general strike took place in Russia between 23 and 27 February 1917 (8-12 March in western calendar). Peasants, army and bourgeoisie joined to create the **Petrograd Soviet** to fight against the tsarist power. The revolutionary slogan was "Peace, bread and land". A general strike broke out, and there were mutinies among the soldiers.

Nicholas II, who had lost the support of the army, was forced to abdicate on 2 March in favour of his brother Michael, who subsequently abdicated on 3 March. The **Russian Republic** was thus established and the **Duma** took the political control in Russia. A **provisional government** was formed, first led by prince Lvov and soon replaced by **KERENSKY**, a Menshevik. Workers, peasants and soldiers formed soviets all over the country. These councils had their own armed militias (the Red Guard) and soon fell under Bolshevik control. In fact, there were two powers in Russia: the Provisional Government and the soviets.

The **first liberal measures** of the Provisional Government were: freedom of speech was allowed, political parties were permitted, the redistribution of land was promised... but as Kerensky knew Russia needed the support of Western countries, the Russians went on fighting in WWI, hoping as well that Russian victories would restore morale.

The Bolsheviks, led by LENIN, who came back from his exile in Switzerland (helped by the Germans) opposed the provisional government and presented his program in the "**April theses**". Lenin promised "*peace, bread and land*", the withdrawal of WWI, and the nationalisation of lands. He asked to give "*all the power to the Soviets*", and to stop supporting the provisional government. Helped by TROTSKY, he prepared the future and definitive revolution. His popularity increased and soon controlled the main cities (St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kiev), establishing alternative government based on the soviets. There were many demonstrations against the Provisional Government in July and Kerensky responded with a harsh repression. Lenin's opposition to the Provisional Government resulted in another exile in July, this time to Finland and many Bolshevik leaders, like Trotsky, were imprisoned.

In September, a conservative military leader (general Kornilov) tried to achieve a coup d'état against the Provisional Government. Consequently, as the soviets were well organized, the Provisional Government decided to free the Bolsheviks that were in jail and gave them weapons to respond to the coup. Trotsky's Red Guard defended the city, increasing its popularity seen as the saviours. They kept the weapons that Kerensky had loaned them! The events in the summer 1917 showed the weakness of the Provisional Government and the strength of the Bolsheviks and the soviets.

2.2.-The **October** Revolution.

On 24th October (6th November in western calendar) Lenin, who had returned from his exile in Finland, joined the Petrograd Soviet. The next day the **Bolsheviks** stormed the **Winter Palace** of St. Petersburg, which was guarded by the Cossacks, Women's battalion, and cadets. Later, they took control of banks, stations, communications, with almost no resistance. The Provisional Government surrendered. It is considered the outbreak of the October Revolution. A new **Revolutionary government** was formed by the Bolshevik leaders: **Lenin, Stalin, Trotsky**, among others. Lenin became soon the leader of Russia.

ACTIVITIES:

6.- Research and write a short biography about Lenin.

7.- What were the main proposals of the so-called April thesis?

8.- Make a chart comparing causes /development/ consequences of February and October Revolutions.

3.- THE USRR.

3.1.- Lenin government (1917-21) and the civil war.

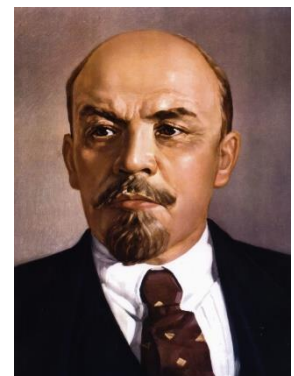
Under Lenin the Bolshevik government imposed some measures: the **Duma** was dissolved and the Red Army seized the control in Russia; censorship was imposed; right to strike was abolished; lands and banks were nationalised; as it had been promised, Russia retreated from War, signing in March 1918 the **Treaty of Brest-Litovsk** with Germany, where Russia accepted the independence of Finland, the Baltic republics, Poland, Ukraine, and Transcaucasia. The former Russian Empire became a federal state.

The **Cheka** (political police) was created in order to persecute dissidents and purge the soviets of possible Mensheviks. The government persecuted opponents, and executed the Imperial family (Romanov) in July 1918.

A communist dictatorship was established and all other political parties were banned.

In response to these events, a **civil war** broke out between:

- White Army (counter-revolutionaries, represented by liberals, conservatives and moderate socialists, supported by France and UK, that feared the spread of communism in Europe)
- the Bolshevik forces (the Red Army).



The civil war would last until from 1918 until 1921. Bolsheviks won the war, 8 million people lost their lives. **War Communism** was imposed to guarantee supplies to the cities and the war fronts. Industries and lands were nationalised, crops were seized to feed the army. Protests against these measures were harshly repressed

After the Civil War, the USSR, **Union of Soviet Socialist Republics** was proclaimed (1922), organised as a federal state governed by the Communist Party. The **Constitution of the USSR** was passed on 6 June 1923: only the **Communist Party of the Soviet Union** was legal; the legislative power was held by the **Supreme Soviet**; the executive power was held by the **Presidium and Council of People's Commissars**, who were in charge of controlling the Head of the State; the capital was fixed in **Moscow**; each republic of the **USSR** would have some autonomy. It soon began to expand by incorporating other republics.



In 1921, the Kronstadt sailors - who had been the **Bolsheviks** fiercest supporters - **mutinied**, demanding an end to War Communism. Trotsky put down the rebellion, but Lenin decided to replace War Communism by a **New Economic Policy (NEP)** which was in use until 1927: some economic freedom was given to the peasants; small companies could be private; some foreign investments were allowed; they allowed some international exchanges; the nationalised companies would be self-managed by the workers. At the same time, local nationalities who had been forced to follow a strict

Communist line were allowed to bring back their own language and customs. Churches, mosques and bazaars were re-opened. The improvement in the economy was significant, but some old Bolsheviks said Lenin had sold out to capitalism, and left the party.

QUESTIONS

9.- Why was there a civil war after the October Rev? Explain the main features of the two opponent sides.

10.- Explain how the Russian civil war was an international issue.

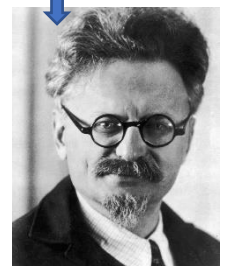
11.- Summarize the economic measures imposed during the civil war. Research about its results.

12.- What type of economic policy was established replacing War Communism? List its main economic and political consequences.

3.2.- **Stalin's** government (1924-1953)

Once **Lenin** died in 1924, he was succeeded by **Joseph Stalin**, who had fought with **Trotsky** to get the government. This struggle for power between Stalin, the secretary of the Communist Party, and Trotsky, the brilliant Commissar for War, was about what the Soviet Union would become: Trotsky believed in encouraging world revolution, whereas Stalin advocated Communism in one country' and said Russia had to establish its power before there was any attempt to spread revolution. Stalin used his position as secretary to put his supporters on the Central Committee of the party. Stalin became party leader in 1924, and Trotsky was dismissed, then exiled and murdered in 1940.

Stalin established a totalitarian regime until his death in 1953. It is the so-called **Stalinism**:



- **Politically**, there was a total centralisation of the state and all the enemies of **Stalin** were purged, even within the Communist party - 93 of the 139 Central Committee members were put to death. Some 20 million ordinary Russians were sent to the **gulag** forced labour camps system mostly in Siberia - where perhaps half of them died. The Christian Church and the Muslim religion were

forbidden. Ethnic groups were persecuted, and **Russification** - the acceptance of Russian language and customs - was enforced throughout the Soviet Union.

- In **economic** terms he implemented the **Five-year Plans**, which favoured the heavy industry (coal, oil, steel and electricity). They created the **Kolkhoz** (agrarian cooperatives) and the **Sovkhoz** (state-owned farms) for peasants. Private property was completely prohibited. The State should own the wealth and would lead its redistribution. These plans made the **USSR** a very important economic and military power. However, consumers goods industries (food, textiles) was deficient, and thousands of people died of starvation and cold. Recent research estimate that only in Ukraine, more than 4 million people died of famine in 1932-33.

The Soviet Union also gave **opportunities to women** - crèches were set up so they could also work.



92. Ефимов Б.
Капитан Страны Советов ведет нас от победы к победе! 1933

Women became doctors and scientists, as well as canal diggers and steel workers.

The use of **propaganda** presented Stalin as a caring father to his people.

His leadership was reinforced after the participation of USSR in WW2. The victory over Hitler and the freeing of Western Europe would increase Stalin's popularity and would lead to the spread of Communism from Poland to Yugoslavia (the so-called "iron curtain"), dividing Europe into two blocks.

The division will also affect other areas of the world (Korea, South Eastern Asia, South America).

The confrontation between USSR and USA and his allies will be maintained during the **Cold War** by Stalin successors after his death in 1954. The reforms introduced in the 80's will finally put an end to the USSR (dissolved in 1991) and therefore to Cold War.

ACTIVITIES

- 13.- List the main political and economic measures established under Stalin dictatorship.
- 14.- Research the influence of the Russian Revolution. Which other countries became communist?
- 15.- How long did the communist regime in Russia last?
- 16.- What was its conflict with the USA called?

INTERESTING LINKS:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/history/mwh/russia/>

<https://www.history.com/topics/russian-revolution>