

Russia, History, WWI - Steps Towards the Russian Revolution

The quotation, "'I shall maintain the principle of autocracy just as firmly and unflinchingly as it was preserved by my unforgettable dead father.'" (Nicholas II) In spite of the Czar's decrees and declarations, Russia, by the beginning of the 20th century, was overripe for revolution," is supported by political and socioeconomic conditions late monarchial Russia.

Nicholas II was the Czar of Russia from 1896-1917, and his rule was the brute of political disarray. An autocrat, Nicholas II had continued the divine-right monarchy held by the Romanovs for many generations. From the day Russia coronated Nicholas II as Emperor, problems arose with the people. As was tradition at coronations, the Emperor would leave presents for the peasants outside Moscow. The people madly rushed to grab the gifts, and they trampled thousands in the bedlam. As an autocrat, no other monarch in Europe claimed such large powers or stood so high above his subjects as Nicholas II. Autocracy was traditionally impatient and short-tempered. He wielded his power through his bureaucracy, which contained the most knowledgeable and skilled members of Russian high society. Like the Czar, the bureaucracy, or chinovniki, stood above the people and were always in danger of being poisoned by their own power.

When Sergei Witte acted as Russia's Minister of Finance from 1892 to 1903, attempted to solve Russia's "riddle of backwardness" in its governmental system. He is considered more of a forerunner of Stalin rather than a contemporary of Nicholas II. In 1900, Witte wrote a memorandum to Nicholas II, underscoring the necessity of industrialization in Russia. After the government implemented Witte's plan, Russia had an industrial upsurge. All of Russia, however, shared a deep-seated resentment of the sudden jump into an uncongenial way of life. Witte realized that Nicholas II was not meant to carry the burden of leading Russia to an industrial nation as a Great Power. Nicholas II's weakness was even obvious to himself, when he said, "I always give in and in the end am made the fool, without will, without character." At this time, the Czar did not lead, his ministers bickered amongst themselves, and cliques and special-interest groups interfered with the conduct of government. Nicholas II never took interest in public opinion, and seemed oblivious to what was happening around him. He was still convinced he could handle Russia himself.

By 1902, the peasants had revolted against Witte's industrialization movements, which were marked by a raise in taxes as Russia spent more than it ever had. Russia was struggling in the European and Asian markets, and with much domestic unrest, Nicholas II did not want foreign affairs muddled as well. Nicholas II dismissed Witte from the Minister of Finance in August 1903.

January 22, 1905, commonly known as Bloody Sunday, was a revolutionary event only because of what followed, not of what actually happened on that day. A group of workers and their families set out, with the backing of several officials, to

present a petition to the Czar. As they approached the Winter Palace, rifles sprayed them with bullets. This cruel act by the Czar shattered what smidgen of faith the workers and peasants still held for Nicholas II, and sparked the quickly-aborted "October Revolution." Peasants and workers revolted in an elemental and anarchic rebellion, ultimately turning a large-scale strike and bringing the government, economy, and all public services to a complete halt. By October 1905, the relations between the Czar and his subjects had come to a complete breakdown.

The October Manifesto, created in 1905, caused two things. First, it granted basic civil liberties to all, despite religion or nationality; it even legalized political parties. This concession was capped by the creation of an elected legislative body, the Imperial Duma. Second, it split the revolutionary front, reconciling the most cautious elements among the moderates, who had no heart for violence, with a government which promised to end the abuses of autocracy. This formed the political party called Octobrist, which lead the Duma.

Peter Stolypin was Chair of the Soviet of Ministers (1907-1911). Stolypin's goal was to seal the rift between the government and the public. His scheme was a moderate one, based largely on Witte's earlier suggestions. Its essence was the creation of a prosperous and conservative element in the countryside composed of "the strong and the sober." On the whole, Stolypin succeeded with some improvements in the civic status of the peasantry, but did not expunge the barriers separating it from "privilege Russia" (see explanation in section covering social aspects). A revolutionary assassinated Stolypin in 1911.

In 1916, Nicholas II and his wife, Alexandria, were so estranged from the ruling circle that a palace coup was freely advocated. Before this, Alexandria had brought Rasputin, a faith-healer, to live with them in the Winter Palace at Petrograd. Alexandria believed he was holy and could save her son, Alexander, from dying of hemophilia. Rasputin ate into the woodwork of the Russian aristocracy, and Alexandria made sure that the members of the Duma did not tarnish him, and that they met his requests. Two revolutionaries murdered Rasputin in December of 1916, after being poisoned, shot, and drowned. Many members of the Imperial family and army generals in the field believed that, "If it is a choice between the Czar and Russia, I'll take Russia." The British Ambassador to Russia, Sir George Buchanan, said to Nicholas II on January 12, 1917, "Your Majesty, if I may be permitted to say so, has but one safe course open to you, namely to break down the barrier that separates you from your people and to regain their confidence."

To this, Nicholas II replied, "Do you mean that I am to regain the confidence of my people or that they are to regain my confidence?" History took its course with the belligerent ravings of Nicholas II, and on March 7, 1917, a major demonstration ignited in Petrograd. After two days of heavy rioting, the soldiers called into to control the bunch and defend the regime gave up and joined in. On March 12, the

soldiers in Petrograd would not obey the Czar's orders, and in several days this held for the rest of Russia. On March 15, Czar Nicholas II abdicated his Empire to the emissaries of the Duma.

Socially, Russia was in just about as much of a mess as they were politically. In 1900, the Czar and his government had not decided how to treat its peasants. It kept all the peasants legally and socially segregated from the other social groups.

There were essentially two sides to Russian society at this time. On one side stood the peasants, the "dark people." On the other was "privilege Russia," including nobles, bureaucrats, the run of educated Russians, and even the merchants, who often had risen from the peasants. "Privilege Russia" look down upon the "dark people" with much contempt.

Chekhov described the peasants in a story that he published in 1897:

. . . these people lived worse than cattle, and it was terrible to be with them; they were coarse, dishonest, dirty, and drunken; they did not live at peace with one another but quarreled continually, because they feared, suspected, and despised each other . . . The most insignificant little clerk or official treated the peasants as though they were tramps, and addressed even the village elders and church wardens as inferiors, and as though he had a right to do so.

The peasants were the bulk of Russian citizenry, and acted as the soldiers of the 1917 revolution. While "privilege Russia," worked reluctantly to make themselves more western, the "dark people" had remained the same over the years.

Most were, until this time, politically unaware. The only Russia that they knew existed within a five-mile radius of their shanty. In the bottom of the peasant's heart, he or she carried a deep, imbedded bitterness and hatred for the "upper crust." All moves toward industrialization and westernization had been done without regard to him or even at his expense.

The peasant was simply apathetic and harbored a sense of personal worthlessness to his country. Ultimately, he rejected it, and was not a Russian, but identified himself as merely from his local area. As pathetic as the peasant's situation might be, it was finally them who started the revolution and them who slowly came politically aware. As visionaries believed in the power of the people, the peasants' resilience and drive encouraged them.

"Privilege Russia," although markedly better-off than the peasantry, was not having a picnic either. As much as it tried to westernize itself, it did not enjoy the equal citizenship of a European democracy. It was divided into state-supervised organizations: the nobility, the bureaucracy, the priesthood, the merchant community, and the "lower middle class." If a citizen had graduated from a school which was considered "higher education," the citizen became known as an "honorary citizen," which granted enough more privileges to appear somewhat like a western citizen.

The Balkans had ethnic groups numbering in double-digits, and they weren't worth the bones of a Pomeranian grenadier.

Greater Russia had groups numbering in triple-digits. There were hundreds of different ethnicities, languages, cultures, and many different religions, ranging from sects of Judeo-Christian to Islam to even Buddhism. Getting along with one another was not easy for these groups, and especially so under Russia's policy of forced assimilation.

Most Russians were dissatisfied with their country's "cultural barrier" between Russia and Europe. They had an inferiority complex, thinking of themselves as less civilized, backwards, "Asiatic," and in doing so created a lack of respect among Russia's European counterparts. During World War I, when the Allies bullied Russia to get back into the war after their first retreat, they seemed to think of Russia as "stupid cowards." Germany made Russia soon to sign a treaty with Germany, after their army – embarrassingly enough – ran away from strong German defenses. If losing a war isn't enough to give people of a nation an inferiority complex, nothing is. The Russian people unconsciously accepted the flood of western standards into Russia between 1890 and 1914. Not surprisingly, the Russians with their extra-long-sleeved shirts were complacent to this infuse of foreign culture, wanting to do anything to feel equal to Europeans.

The years of revolution between 1907 and 1914 were not particularly bad ones for the peasants. Stolypin's reformation plan had given more land to the peasants (who already owned most of the land in the first place). Though taxes had increased unexpectantly under Witte's system, Stolypin quickly lowered the rates and eased the tax burden on the peasants. Rural goods-cooperatives had expanded and even introduced technological advancements. The literacy rate had risen as the government put more emphasis on elementary education.

Even under the political restrictions imposed by Stolypin and his successors, with the creation of the Duma and political parties, people felt freer. Educational planners predicted that there would be schools for every child in Russia built by 1922. Russia's contacts with western Europe grew, as they even began contributing to the fashions in art, literature, and philosophy. Not looking at these years from a pessimistic, intellectually political point of view, these were Russia's version of our "roaring twenties."

By 1916, all of this had changed. Peasants were forced into the army as punishment for striking. Much of the army was made up of peasants, and hundreds of thousands of men died. No one believed the war was a noble cause to fight for. At the beginning of 1917, an estimated 1.5 million people deserted the Russian army. All of this amounted to one thing everyone knew for sure; they were in for another storm of revolution.

With the first aborted revolution attempt of 1905, the people were like half a splinter removed; there was a momentary relief, but later the pain returned with an infection. All of Russia knew something had to be done by 1917, and up until that point no one could decide upon what should take place.

Russia had been torn apart politically by a weak Emperor,
festering with indecision, and socio- economically with World
War I, class wars, and the increasing state of
industrialization's unrest and bread lines. It was a time for
change, and in 1917, Russia was clearly "overripe" for
revolution.