

The Russian Revolution

While our bloody war was going on in the trenches of France and Belgium, an even bloodier one was raging in Eastern Europe. There, Russian armies were facing the armies of Germany and Austria-Hungary. And, by 1916, Russia was close to total defeat. It also faced a complete economic and social collapse at home.

Why did the war go so badly for Russia? Basically, because it was not ready for war. Compared to Germany, it had few factories and railroads. Thus it could not supply its soldiers with enough guns and ammunition. It could not get food, fuel, and clothing to either its soldiers or its civilians. Often, Russian soldiers went into battle without helmets or gas masks. Sometimes they didn't even have rifles.

From 1914 to 1917, the Russian army lost more than nine million men. These were higher casualties than any other nation suffered. And this was one of the main reasons for the Russian Revolution of 1917.

By 1917 Russian soldiers and civilians were sick of the war. In cities and towns, many people were starving. The railroads had broken down and could not deliver food. There was not enough coal or wood for people to keep warm through the long Russian winter.

Many Russians blamed the government of Czar Nicholas for their troubles. The czar, or emperor, was one of the most powerful rulers in the world. He believed he had been chosen by God to rule Russia, and that no

human could oppose him. Although Russia had a kind of parliament called the Duma (DOO-mah), Nicholas paid very little attention to it. Many of the czar's ministers had little ability, and some were dishonest. But Nicholas could not see that Russia was close to revolution.

In March 1917, factory workers in Russia's capital, Petrograd (PEH-truh-grad), went on strike. Crowds formed in the center of the city shouting, "Down with the czar!" "Down with the war!" "We want bread!" The czar's ministers ordered his soldiers to fire on the crowds. Instead the soldiers joined the crowds against the czar. In a few days, Nicholas was thrown out of power.

The revolution of March 1917 was not a Communist revolution at first. It was an unplanned uprising by peasants, workers, and soldiers. Peasants seized many estates. Workers took over the mines and factories. Soldiers left the front lines and started walking home.

Russia was now ruled by leaders of the Duma. The new government gave Russians more freedom than they had ever had before. Free speech and the right to vote were given to all. But the Duma's leaders did not end the war against Germany. They were under pressure from Britain and the U.S. to continue fighting. Because of this, they lost the support of many Russians.

Soon a new political force emerged. This movement was made up of radical followers of Karl Marx, known as Bolsheviks (BOL-shuh-vicks). They demanded that Russia leave the war. They said that only one man was strong enough to lead Russia out of the war. That man was V.I. Lenin.

Lenin was a forceful leader who had been living in exile when World War I broke out. When the czar was

overthrown, Lenin decided to return to Russia. But to get from Switzerland to Russia meant getting through German lines. It was the German government who helped get Lenin back into Russia. The Germans hoped that he would use his influence to take Russia out of the war.

Once in Russia, Lenin began attacking the new government. He demanded immediate peace with Germany. Instead, the government foolishly launched a new attack against the Germans. Its forces were badly beaten. When riots and demonstrations broke out in Petrograd, Lenin and the Bolsheviks made their move.

On November 8, 1917, the Bolsheviks stormed the palace where the government was meeting. At gun point, they threw out the government leaders and took over.

Lenin's new government signed a peace treaty with Germany in March 1918. It also moved to crush all opposition. When free elections were held for an assembly, the Bolsheviks received less than a quarter of the votes. Lenin simply dissolved the assembly. Czar Nicholas and his family had been imprisoned since he gave up the throne in March 1917. One night the whole family was taken to a cellar by their Bolshevik guards and executed. Other opponents were imprisoned or executed.

The Bolsheviks organized their own Red army. It was soon involved in a long struggle with anti-Communist Russian forces. These forces, called the Whites, were aided by the U.S., Britain, France, and Japan. But the Whites were poorly organized and did not have the backing of the Russian people. By 1920 the White forces were largely wiped out. The Communists controlled all of Russia.

Questions

1. Why did the Russians do so badly in World War I?
2. What conditions existed in Russia in 1917?
3. How was the rule under the Duma different from that of Nicholas II?
4. Who were the Bolsheviks? What did they want?
5. Why did the Germans help Lenin return to Russia?
6. How was Lenin able to take control of the government?
7. What happened to Czar Nicholas II and his family?