

RUSSIA, 1894-1945

Problems Facing Tsar Nicholas II

When Tsar Nicholas II ascended to the throne in 1894, he inherited a vast empire fraught with problems. Russia was an agrarian society, with the majority of the population living as impoverished peasants. The country lagged behind Western Europe in industrial development. Nicholas II was an autocrat who believed in absolute monarchy, resisting calls for political reform. Ethnic minorities within the empire sought greater autonomy or independence. Additionally, the disastrous Russo-Japanese War of 1904-1905 highlighted the inefficiency and corruption within the Russian military and government, increasing public dissatisfaction.

The Revolution of 1905

The Revolution of 1905 was triggered by Bloody Sunday, when some 200 peaceful protesters led by Father Gapon were killed by the Tsar's troops. This event ignited widespread unrest. Workers went on strike, peasants seized land, and military mutinies occurred. The unrest forced Nicholas II to issue the October Manifesto, promising the creation of a Duma (parliament) and basic civil liberties. However, these reforms were limited, and the Tsar retained significant power, leading to continued disillusionment among the people.

The February Revolution

By 1917, Russia was exhausted by World War I, suffering from severe food shortages, military defeats, and a collapsing economy. In February 1917, mass protests erupted in Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg) over food rationing and general war weariness. Strikes by workers and mutinies by soldiers quickly escalated.

On 15 March, 1917, Nicholas abdicated, ending more than three centuries of Romanov rule. A Provisional Government, led initially by Prince Lvov and later by Alexander Kerensky, took control to manage the transition.

Provisional Government

The Provisional Government faced immense challenges from the outset. It decided to continue fighting in World War I, which was a deeply unpopular decision. It struggled with economic problems, food shortages, and demands for land reform from the peasants. Further, it had to contend with the rise of the Soviets, councils of workers' and soldiers' deputies that held significant power in many cities.

October Revolution

The October Revolution, also known as the Bolshevik Revolution, occurred in November 1917. The Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Lenin, capitalized on the discontent with the Provisional Government. On November 7, 1917, they seized key government buildings in Petrograd with little resistance. They promised "peace, land, and bread" to the war-weary, land-hungry, and hungry population. The Provisional Government was overthrown, and the Bolsheviks took control, establishing a government based on Soviet power.

Bolshevik State: 'War Communism'

To consolidate power and manage the economy during the Civil War, the Bolsheviks implemented so-called 'War Communism' (1918 to 1921). This policy involved the nationalization of industry, requisitioning of grain from peasants, and the abolition of private trade. The goal was to transform Russia into a socialist state, and also to supply the Red Army and maintain urban populations. However, 'War Communism' led to food shortages and widespread suffering, as it disrupted agricultural production and alienated the peasantry.

Civil War

The Russian Civil War (1917-1922) was a brutal conflict between the Bolsheviks (Reds) and their opponents, collectively known as the Whites, who included monarchists, liberals, and other anti-Bolshevik factions. The Reds, led by figures like Leon Trotsky, were better organized and controlled key strategic areas. The Whites were fragmented and lacked unity. The civil war caused devastation, with millions dying from combat, disease, and famine. By 1922, the Bolsheviks had emerged victorious, solidifying their control over Russia.

New Economic Policy

In response to the economic devastation caused by So-called 'War Communism' and the civil war, Lenin introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921. The NEP was a strategic retreat from full socialism, allowing for some private enterprise and small-scale private farming. Peasants were permitted to sell surplus produce on the open market, and small businesses could operate privately. This policy led to economic recovery and increased agricultural and industrial production. However, it also created tensions within the Communist Party, as some members viewed it as a betrayal of socialist principles.

Stalin Takes Power

After Lenin's death in 1924, a power struggle ensued within the Communist Party. Joseph Stalin gradually outmanoeuvred his rivals, including Leon Trotsky, to consolidate his power. By the late 1920s, Stalin had become the undisputed leader of the Soviet Union. He implemented policies to rapidly industrialize the country and eliminate political opposition. Stalin's leadership marked a significant shift from Lenin's policies, with a focus on centralizing power and transforming the Soviet Union into a major industrial power.

Purges and Terror

During the 1930s, Stalin initiated a series of purges to eliminate perceived threats to his authority. The Great Purge (1936-1938) saw the arrest, imprisonment, and execution of millions of people, including Communist Party members, military officers, and ordinary citizens. The secret police, known as the NKVD, conducted widespread arrests and used torture to extract confessions. Show trials were held, and many high-ranking officials were executed. The purges created a climate of fear and paranoia, severely weakening the Soviet military and society.

Collectivization

Stalin's collectivization policy aimed to consolidate individual peasant farms into large, state-controlled collective farms. This policy was intended to increase agricultural productivity and supply the growing industrial workforce. However, it faced significant resistance from peasants, leading to widespread violence and repression. The forced collectivization disrupted agricultural production, causing severe famine, particularly in Ukraine, where millions perished in the Holodomor. Despite the human cost, collectivization achieved some of its goals, increasing state control over agriculture.

5-Year Plans

To accelerate industrialization, Stalin introduced a series of Five-Year Plans, starting in 1928. These plans set ambitious targets for the production of steel, coal, machinery, and other industrial goods. The government directed resources towards heavy industry and infrastructure projects, such as the construction of factories, dams, and railways. While the plans led to significant industrial growth and transformed the Soviet Union into an industrial power, they also resulted in harsh working conditions, labour shortages, and widespread environmental degradation.

Impact of World War II

In June 1941, Nazi Germany launched Operation Barbarossa, a massive invasion of the Soviet Union. The initial phase of the invasion was catastrophic for the Soviets, with significant territorial losses and high casualties. However, the Soviets managed to regroup and launched a successful counteroffensive, culminating in the decisive Battle of Stalingrad (1942-1943). The Soviet Union played a crucial role in defeating Nazi Germany, but at a tremendous cost. An estimated 27 million Soviets died during the war, and vast areas of the country were devastated. Despite the immense suffering, the war solidified the Soviet Union's status as a global superpower and expanded its influence in Eastern Europe.