Notes on Russian Revolution

Russia at the Turn

By the turn of the twentieth century, Russian society had never been more divided, nor had a Russian tsar ever been so far estranged from his people. Tsar Nicholas II, who had come to power in 1894, had never shown leadership skills or a particular desire to rule, but with the death of his father, Alexander III, the Russian crown was thrust upon him. In person, Nicholas II was mild-mannered, even meek; lacking the personality of a leader, his rule was clumsy, and he appeared weak before the people. When it came to public opposition or resistance, he avoided direct involvement and simply ordered his security forces to get rid of any problem as they saw fit. This tactic inevitably resulted in heavy-handed measures by the police, which in turn caused greater resentment among the public.

Violence in 1905

The year 1905 brought the most extreme examples of Nicholas II’s perceived indifference, brutality, and weakness. On Sunday, January 9, a crowd of over 100,000 marched peacefully through the center of St. Petersburg. Eventually they assembled in Palace Square in front of the tsar’s Winter Palace and, unaware that the tsar was not in town that day, called for the tsar to appear so that they could present him with a petition.

A Century of Unrest

The police, who had just finished putting down a series of strikes by industrial workers, followed their standing orders to get rid of any problems. Their solution was to open fire on the crowd, which included women and children as well as church leaders. As the crowd scattered, police pursued them on horseback, continuing to fire on them. Many in the crowd were trampled to death in the ensuing panic. Estimates of the total death toll range from a few hundred to several thousand.

Rasputin
In the meantime, Nicholas’s own family became the subject of a different sort of crisis. His wife, Alexandra, had begun consulting with a mystic peasant named Grigory Rasputin in a desperate attempt to help her hemophilic son, Alexis. In time, the self-proclaimed monk Rasputin gained political influence over the tsar through his wife, while at the same time engaging in scandalous sexual escapades throughout the Russian capital. Rumors quickly spread that Rasputin had magical powers and that he had the entire royal family under some sort of spell.

World War I

It was in the midst of this scandal that Nicholas drew Russia into World War I in the summer of 1914. The war was a disaster for Russia: it caused inflation, plunged the country into a food shortage, and ultimately cost the lives of nearly 5 million Russian soldiers and civilians, as well as a series of humiliating military defeats.

Russian Revolution: Background

By 1917, most Russians had lost faith in the leadership ability of Czar Nicholas II. Government corruption was rampant, the Russian economy remained backward, and Nicholas repeatedly dissolved the Duma, the Russian parliament established after the 1905 revolution, when it opposed his will. However, the immediate cause of the February Revolution—the first phase of the Russian Revolution of 1917—was Russia’s disastrous involvement in World War I (1914-18). Militarily, imperial Russia was no match for industrialized Germany, and Russian casualties were greater than those sustained by any nation in any previous war. Meanwhile, the economy was hopelessly disrupted by the costly war effort, and moderates joined Russian radical elements in calling for the overthrow of the czar.

Did You Know?

After Czar Nicholas II and his family were executed by Bolshevik forces in July 1918, the killers hid the victims’ mutilated bodies. The remains were discovered and exhumed in the late 1970s near Yekaterinburg, Russia, and eventually identified through DNA testing.

February Revolution: 1917

The February Revolution
In March 1917 crowds rioted on the streets. The soldiers joined them. Then the members of the Duma joined the rebellion; they forced the Tsar to abdicate.

1 Weakness of Russia
Underlay everything (see weaknesses 1–7)

2 World War I
The First World War was the key factor.
The army was badly led and poorly equipped. Russian defeats at Tannenberg and Masurian Lakes – the Russians lost 200,000 men – lost the government the support of the army.
The war took 15 million men from the farms and trains had to be used for the war (so they could not bring food to the cities) so there were food shortages and food prices rose, all of which created anger and unrest in Petrograd.
The winter of 1916–17 was severe. Food shortages got worse – there was a famine in the cities.

3 Tsar’s Mistakes
The Tsar took personal command of the army – which did not help the war effort and meant he was blamed for the defeats.
He left the Tsarina in charge. She was incompetent (she let Rasputin run the government), and (because she was a German) rumours circulated that she was trying to help Germany to win.
By February 1917 the government was in chaos.
Finally, in the crisis, Nicholas went to pieces and failed to do anything (see Source A).

4 Army abandoned the Tsar
On 8 March 1917, there were riots in Petrograd about the food shortages and the war.
On 12 March the Army abandoned the Tsar – the soldiers mutinied and refused to put down the riots. The government lost control of the country.

5 Duma abandoned the Tsar
On 13 March members of the Duma went to Nicholas to tell him to abdicate.

Bolshevik Revolution: 1917

In the aftermath of the February Revolution, power was shared between the weak provisional government and the Petrograd Soviet. Then, on November 6 and 7, 1917 (or October 24 and 25 on the Julian calendar, which is why this event is also referred to as the October Revolution), leftist revolutionaries led by Bolshevik Party leader Vladimir Lenin launched a nearly bloodless coup d'état against the provisional government. The Bolsheviks and their allies occupied government buildings and other strategic locations in Petrograd, and soon formed a new government with Lenin as its head.

Lenin became the virtual dictator of the first Marxist state in the world. His government made peace with Germany, nationalized industry and distributed land, but beginning in 1918 had to fight a devastating civil war against anti-Bolshevik White Army forces. In 1920, the anti-Bolsheviks were defeated, and in 1922 the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was established.

- **Causes of the Russian Revolution**

- **Political**

  - Politically the Tsar’s rule was very weak. Russia fought a war with Japan in 1904-05. Small Asian Country Japan defeated the mighty European country Russia in the Russo-Japanese war. This lowered the international and domestic prestige of Russia.
  - The Tsars believed in the divine right theory of kingship. Tsar Nicholas II was autocratic in his administration. The people had many grievances. The members of zemstoves and Dumas wanted liberal reforms from the Tsar. But Tsar was not prepared to sanction any reforms. Meantime, the working class of St. Petersburg went on strike. The striking workers went on a procession to Tsar’s place to present a petition to redress their grievances. They were led by father Gapon. When the workers reached Tsar’s palace the guards fired on the unarmed crowd. This event is known as “Bloody Sunday” as it took place on a Sunday, 22nd January 1905. This is also known as 1905 Revolution. This event was indeed a prelude to the October Revolution of 1917.
The Tsarist court was under the evil influence of Rusputin. The Tsarina was strongly under his influence and at times the administration was affected by his influence. Hence, the nobles poisoned Rusputin to death.

**Economic**

The economic causes of the Russian Revolution largely originated in Russia’s slightly outdated economy. Russia’s agriculture was largely based on independent peasants. They did not own modern machinery. Russian agriculture suffered from cold climate. Russia’s agriculture season was only 4-6 months. The famine of 1891 had left many peasants in poverty. The rapid industrialization of Russia also resulted in urban overcrowding and poor conditions for urban industrial workers. Between 1890 and 1910, the population of the capital of St Petersburg increased from 1,033,600 to 1,905,600, with Moscow experiencing similar growth. In one 1904 survey, it was found that an average of sixteen people shared each apartment in St Petersburg, with six people per room. There was also no running water, and piles of human waste were a threat to the health of the workers. Hence, the workers in general were in a discontented situation.

**Rise of Socialist Party**

One of the most important events in the history of socialist movement was the formation in 1864 of the International Working Men’s Association or the First International. During the short period of its existence, the International exercised a tremendous influence on workers’ movements in Europe.

To unite the socialist parties in various countries into an international organisation, a Congress was held in Paris on 14th July 1889, the centenary of the French Revolution of 1789. The result of this Congress was what has come to be known as the Second International. The formation of the Second International marked a new stage in the history of socialism.

On the first of May 1890, millions of workers all over Europe and America struck work and held massive demonstrations. Since then the first of May is observed as the international working class day all over the world.

In Russia when the workers’ organizations were set up they were dominated by Marx’s ideas on socialism. In 1883, the Russian Social Democratic Party was formed by George Plekhanov, a follower of Marx. This party along with many other socialist groups was united into the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party in 1898. However, the party was soon split over questions of organization and policies. One group which was in a minority called the
Mensheviks [Russian it means minority]. The majority party was called as the Bolsheviks.

- The leader of the Bolsheviks was Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, popularly known as Lenin. He is regarded as one of the greatest leaders of the socialist movement after Marx and Engels. He devoted himself to the task of organizing the Bolshevik Party as an instrument for bringing about revolution. His name has become inseparable from the revolution of 1917. The Russian socialists, including Plekhanov and Lenin, had played an important part in the Second International.

- Besides the Menshevik and the Bolshevik parties, which were the political parties of industrial workers, there was the Socialist Revolutionary Party which voiced the demands of the peasantry.

News of the massacre spread quickly, and many saw it as a sign that the tsar no longer cared about his people. The incident earned Nicholas the title “Nicholas the Bloody” even though he did not in fact know about the violence until it was already over. An unorganized series of demonstrations, riots, strikes, and assorted episodes of violence erupted across Russia in the following months.

http://dailyhistory.org/How_Joseph_Stalin_became_the_leader_of_the_Soviet_Union

https://www.marxists.org/history/erol/ncm-7/lenin-socialism.htm
Extra notes on Bolshevik Revolution

Summary
In 1917 Russia was convulsed by two major seizures of power. The Tsars of Russia were replaced first in February by a pair of co-existing revolutionary governments, one mainly liberal, one socialist, but after a period of confusion a fringe socialist group lead by Lenin seized power in October and produced the world’s first socialist state. The February Revolution was the start of a genuine social revolution in Russia, but as the rival governments were seen to increasingly fail a power vacuum allowed Lenin and his Bolsheviks to stage their coup and seize power under the cloak of this revolution.

Decades of Dissent
Tensions between the autocratic Tsars of Russia and their subjects over a lack of representation, a lack of rights, disagreements over laws and new ideologies, had developed across the nineteenth century and into the early years of the twentieth.

The increasingly democratic west of Europe provided a strong contrast to Russia, which was increasingly viewed as backward. Strong socialist and liberal challenges had emerged to the government, and an abortive revolution in 1905 had produced a limited form of parliament called the Duma.

But the Tsar had disbanded the Duma when he saw fit, and his ineffective and corrupt government had grown massively unpopular, leading to even moderate elements in Russia seeking to challenge their long term ruler. Tsars had reacted with brutality and repression to extreme, but minority, forms of rebellion like assassination attempts, which had killed Tsars and Tsarist employees. At the same time Russia had developed a growing class of poor urban workers with strong socialist leanings to go with the mass of long term disenfranchised peasants. Indeed, strikes were so problematic that some had wondered aloud in 1914 whether the Tsar could risk mobilizing the army and sending it away from the strikers.

Even the democratically minded had been alienated and started agitating for change, and to educated Russians the Tsarist regime increasingly appeared like a horrific, incompetent, joke.

The Causes of the Russian Revolution in more depth

World War 1: The Catalyst
The Great War of 1914 to 1918 was to prove the death knell of the Tsarist regime.
After initial public fervour, alliance and support collapsed due to military failures. The Tsar took personal command, but all this meant was that he became closely associated with the disasters. The Russian infrastructure proved inadequate for Total War, leading to widespread food shortages, inflation and the collapse of the transport system, exacerbated by the failure of central government to manage anything. Despite this the Russian army remained largely intact, but without faith in the Tsar. Rasputin, a mystic who exerted a hold over the imperial family, changed the internal government to his whims before he was assassinated, further undermining the Tsar. One politician remarked “Is this stupidity or treason?”

The Duma, which had voted for its own suspension for the war in 1914, demanded a return in 1915 and the Tsar agreed. The Duma offered to aid the failing Tsarist government by forming a ‘Ministry of National Confidence’, but the Tsar refused. Then major parties in the Duma, including the Kadets, Octobrists, Nationalists and others, supported by the SRs, formed the ‘Progressive Bloc’ to try and pressurise the Tsar into acting. He again refused to listen. This was probably his realistic last chance to save his government.

The February Revolution

By 1917 Russia was now more divided that ever, with a government that clearly couldn’t cope and a war dragging on. Anger at the Tsar and his government led to massive multi-day strikes. As over two hundred thousand people protested in the capital Petrograd, and protests hit other cities, the Tsar ordered military force to break the strike. At first troops fired on protestors in Petrograd, but then they mutinied, joined them and armed them. The crowd then turned on the police. Leaders emerged on the streets, not from the professional revolutionaries, but from people finding sudden inspiration. Freed prisoners took looting to the next level, and mobs formed; people died, were mugged, were raped.

The largely liberal and elite Duma told the Tsar that only concessions from his government could stop the trouble, and the Tsar responded by dissolving the Duma.

This then selected members to form an emergency Provisional Government and, at the same time – February 28th - socialist minded leaders also began to form a rival government in the form of the St, Petersberg Soviet. The early executive of the Soviet was free of actual workers, but full of intellectuals who tried to assume control of the situation. Both the Soviet and the Provisional Government then agreed to work together in a system nicknamed ‘Dual Power / Dual Authority’.

In practice, the Provisionals had little choice but to agree as the soviets were in effective control of key facilities. The aim was to rule until a Constituent Assembly had created a new government structure. Support for the Tsar faded quickly, even though the Provisional Government was unelected and weak. Crucially, it had the support of the army and bureaucracy. The Soviet could have taken total power, but its non-Bolshevik leaders stopped, partly because they believed a capitalist, bourgeois government was needed before the socialist revolution was possible, partly because they feared a civil war, and partly because they doubted they could really control the mob.
At this stage the Tsar discovered the army would not support him – military leaders, having spoken to the Duma, asked the Tsar to quit – and abdicated on behalf of himself and his son. The new heir, Michael Romanov, refused the throne and three hundred years of Romanov family rule was ended. They would later be executed on mass. The revolution then spread across Russia, with mini Dumas and parallel soviets formed in major cities, the army and elsewhere to take control. There was little opposition. Overall, a couple of thousand people had died during the changeover. At this stage, the revolution had been pushed forward by former Tsarists - high ranking members of the military, Duma aristocrats and others - rather than by Russia’s group of professional revolutionaries.

Troubled Months
As the Provisional Government attempted to negotiate a way through the many different hopes for Russia, the war continued in the background. All but the Bolsheviks and Monarchists initially worked together in a period of shared joy, and decrees were passed reforming aspects of Russia. However, the issues of land and the war were side stepped, and it was these that would destroy the Provisional Government as its factions grew increasingly drawn to the left and right. In the country, and across Russia, central government collapsed and thousands of localized, ad hoc committees formed to govern. Chief among these were village / peasant bodies, based heavily on the old communes, which organised the seizure of land from the landowning nobles. Historians like Figes have described this situation not as just ‘dual power’, but as a ‘multitude of local power’.

When the anti-war soviets discovered the new Foreign Minister had kept the Tsar’s old war aims – partly because Russia was now dependent upon credit and loans from its allies to avoid bankruptcy - demonstrations forced a new, semi-socialist coalition government into creation. Old revolutionaries now returned to Russia, including one called Lenin, who soon dominated the Bolshevik faction. In his April Theses and elsewhere, Lenin called for the Bolsheviks to shun the Provisional Government and prepare for a new revolution, a view many colleagues openly disagreed with.

The first ‘All-Russian Congress of Soviets’ revealed that the socialists were deeply divided over how to proceed, and the Bolsheviks were in a minority.

The July Days
As the war continued the anti-war Bolsheviks found their support growing. On July 3-5th a confused armed uprising by soldiers and workers in the name of the Soviet failed. This was the ‘July Days’. Historians are divided over who was actually behind the revolt. Pipes has argued it was an attempted coup directed by Bolshevik high command, but Figes has presented a convincing account in his ‘A People’s Tragedy’ which argues that the uprising started when the Provisional Government tried to move a pro-Bolshevik unit of soldiers to the front. They rose up, people followed them, and low level Bolsheviks and anarchists pushed the rebellion along. The top level Bolsheviks like Lenin refused to either order the seizure of power, or even give the rebellion any direction or blessing, and the crowds milled aimlessly about when they could easily have taken power had someone pointed them in the right direction. Afterwards, the government
arrested major Bolsheviks, and Lenin fled the country, his reputation as a revolutionary weakened by his lack of readiness.

Shortly after Kerensky became Prime Minister of a new coalition which pulled both left and right as he tried to forge a middle path. Kerensky was notionally a socialist, but was in practice closer to the middle class and his presentation and style initially appealed to liberals and socialists alike. Kerensky attacked the Bolsheviks and called Lenin a German agent - Lenin was still in the pay of German forces - and the Bolsheviks were in serious disarray.

They could have been destroyed, and hundreds were arrested for treason, but other socialist factions defended them; the Bolsheviks would not be so kind when it was the other way round.

**The Right Intervenes?**

In August 1917 the long feared right wing coup appeared to be attempted by General Kornilov who, afraid the soviets would take power, tried to take it instead. However, historians believe that this ‘coup’ was much more complicated, and not really a coup at all. Kornilov did try and convince Kerensky to accept a programme of reforms which would have effectively placed Russia under a right wing dictatorship, but he proposed this on behalf of the Provisional Government to protect it against the Soviet, rather than to seize power for himself.

There then followed a catalogue of confusions, as a possibly mad intermediary between Kerensky and Kornilov gave the impression that Kerensky had offered dictatorial powers to Kornilov, while at the same time giving the impression to Kerensky that Kornilov was taking power alone.

Kerensky took the opportunity to accuse Kornilov of attempting a coup in order to rally support around him, and as the confusion continued Kornilov concluded that Kerensky was a Bolshevik prisoner and ordered troops forward to free him. When the troops arrived in Petrograd they realised nothing was happening and stopped. Kerensky ruined his standing with the right, who were fond of Kornilov, and was fatally weakened by appealing to the left, as he had agreed to the Petrograd Soviet forming a ‘Red Guard’ of 40,000 armed workers to prevent counter revolutionaries like Kornilov. The Soviet needed the Bolsheviks to do this, as they were the only ones who could command a mass of local soldiers, and were rehabilitated. People believed the Bolsheviks had stopped Kornilov.

Hundreds of thousand went on strike in protest at the lack of progress, radicalised once more by the attempted right wing coup. The Bolsheviks had now become a party with more support, even as their leaders argued over the right course of action, because they were almost the only ones left arguing for pure soviet power, and because the main socialist parties had been branded failures for their attempts to work with the government. The Bolshevik rallying cry of ‘peace, land and bread’ was popular. Lenin switched tactics and recognised peasant land seizures, promising a Bolshevik redistribution of land. Peasants now began to swing in behind the Bolsheviks and against the Provisional Government which, composed partly of land holders, was against the seizures. It’s important to stress the Bolsheviks were not supported purely for their policies, but because they seemed to be the soviet answer.
The October Revolution

The Bolsheviks, having persuaded the Petrograd Soviet to create a ‘Military Revolutionary Committee’ (MRC) to arm and organise, decided to seize power after Lenin was able to overrule the majority of party leaders who were against the attempt. But he didn’t set a date. He believed it had to be before elections to the Constituent Assembly gave Russia an elected government he might not be able to challenge, and before the All Russian Congress of Soviets met, so they could dominate it by already having power. Many thought power would come to them if they waited. As Bolshevik supporters travelled among soldiers to recruit them, it became apparent the MRC could call on major military support.

As the Bolsheviks delayed attempting their coup for more discussion, events elsewhere outpaced them when Kerensky’s government finally reacted – triggered by an article in a newspaper where leading Bolsheviks argued against a coup - and tried to arrest Bolshevik and MRC leaders and send Bolshevik army units to the frontlines. The troops rebelled, and the MRC occupied key buildings. The Provisional Government had few troops and these stayed largely neutral, while the Bolsheviks had Trotsky’s Red Guard and the army. Bolshevik leaders, hesitant to act, were forced into acting and hurriedly taking charge of the coup thanks to Lenin’s insistence. In one way, Lenin and the Bolshevik high command had little responsibility for the start of the coup, and Lenin – almost alone – had responsibility for the success at the end by driving the other Bolsheviks on.

The coup saw no great crowds like February.

Lenin then announced a seizure of power, and the Bolsheviks tried to influence the Second Congress of Soviets, but found themselves with a majority only after other socialist groups walked out in protest (although this, at least, tied up with Lenin’s plan).

It was enough for the Bolsheviks to use the Soviet as a cloak for their coup. Lenin now acted to secure control over the Bolshevik party, which was still divided into factions. As socialist groups across Russia seized power the government was arrested. Kerensky fled after his attempts to organise resistance was thwarted; he later taught history in the US. Lenin had effectively backed into power.

The Bolsheviks Consolidate

The now largely Bolshevik Congress of Soviets passed several of Lenin’s new decrees and created the Council of People’s Commissars, a new, Bolshevik government. Opponents believed the Bolshevik government would swiftly fail and prepared (or rather, failed to prepare) accordingly, and even then there were no military forces at this point to retake power. Elections to the Constituent Assembly were still held, and the Bolsheviks gained only a quarter of the vote and shut it down. The mass of peasants (and to some extent workers) didn’t care about the Assembly as they now had their local soviets. The Bolsheviks then dominated a coalition with the Left SR’s, but these non-Bolsheviks were quickly dropped. The Bolsheviks began to change the fabric of Russian, ending the war, introducing a new secret police, taking over the economy and abolishing much of the Tsarist state.

They began to secure power by a twofold policy, born out of improvisation and gut feeling: concentrate the high reaches of government in the hands of a small dictatorship, and use
terror to crush the opposition, while giving the low levels of government entirely over to the new worker’s soviets, soldier’s committees and peasant councils, allowing human hate and prejudice to lead these new bodies into smashing the old structures.

Peasants destroyed the gentry, soldiers destroyed the officers, workers destroyed the capitalists. The Red Terror of the next few years, desired by Lenin and guided by the Bolsheviks, was born out of this mass outpouring of hate, and proved popular. The Bolsheviks would then go about taking control of the lower levels.

Conclusion
After two revolutions in less than a year, Russia had been transformed from an autocratic empire, through a period of shifting chaos to a notionally socialist, Bolshevik state. Notionally, because the Bolsheviks had a loose grasp on government, with only slight control of the soviets outside major cities, and because quite how their practices were actually socialist is open to debate. As much as they later claimed, the Bolsheviks didn’t have a plan for how to govern Russia, and they were forced into making immediate, pragmatic decisions to hold onto power and keep Russia functioning.

It would take a civil war for Lenin and the Bolsheviks to consolidate their authoritarian power, but their state would be established as the USSR and, following Lenin’s death, taken over by the even more dictatorial and bloodthirsty Stalin.

Socialist revolutionaries across Europe would take heart from Russia’s apparent success and agitate further, while much of the world looked at Russia with a mixture of fear and apprehension.