**1917 Russian Revolution**

The 1917 Russian Revolution was not, as many people suppose, one well organized event in which Tsar Nicholas II was overthrown and Lenin and the Bolsheviks took power. It was a series of events that took place during 1917, which entailed two separate revolutions in February and October (with a great deal of political wranglings in between), and which eventually plunged the country into Civil War before leading to the founding of the Communist State.

**Growing Unrest**

The first major event of the Russian Revolution was the February Revolution, which was a chaotic affair and the culmination of over a century of civil and military unrest. The causes of this unrest of the common people towards the Tsar and aristocratic landowners are too many and complicated to neatly summarize, but key factors to consider were ongoing resentment at the cruel treatment of peasants by patricians, poor working conditions experienced by city workers in the fledgling industrial economy and a growing sense of political and social awareness of the lower orders in general (democratic ideas were reaching Russia from the West and being touted by political activists). Dissatisfaction of the proletarian lot was further compounded by food shortages and military failures. In 1905 Russia experienced humiliating losses in the Russo-Japanese war and, during a demonstration against the war in the same year, Tsarist troops fired upon an unarmed crowd - further dividing Nicholas II from his people. Widespread strikes, riots and the famous mutiny on the Battleship Potemkin ensued.

Such was the climate in 1905 in fact that Tsar Nicholas saw fit, against his will, to cede the people their wishes. In his October Manifesto, Nicholas created Russia's first constitution and the State Duma, an elected parliamentary body. However Nicholas's belief in his divine right to rule Russia meant that he spent much of the following years fighting to undermine or strip the Duma of its powers and to retain as much autocracy as possible. (Modern historians might note that Russian rulers haven't come a long way in the last hundred years!).

When Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated by political activists in Serbia in 1914, the [Austro-Hungarian empire](http://www.local-life.com/vienna) declared war on its neighbors. Serbia turned to Russia for help. Tsar Nicholas II saw a chance to galvanize his people against a common enemy, and to atone for the humiliations suffered in the Russo-Japanese war. It didn't quite work out however...



**World War I**

In many ways Russia's disastrous participation in World War I was the final blow to Tsarist rule. In the very first engagement with the Germans (who had sided with the Austro-Hungarian Empire), the Battle of Tannenberg, the Russian army was comprehensively beaten suffering 120,000 casualties to Germany's 20,000. A continuing series of losses and setbacks meant that Nicholas left St. Petersburg in the autumn of 1915 to take personal control of the army. By this time Russia was sending conscripts and untrained troops to the front, with little or no equipment and fighting in an almost continual retreat. In 1916 morale reached an all time low as the pressure of waging the war fell hardest on proletarian families, whose sons were being slaughtered at the front and who severe suffered food and fuel shortages at home. The Tsar and the Imperial regime took the blame as civil unrest heated up to boiling point.

**The February Revolution (1917)**

On 23rd February 1917 the International Women's Day Festival in St. Petersburg turned into a city-wide demonstration, as exasperated women workers left factories to protest against food shortages. Men soon joined them, and on the following day - encouraged by political and social activists - the crowds had swelled and virtually every industry, shop and enterprise had ceased to function as almost the entire populace went on strike.

Nicholas ordered the police and military to intervene, however the military was no longer loyal to the Tsar and many mutinied or joined the people in demonstrations. Fights broke out and the whole city was in chaos. On October 28th over 80,000 troops mutinied from the army and looting and rioting was widespread.

Faced with this untenable situation Tsar Nicholas abdicated his throne, handing power to his brother Michael. However Michael would not accept leadership unless he was elected by the Duma. He resigned the following day, leaving Russia without a head of state.

**The Provisional Government**

After the abdication of the Romanovs a Provisional Government was quickly formed by leading members of the Duma and recognized internationally as Russia's legal government. It was to rule Russia until elections could be held. However it's power was by no means absolute or stable. The more radical Petrograd Soviet organization was a trade union of workers and soldiers that wielded enormous influence. It favored full-scale Socialism over more moderate democratic reforms generally favored by members of the Provisional Government.

After centuries of Imperial rule Russia was consumed with political fervor, but the many different factions, all touting different ideas, meant that political stability was still a long way off directly after February Revolution.

**Lenin Returns to Russia**

One person keen to take advantage of the chaotic state of affairs in [St. Petersburg](http://www.local-life.com/st-petersburg) was Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov - aka Lenin. Lenin had spent most of the 20th Century travelling and working and campaigning in Europe - partly out of fear for his own safety, as he was known Socialist and enemy of the Tsarist regime. However with the Tsar under arrest and Russian politics in chaos, Lenin saw the opportunity to lead his party, the Bolsheviks, to power. From his home in Switzerland he negotiated a return to Russia with the help of German authorities. (As a proponent of withdrawing Russia from the Great War, the Germans were willing to facilitate Lenin's passage back via a 'sealed train'.)

Lenin's return in April of 1917 was greeted by the Russian populace, as well as by many leading political figures, with great rapture and applause. However, far from uniting the fractious parties, he immediately condemned the policies and ideologies of both the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet. In his April Theses, published in the Bolshevik newspaper Pravda, he advocated non-co-operation with the liberals (ie. non-hardline Communists) and an immediate end to the war.

At first his uncompromising stance served to isolate Lenin and the Bolsheviks, however with powerful slogans like 'Peace, land and bread,' Lenin begin to win the hearts of the Russian people - who were increasingly unable to stomach war and poverty.

**Summer of 1917**

During the summer of 1917 Lenin made several attempts to invoke another revolution the likes of which had taken place in February, with the aim of overthrowing the Provisional Government. When the Machine Gun Regiment refused to leave Petrograd (as St. Petersburg was then known) for the frontline Lenin sought to maneuver them instead into making a putsch. However Kerensky, arguably the most important figure of the time - a member of both the Provisional Government and Petrograd Soviet - adeptly thwarted the coup. Experienced troops arrived in the city to quell any dissidents and the Bolsheviks were accused of being in collusion with the Germans. Many were arrested whilst Lenin escaped to Finland.

Despite this PR disaster Lenin continued plotting and scheming. Meanwhile Kerensky suffered his own political setbacks and even had to appeal to the Bolsheviks for military aid when he feared his Minister of War, Kornilov, was aiming for a military dictatorship. By autumn the Bolsheviks were climbing into the ascendency, winning majority votes within the Petrograd and [Moscow](http://www.local-life.com/moscow) Soviets. Leon Trotsky was elected as president of the former.

**The October Revolution**

(Nb. By the Julian Calendar used in Russia at the time, the revolution took part in November 1917, and is therefore often referred to as the November Revolution)

With Russian politics still in a state of constant flux Lenin realized that now was the time to capitalize on his party's popularity. He planned a coup d’état that would overthrow the increasingly ineffective Provisional Government and replace them with the Bolsheviks. On October 10th he held a famous meeting with twelve party leaders, and tried to persuade them that a revolution was required. Despite receiving the backing of only 10 of them plotting went ahead.

October 24th was the date decided upon, and on that day troops loyal to the Bolsheviks took up crucial positions in the city, such as the main telephone and telegraph offices, banks, railroad stations, post offices, and major bridges. Guards commissioned by the Provisional Government, who had got wind of the plot, fled or surrendered without a fight. By the 25th October every key building in St. Petersburg was under Bolshevik control, except the [Winter Palace](http://www.local-life.com/st-petersburg/articles/hermitage) where Kerensky and the other Ministers were holed up with a small guard.

At 0900 of that day Kerensky fled the Palace by car, never to return to Russia. On the 26th the Palace was taken with barely a shot fired, and Lenin's October Revolution had been achieved with the bare minimum of drama or bloodshed.

**Aftermath and Consequences**

Despite being allowed to seize power so easily Lenin soon discovered that his support was far from absolute. His Peace Policy with the Germans was particularly unpopular as it ceded large amounts of Russian territory. Shortly after the October Revolution, the Russian Civil War broke out between the 'Reds' (Communists) and the 'Whites' (Nationalists, Conservatives, Imperialists and other anti-Bolshevik groups). After a bloody four-year struggle Lenin and the Reds won, establishing the Soviet Union in 1922, at an estimated cost of 15 million lives and billions of rubles. In 1923 [Lenin](http://www.local-life.com/moscow/culture/57-Red_Square) died and Stalin took over the Communist Party, which continued to rule Russia until 1991 when the USSR was dissolved.