



What were the causes of the Russian Revolution?

Objectives: Describe the causes of the Russian Revolution

Introduction

Directions: Read the letter below and answer the questions that follow.

Letter to Russian War Minister Alexander Kerensky from soldiers fighting in WWI, August 18th, 1917.

Mr. War Minister!

We, soldiers from various regiments[...]ask you to end the war and its bloodshed at any cost. If this is not done, then believe us when we say that we will take our weapons and head out for our own hearths [homes] to save our fathers, mothers, wives, and children from death by starvation (which is nigh [near]). And if we cannot save them, then we'd rather die with them in our native lands than be killed, poisoned, or frozen to death somewhere and cast into the earth like a dog.

Remember that all your threats about the death penalty and discipline and the eloquent words of orators will cease to have any effect on us then-- it will be too late. You know we are all tired, both at the front and in the rear, and we cannot endure another autumn and winter, nor do we have any wish to.

For a second time we ask you, Mr. War Minister, put an end to the slaughter. Only by doing this can you keep the enemy from penetrating deep inside Russia and save us both from this invasion and from starvation.

- Soldiers

Source: *Voices of Revolution, 1917*. Mark D. Steinberg. p. 218. <https://books.google.com/books?id=aFxJqbQSd7MC&lpg=PP1&dq=voices%20of%20revolution&pg=PP1#v=onepage&q=voices%20of%20revolution&f=false>

1. Who wrote this?	2. Who was the audience?	3. When was this letter written? What was happening at that time?	4. Why was this letter written?
4. Based on the letter above, what problems existed in Russia in 1917?			

What was the Russian Revolution?



Emperor Nicholas II

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The Russian Revolution of 1917, was actually two revolutions, one in February, and one in October of 1917. At the time, Russia used a different calendar than we use today, so they call these revolutions the March Revolution and November Revolution because their calendar was thirteen days ahead of what is commonly used today. The November Revolution is also referred to as the Bolshevik Revolution.

Before the Russian Revolution, the country was ruled by a king, called a **czar** (sometimes spelled tsar), named Nicholas II. There was discontent [dissatisfaction] in Russia because the government was corrupt and ineffective, there was widespread poverty in the country, there was a scarcity of food, and the Russians suffered massive losses in World War I.

As a result, in February of 1917 (The March Revolution), Czar Nicholas II was forced to abdicate [give up the throne] and power was given to a group of elected officials called the Duma. The Duma ruled until October, when it was replaced by the events of the November Revolution.

Led by a man named Vladimir Lenin, a group of Communists named the Bolsheviks took control of the Russian government in a bloodless coup [a forced overthrow of the government in which no one was killed] called the November (or Bolshevik) Revolution. The Bolsheviks gained support from the peasants, urban workers, and soldiers by promising “peace, land, and bread.”

The Bolsheviks signed a peace agreement with Germany, taking Russia out of WWI. After winning a civil war that lasted from 1917 to 1922, the Bolsheviks set about transforming Russia into the world’s first **Communist** nation. They renamed Russia the **Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)**, also known as the Soviet Union. A soviet was a local ruling council elected by workers.

Source: Adapted from *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, s. v. "Russian Revolution of 1917", accessed January 07, 2016, <http://www.britannica.com/event/Russian-Revolution-of-1917>.



Vladimir Lenin, leader of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917
speaking to troops in 1920.

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1. Where and when did the Russian Revolution took place?

2. What caused the Russian Revolution?

3. What were the effects of the Russian Revolution?

“Dear Minister Kerensky,”

Causes of the Russian Revolution Letter Writing Activity

The letter in the introduction of this lesson was written by Russian soldiers to the War Minister, and later Minister-Chairman of Russia, Alexander Kerensky. Kerensky was the leader of the provisional government in Russia between the March and November Revolutions until he was overthrown by Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

Directions:

- 1. Examine the following documents on Russia in 1917 that demonstrate the causes of the Russian Revolution and answer the questions that accompany them.**
- 2. Then, write Minister Kerensky a letter from the perspective of a working-class Russian detailing the problems you see in the country and what you'd like him to do about them. Use evidence from the documents to support your claim.**



Minister Alexander Kerensky

[image](#) is courtesy of wikimedia commons and is in the public domain

Cause #1: The Peasants' Lives

In 1861, Czar Alexander II issued the **Emancipation Manifesto**, which was a document that freed all of the 23 million serfs in Russia. The newly freed serfs had no money to buy land and most of them were forced to work in poor conditions with little pay without their most basic needs being met. By 1900, around 85 percent of the Russian people lived in the countryside and earned their living from agriculture. These peasants lived in extreme poverty and became disgruntled with the government and the upper class who had money and owned the land.

In the summer of 1876, Praskovia Ivanovskaia and her friend Galina Cheriavskaia went to work as agricultural laborers. The following are sections of Praskovia Ivaovskaia's recollection of her time:



Group of Russian peasants posed at an outdoor table
Source: In courtesy of Wikimedia Commons and is in the public domain

“At four in the morning, as the sun's rays were just beginning to spill over the steppe, the overseer would wake us, kicking the legs of those who wouldn't get up immediately.... In the morning, we froze from the bitterly cold dew, which drenched our clothing up to the waist. Staggering along, still half asleep, we worked as automatically as robots, gradually warming up a bit.”

“At ten, we returned to camp for breakfast, which lasted around half an hour. Despite the camp hubbub, some people preferred to nap instead of eating. Our food was of rather poor quality - very plain and unappetizing. In the morning, they cooked us a watery gruel made from wheat and water with a dose of salt, or buckwheat dumplings as big as cobblestones - one or two of these would satisfy the hunger of even the greatest glutton. The meal was poured into a wooden trough, from which you'd pull the dumplings with long, pointed splinters. We got the same modest fare for lunch and dinner.”

“After our brief breakfast, we returned to work. As the day wore on, the heat became so intense that you wanted to take shelter in any available patch of shade. The sun was so strong that the backs of most of the newly arrived vagabonds were practically covered with swollen blisters; later, as their skin toughened up, the burns went away.”

“During the busy season, there were no set limits to the work day: if the steward wished, it could last for sixteen hours or more, with only an hour off for lunch...”

“In the evening, after the sun had set, we returned to camp....“Frequently our evening talks ended with the peasants saying: "That's our fate - so it's been written", or, "We're born - we'll die."

“In fact, we were rarely able to talk at all: after the day's work, our limbs shrieked with weariness, our

exhausted bodies demanded rest and peace. “

1. How long was the peasants' work day?	2. How did the working conditions add to peasant unrest before the Russian Revolution?

Cause #2: Working Conditions and Bloody Sunday (January 22, 1905)

At the beginning of the 20th century the Russian industrial employee worked on average an 11 hour day (10 hours on Saturday). Conditions in the factories were extremely harsh and little concern was shown for the workers' health and safety. Attempts by workers to form trade unions were resisted by the factory owners, and in 1903, a priest named Father George Gapon, formed the Assembly of Russian Workers. Within a year it had over 9,000 members.

1904 was a bad year for Russian workers. Prices of essential goods rose so quickly that real wages declined by 20 per cent. When four members of the Assembly of Russian Workers were dismissed at the Putilov Iron Works, Gapon called for industrial action. Over the next few days, over 110,000 workers in St. Petersburg went out on strike.



Painting commemorating Bloody Sunday created before 1917.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Vladimir_kozlovsky.jpg

In an attempt to settle the dispute, George Gapon decided to make a personal appeal to Czar Nicholas II. He drew up a petition outlining the workers' suffering and demands. This included calling for a reduction in the working day to eight hours, an increase in wages and an improvement in working conditions.

Over 150,000 people signed the petition and on January 22, 1905, Gapon led a large procession of workers to the Winter Palace in order to present the petition to Nicholas II. When the procession of workers reached the Winter Palace, it was attacked by the police and the Cossacks [Russian Soldiers]. Over 100 workers were killed and some 300 wounded. The incident became known as Bloody Sunday.

Bloody Sunday sparked waves of strikes and violence across Russia in support of worker's rights and against the Czar. The violence following Bloody Sunday became known as the Revolution of 1905. In response, Czar Nicholas II reluctantly promised more freedom and approved of the creation of the Duma, the first parliament in Russia. Nicholas II dissolved the Duma in ten weeks and many of the problems plaguing Russian workers continued.

3. What types of poor working conditions inspired the industry workers to approach the Winter Palace on January 22, 1905?	4. What were the worker's demands?	5. What would have been some of your thoughts if you were with the workers who were being killed by the Czar's soldiers at the Winter Palace?

Cause #3: Corruption in the Czar's Family: Rasputin (1872- 1916)



A colored photograph of Rasputin in 1916.
Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rasputin_myth

Born a peasant in Siberia, Grigori Rasputin became a religious teacher, although he was never ordained as a priest. He became close with czar's family because they believed he had mysterious powers that relieved their son's hemophilia, a disease that prevents blood from clotting and causes massive bleeding from even slight injuries.

It was rumored that Czarina Alexandra, who was put in charge of the Czar's responsibilities when he went to command troops during WWI, was heavily under Rasputin's control. In December 1916, a small group of young aristocrats who feared that Rasputin was taking control of the government plotted his assassination. They lured him to a mansion and fed him poisoned cakes. The poison apparently had no effect on Rasputin's extraordinary strength. The conspirators then shot him several times. Assuming he was finally dead, they threw him into the Neva River. When his body was discovered three days later, doctors confirmed the cause of his death- drowning.

Rasputin's death threw the Czarina into shock. His prediction haunted her: "If I die or you desert me, in six months you will lose your son and your throne."

The specifics behind Rasputin's death are now more a legend than fact. Many of the facts have been discredited through historical investigation. Rasputin's supposed influence over the Czar's family showed that the government was corrupt and added to the lower class's distrust for the family.



Russian political cartoon showing Rasputin, Czar Nicholas II and his wife Alexandra.

Source: <http://www.edu.ru/docs/edu/bib/970202/ed0703060101-entrance>

6. Rasputin had influence over government decisions when he was close to the Czar's family. How does this support the claim that the government was corrupt?

Cause #4: Czar Nicholas II's Military Woes



Political cartoon that depicts Japan beating Russia in the Russo-Japanese War published in the Brooklyn Eagle in 1904.

Source: <http://www.indiana.edu/~ja1915/ww.html>

Popular support for a country's leader has always depended largely on their success as a military leader. Czar Nicholas II experienced several disappointments which turned the peasants and workers against him. The Russo-Japanese War and World War I showed the Czar's weakness and paved the way for revolution.

In the late 1800s, Russia and Japan were imperialist powers. Both competed for control of Korea and Manchuria. The two nations signed a series of agreements over the territories, but Russia broke them. In retaliation, Japan attacked the Russians at Port Arthur, Manchuria, in February 1904. Though Russian soldiers and sailors went confidently to war, the Japanese defeated them. News of repeated losses sparked unrest at home and led to revolt in the midst of the war.

In 1914, Nicholas II made the fateful decision to drag Russia into World War I. Russia was unprepared to handle the military and economic costs. Russia's weak generals and poorly equipped troops were no match for the German army. Before a year had passed, more than 4 million Russian soldiers had been killed, wounded or taken prisoner. German machine guns mowed down advancing Russians by the thousands. Defeat followed defeat. As in the Russo-Japanese War, Russia's involvement in World War I revealed the weakness of czarist rule and military leadership.

The war was destroying the morale of Russian troops. Soldiers mutinied, deserted, or ignored orders. On the home front, food and fuel supplies were dwindling. Prices were wildly inflated. People from all classes were clamoring for change and an end to the war. Neither Czar Nicholas nor Czarina Alexandra proved capable of tackling these enormous problems.

7. What effect did the outcome of the Russo-Japanese War have on the Russian people?

8. Why were the Russian people unhappy with their country's involvement in World War I?

Cause #5: The March Revolution (1917)



Protesters during the March Revolution, 1917.

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Feb_1917.jpg

In March 1917, women textile workers in Petrograd led a citywide strike. Soon afterward, riots flared up over shortages of bread and fuel. Nearly 200,000 workers swarmed the streets. At first the soldiers obeyed orders to shoot the rioters but later sided with them. The soldiers fired at their commanding officers and joined the rebellion. Large crowds gathered, shouting “Down with the autocracy!” and “Down with the war!”

The local protest exploded into a general uprising- the March Revolution. It forced Czar Nicholas II to abdicate (give up) his throne. The czarist rule of the Romanovs, which spanned over three centuries, had finally collapsed. The March Revolution succeeded in bringing down the czar, yet it failed to set up a strong government to replace his regime.

Leaders of the Duma established a **provisional government**, or temporary government. The provisional government kept the country in World War I and was too weak to make the changes that peasants and workers demanded. Instead, power in the cities grew in local councils of workers called **Soviets**. In many cities, including Petrograd, the soviets had more influence than the provisional government.

The March Revolution of 1917 dethroned Nicholas II but failed to put a strong government in his place.

9. What spurred the March Revolution of 1917?	10. How successful was the provisional government set up by the Duma?

Cause #6: Industrial Workers Support a Growing Revolution

Rapid industrialization stirred discontent among the people of Russia. The growth of factories brought new problems. Among these problems were grueling working conditions, miserably low wages, and child labor. Unions were outlawed. Still, exploited laborers who worked in factories and built the railway lines organized strikes. Workers were unhappy with their low standard of living and lack of political power. The gap between rich and poor was enormous.

Amid the widespread unrest of workers and other members of Russian society, various revolutionary movements began to grow. They also competed for power. The group that would eventually succeed in establishing a new government in Russia followed the views of Karl Marx. These revolutionaries believed that the industrial class of workers would overthrow the czar. The industrial class would then form “a dictatorship of the proletariat.” In such a state, the workers would rule.

In 1903, Russian Marxists split into two groups over revolutionary tactics. The Mensheviks wanted a broad base of popular support for the revolution. The **Bolsheviks** supported a small number of committed revolutionaries willing to sacrifice everything for radical change.

The major leader of the Bolsheviks was Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov. He adopted the name of **Lenin**. He had an engaging personality and was an excellent organizer. He was also ruthless. These traits would ultimately help him gain command of the Bolsheviks. In the early 1900s, Lenin fled to Western Europe to avoid arrest by the czarist regime. He maintained contact with other Bolsheviks. Lenin then waited until he could safely return to Russia.



Workers protesting in Chiatura, Russia in 1917.

Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chiatura_workers_demonstration_1917.jpg

11. List four reasons why life was difficult for workers in Russia in the early 1900s.	12. Why would the workers follow the Bolsheviks? What about the Bolsheviks beliefs appealed to Russian workers?



Regents Multiple Choice Check for Understanding

<p>1. Which statement best describes the relationship between World War I and the Russian Revolution?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">(1) World War I created conditions within Russia that helped trigger a revolution.(2) World War I postponed the Russian Revolution by restoring confidence in the Czar.(3) The Russian Revolution inspired the Russian people to win World War I.(4) World War I gave the Czar's army the needed experience to suppress the Russian Revolution.	<p>3. An incompetent government, massacres on Bloody Sunday, and the high costs of World War I were causes of the</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">(1) Mexican Revolution(2) Boxer Rebellion(3) Sepoy Mutiny(4) Russian Revolution
<p>2. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 in Russia was caused in part by</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">(1) a forced famine in Ukraine(2) the failure of Czar Nicholas II to come to Serbia's aid(3) a shortage of military supplies and food during World War I(4) the establishment of Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP)	<p>4. One of the major causes of the Russian Revolution of 1917 was the</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">(1) abuse of political power by Czar Nicholas II(2) government's refusal to enter World War I(3) rapid expansion of the right to vote(4) failure of communism