The Russian Revolution
By Mike Kubic
2016

Mike Kubic is a former correspondent of Newsweek magazine. In 1917, the nation of Russia erupted in a fervor of revolution. This was not the first revolution it had seen in the 20th century, nor would it be the last, but it certainly proved to be the most transforming. The Russian ruling class was overthrown and replaced with a Communist state led by revolutionary Vladimir Lenin. As you read, take notes on the various causes of the 1917 Russian Revolution and how they collectively contributed to the overthrowing of the former Russian government.

[1] “Revolution” is a term that’s often misused to lend the appearance of popular support to the simple overthrow of a government—an episode that can be very short and have the support of no one except a would-be strongman and a line of tanks outside the presidential palace.

This was emphatically not the case with the nation-wide Russian revolution that in 1917 swept away the country’s 304 year-old Romanov monarchy, and ushered in a Communist regime with shattering consequences for the whole world.

The path to the triumphant “Red October” was more than a quarter century long and so complex that it’s easy to lose track of before reaching the climax.

What follows is an attempt to make the story more lucid by putting together the revolt’s anatomy.

Here are the main events that a century ago preceded one of the most dramatic and consequential upheavals in European history:

1. The Romanovs took power in 1613 as the ruling family of the Russian empire until 1917, when the last czar Nicholas II gave up the throne due to pressure from civil unrest and the February Revolution.
2. “Communism” is a political theory derived from the works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels that advocates class war, the rise of the working class, and a society in which all property is publicly, rather than individually owned; in theory, under communism everyone works and is paid according to their abilities and needs.
3. The term “Red October” refers to the 1917 October Revolution that ousted the provisional government set in place after czar Nicholas II gave up the throne. The provisional government was taken over by the Bolsheviks, the majority faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) that was also known as the “Reds,” especially during the Russian Civil War. The Bolsheviks were led by future Soviet dictator Vladimir Lenin.
4. **Lucid (adjective):** expressed clearly; easy to understand
5. **Anatomy (noun):** a study of the structure or internal workings of something
6. **Precede (verb):** to come before something in time
The Great Famine of 1891

In 2014 Orlando Figes, a leading British historian, published *Revolutionary Russia*, a book that attributes the start of the collapse of the Russian monarchy to a brutally severe weather in 1890-91.

In southeast Russia, he wrote, “the seeds planted the previous autumn had barely time to germinate before the frosts arrived. There had been little snow to protect the young plants during the severe winter. Spring brought with it dusty winds that blew away the topsoil... There was no rain for 100 days. Wells and ponds dried up... forests turned brown, and cattle died by the roadside.”

In an area twice as large as France, 36 million Russians were starving. They lived on bread made with rye husks and bark of trees, and weakened by their diet, half a million of them died of typhus and cholera.

The czarist government’s first response was to warn the newspapers against describing the catastrophe as “famine.” The eventual food deliveries were so slow and clumsy that millions of peasants lost their faith in their unwritten bargain with the monarchy: The czars provided for their subjects’ most urgent needs, and the subjects gave them their blind loyalty.

It was this crisis, Figes wrote, that “set [the Russian people] for the first time on a collision course with the [Romanov] autocracy.”

Disdained Czar

In 1894, Czar Alexander III died of heart attack and was succeeded by his 26 year-old son, Nicholas II, who proved to be totally incapable of ruling a continent-sized empire with 126 million people. Roy Medvedev, a Russian historian, is one of several authors scathingly critical of the new czar. In his book *The October Revolution*, he described him as “lazy, sluggish, unintelligent, distraught, and lacking in character and audacity.”

Nicholas tried to hide his weakness by keeping aloof of his subjects and by being unflinchingly stern and autocratic. As if that did not make him unpopular enough, he married Alexandra, a domineering German princess who fell under the influence of a devious and dissolute monk called Grigori Rasputin.

---

7. **Germinate (verb)**: (of a seed or spore) to begin to grow after a period of dormancy
8. Typhus is an infectious disease characterized by a purple rash, headaches, fever, and delirium, and historically a cause of high death rates during wars and famines; it is often transmitted by lice, ticks, mites, and rat fleas.
9. Cholera is an infectious and often fatal bacterial disease of the small intestine, typically contracted from infected water supplies and causing severe vomiting and diarrhea.
10. **Czar (noun)**: an emperor of Russia (before 1917)
11. The Russian people viewed the czar as a fatherly or semi-godlike figure, whom they owed their loyalty and love.
12. **Autocracy (noun)**: a system of government by one person with absolute power
13. **Scathingly (adverb)**: extremely critical or scornful
14. **Audacity (noun)**: willingness to take bold risks
15. **Aloof (adjective)**: not friendly or forthcoming; cool and distant
16. **Unflinchingly (adverb)**: not showing fear or hesitation
17. **Dissolute (adjective)**: lax in morals; depraved
18. Grigori Rasputin (1869-1916) was a Russian mystic healer who had been brought into the inner circle of the Romanov royal family because of his supposed ability to treat the czar’s only son’s hemophilia, or inability to create blood clots.
Absurd as it sounds, Rasputin became the imperial\textsuperscript{19} couple's most influential adviser on how to rule Russia, and even when to go to war. The monk, who was murdered in December 1916 by a group of nobles, was in Medvedev's judgment “a manifestation of the moral decay, mental degradation,\textsuperscript{20} and impotence\textsuperscript{21} of Nicholas and his court.

### Changing Russia

Ironically, the arch-conservative,\textsuperscript{22} inflexible Nicholas presided over more than two decades of remarkable progress: increased social mobility,\textsuperscript{23} literacy and higher education in Russia.

Between 1860 and 1914, tens of thousands of freed Russian serfs\textsuperscript{24} fled their poverty by migrating to Russian cities. Many of them became merchants and tradesmen, sent their children to school, and the results were startling:

- The number of Russian university students—almost half of them women—had increased from 5,000 to 69,000;
- The number of daily newspapers soared from 13 to 856;
- The number of public institutions—such as schools, public libraries, workers' unions and cooperatives—rose from 250 to over 16,000;
- And by 1914, literacy in Russia rose to 40 percent from 21 percent in 1897.

According to Figes, it was during these years that Russian “intelligentsia” (writers, engineers and other educated people) for the first time in the country's history, “formed professional bodies and began to demand more influence over public policies,” a prerogative\textsuperscript{25} that used to belong exclusively to the czars.

\textsuperscript{19} Imperial (adjective): of or relating to an empire  
\textsuperscript{20} Degradation (noun): the condition or process of decay or breakdown  
\textsuperscript{21} Impotence (noun): inability to take effective action  
\textsuperscript{22} An “arch-conservative” is someone who is a strong supporter of conservatism, which describes any political philosophy that favors tradition as opposed to radical, or even moderate social change. In other words, Nicholas II favored established tradition, such as with religion, politics, and customs—but especially in regards to the absolute power of the monarchy.  
\textsuperscript{23} Social mobility is a term that refers to the possibility for people to change their class or social status within society.  
\textsuperscript{24} Serf (noun): an agricultural laborer bound under a feudal system to work on his or her lord's estate  
\textsuperscript{25} Prerogative (noun): a right or privilege exclusive to a particular individual or class
The Marxist Doctrine

Some of these political leaders and opinion makers embraced an illusory scheme set forth in *The Communist Manifesto*, an 1848 pamphlet by German philosopher Karl Marx. It called for a global “class struggle” between the poor and the wealthy, and as interpreted by Russian radicals, the establishment of the “dictatorship of a proletariat.”

This rule by ordinary workers, peasants, and soldiers was to become the first stage of a process that would culminate in a nirvana—a stateless world where “each person would work according to his ability and receive according to his needs.”

In 1903, eight Russian proponents of this piece of fantasy, led by a brilliant and ruthless revolutionary named Vladimir Lenin, founded a socialist party in Minsk that became known as the “Bolsheviks.”

Nicholas II’s Blunders

Liberal members of Russian nobility responded to the dramatically radicalizing political atmosphere by repeatedly appealing to Nicholas to authorize some reforms and the formation of the Duma, an elected parliament. His answer, time and again, was a flat “Nyet—No!”

Totally convinced that his authority came directly from God, Nicholas continued to lose the much needed support of the traditionally czarist allies: the peasants, who hated his oppression; the moderate elites, who resented his rejection of the parliament; and even of some of his generals, who were critical of his blundering into wars that revealed Russia’s weakness.

Thus in 1900, Nicholas quarreled with Japan over the control of Manchuria, a Chinese province, whereupon Japan sank one of the imperial fleets and routed the Russian army. The ink on the embarrassing peace treaty of 1905—negotiated by U.S. President Theodore Roosevelt—was still wet when Nicholas’ guards fired on a peaceful procession in Petersburg pleading for a few modest reforms.

The “Black Sunday” massacre, as it came to be known, triggered a nation-wide uprising; confirmed the czar’s reputation as “Bloody Nicholas”; and made him authorize the founding of the Duma – but he refused to give it any real authority.

---

26. **Illusory (adjective):** based on illusion or delusion; not real
27. **Radical (noun):** a person who advocates thorough or complete political or social reform; a member of a political party or part of a party pursuing such aims
28. The “proletariat” refers to workers or working-class people, often in reference to Marxism.
29. **Nirvana (noun):** paradise
30. Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, better known by his alias Vladimir Lenin (1870-1924), was a Russian communist leader, politician, and political theorist. He served as head of the Communist Party following the abdication of Nicholas II and officially led the Soviet Union from 1922 until 1924. He developed a system of Marxism known as Leninism.
31. Minsk is the capital of and the largest city in Belarus, located in central Belarus.
32. **Liberal (adjective):** open to new behavior or opinions and willing to discard traditional values; political left
33. **Moderate (adjective):** of a person who holds middle-of-the-spectrum, or average, views, especially in politics
34. **Quarrel (verb):** to fight or argue
35. Manchuria is a mountainous region that forms a northeastern portion of China. Control over this region would allow the Russian empire access to warm-water ports on the Pacific Ocean.
36. A reference to the battle of Port Arthur
37. **Procession (noun):** a parade or march
In 1914, Nicholas ordered the army to enter the First World War as an ally of Great Britain and France, but his poorly equipped and demoralized troops suffered defeat after defeat. The czar’s final blunder was to take personal command of the soldiers, who by then were the prime target of Lenin’s propaganda and mutinous in 1916. Instead of fighting, tens of thousands of them joined the revolutionary “Soviets” – Bolsheviks-led councils that were taking control of Russian towns and villages.

In February 1917, these rebels launched a week-long revolt in Petersburg that neither Nicholas, nor the Duma, were able to stop.

On March 15, 1917, the czar abdicated his throne and was arrested—together with Alexandra, their five children, their private physician and three servants—by the Provisional government elected by the Duma.

On July 21, 1917, Alexander Kerensky, a moderate politician, was elected chairman of the Duma-chosen Provisional government. It was the last successful attempt to stop Lenin’s drive for power.

In November, the Provisional government was overthrown by the Bolsheviks; Kerensky fled to exile; and at the age of 89 died in New York. Nicholas and all ten members of his family and household were savagely murdered by the Bolsheviks on July 17, 1918.

**Lenin and the Red October**

Formally, Russia remained the ally of Britain and France until March 1918, when the Bolsheviks signed a peace treaty with Germany and Austria-Hungary. Until October 1922, in some parts of Russia there continued scattered skirmishes between the “Whites” (a loose confederation of Anti-Communist forces and monarchy supporters that fought the Bolsheviks), and the Bolshevik’s Red Army.

But what really mattered from 1917 on were Lenin’s frantic, furious, and successful efforts to make the vast Russian empire an example of Marxist class struggle and dictatorship.
A fiery orator, masterful organizer and a prodigious writer of propaganda pamphlets, Lenin was born to a wealthy family and as a child was a diligent student and obedient church goer. Unexpectedly, he grew into an Alpha-male leader that dominated individuals and groups by the sheer force of his steely will, volcanic emotions, and overbearing personality. A shadowy, friendless fanatic with no private life to interfere with his work, Lenin rammed through and imposed his agenda on Russia with a total disregard for morality.

Dmitri Volkogonov, a Russian historian and former Red Army general wrote in Lenin, his exhaustive biography, that despite his access to Kremlin's secret archives, he was unable to resolve mysteries that shrouded Lenin's life. For example, there were no records of who financed Lenin's 17 years when he lived in European exile; presided over Bolshevik congresses; organized hundreds of Russian "Soviets" and, after the German government sent him to Russia in April 1917 in a sealed train coach, toured the front lines to harangue the remaining army units to mutiny.

What is amply documented in scores of Lenin's letters were his vicious orders aimed at spreading the "dictatorship of the proletariat" throughout Russia and beyond. For example, he urged one of his Soviets:

"Comrades! ...Hang (and I mean hang so that the people can see) not less than 100 known kulaks [well-off farmers], rich men, bloodsuckers...Take all their grain away from them... Do this so that for hundreds of miles around people can see, tremble, know and cry: ‘they are killing and will go on killing the bloodsucking kulaks.’ Cable that you have received this and carried out [instructions]."

What is also well known are the results of Lenin's brutal leadership. According to Medvedev, by October 24, 1917, the Winter Palace headquarters of the Provisional government had no more than 3,000 defenders, and the fight they put up against the attacking 20,000 Red Guards, sailors and soldiers was so halfhearted that there were no more than 15 fighters killed on both sides, and 60 were wounded.

"During these critical hours," Medvedev wrote, "...Petrograd continued on the whole to go about its normal business. Most of the soldiers remained in their barracks, the plants and factories continued to operate, and in the schools none of their classes were interrupted. There were no strikes or demonstrations..."

Until his death of brain hemorrhage in 1924, Lenin had the power and fervent following that no czar had achieved. He launched a Communist system that created the totalitarian USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), enslaved Baltic states and Eastern Europe, and for seven decades kept the world in fear of World War III.

47. **Orator (noun):** a public speaker
48. **Prodigious (adjective):** remarkably or impressively great in extent, size, or degree
49. **The Kremlin** refers to the Moscow Kremlin, in which Russian government is based.
50. **Shroud (verb):** to cover or envelop
51. **Harangue (verb):** to lecture at length in an aggressive and critical manner
52. **St. Petersburg** was renamed "Petrograd" in 1914 at the beginning of WWI because it sounded less German. It was renamed again in 1924 to Leningrad, following the death of Lenin. In 1991, the city was once again called St. Petersburg.
53. **Fervent (adjective):** passionate, intense
54. **Totalitarian (adjective):** of or relating to a system of government that is centralized and dictatorial and requires complete subservience to the state
And yet, in Volkogonov's opinion, Lenin's life ended in failure. His dream of a global revolution—“an instant onslaught on the capitalist\textsuperscript{57} citadels,” as the historian wrote—never came near to reality, and collapsed totally by the end of the Cold War.

In a competition with Marxism and class warfare, free votes and exchange of political ideas emerged far more powerful than brutality and empty promises of a paradise.

\textsuperscript{55} The Soviet Union (also known as the USSR) was a one-party federation, governed by the Communist Party in Moscow, that existed from 1922 to 1991. It was composed of the Soviet Russia and many Soviet satellite states (Eastern and Central European countries brought under Soviet control).

\textsuperscript{56} The Cold War describes the period of prolonged political tension between Western and Eastern Europe, as well as the United States and the Soviet Union. It is typically measured as having lasted from 1947 to 1991.

\textsuperscript{57} Capitalism is the economic and political system in which a country's trade, industry, and market are controlled by private owners rather than by the state. In this way, it is very different, if not the opposite of communism.
Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which TWO of the following statements best summarize central ideas of the text? [RI.2]
   
   A. Red October was the culminating event in the path towards a communist revolution in Russia, as the Bolsheviks officially took power.
   
   B. Though it preceded the revolution by more than two decades, the Great Famine of 1891 under czar Nicholas II's rule was one of the causes of the Russian Revolution.
   
   C. Whatever progress was made under Nicholas II was outweighed by the catastrophic mistakes and bloody tragedies that characterized his rule.
   
   D. Nicholas II could have easily prevented the Russian Revolution and his own death if he had only abdicated sooner.
   
   E. Lenin ultimately failed in his objective, as he died of a brain hemorrhage before he could obtain absolute power.
   
   F. Despite the violence and cruelty of Lenin's rule, it paled in comparison to that of Stalin's regime.

2. PART B: Which TWO of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
   
   A. “The path to the triumphant “Red October” was more than a quarter century long and so complex that it's easy to lose its track before reaching the climax.” (Paragraph 3)
   
   B. “The czarist government's first response was to warn the newspapers against describing the catastrophe as “famine.” The eventual food deliveries were so slow and clumsy that millions of peasants lost their faith in their unwritten bargain with the monarchy....” (Paragraph 8)
   
   C. “Totally convinced that his authority came directly from God, Nicholas kept losing the critical support of the czarism traditional allies: the peasants, who hated his oppression; the moderate elites, who resented his rejection of the parliament; and even of some of his generals, who were critical of his blundering into wars that revealed Russia’s weakness.” (Paragraph 20)
   
   D. “The “Black Sunday” massacre, as it came to be known, triggered a nation-wide uprising; confirmed the czar’s reputation as “Bloody Nicholas”; and made him authorize the founding of the Duma...” (Paragraph 22)
   
   E. “Comrades! ...Hang (and I mean hang so that the people can see) not less than 100 known kulaks [well-off farmers], rich men, bloodsuckers...Take all their grain away from them... Do this so that for hundreds of miles around people can see, tremble, know and cry: ‘they are killing and will go on killing the bloodsucking kulaks.’” (Paragraph 33)
   
   F. “And yet, in Volkogonov's opinion, Lenin's life ended in failure. His dream of a global revolution—“an instant onslaught on the capitalist citadels,” as the historian wrote—never came near to reality, and collapsed totally by the end of the Cold War.” (Paragraph 37)
3. How do paragraphs 1-3 contribute to the text's central ideas? [RI.5] [RI.2]
   A. The first three paragraphs propose the central idea that the 1917 Bolshevik takeover was technically not a revolution.
   B. The first three paragraphs lament the cost of the Russian Revolution and the negative change the country would experience under communist rule.
   C. The first paragraph defines “revolution” as a force of the people's will to overthrow the government, as opposed to the incorrect use that describes a small party's forceful coup; this introduces the central idea and question: was the Russian Revolution a true revolution?
   D. The first three paragraphs introduce the idea that the Russian Revolution—rather than being a simple coup, in which sometimes the term “revolution” is incorrectly used—was a complex chain of events and causes.

4. How does the British historian Figes connect the weather of 1890-1891 to the decline of the Russian empire in the 20th century? [RI.3]
   A. The weather in 1890-1891 led to the Great Famine of 1891; the czarist government's reaction damaged the people's trust in and loyalty to the imperial monarchy.
   B. The weather in 1890-1891 led to the Great Famine of 1891; the suppressed news of this famine made people advocate for better education and free speech.
   C. The weather in 1890-1891 led to the Great Famine of 1891; the people superstitiously blamed the czar and his strange adviser, Rasputin, for this unfortunately event.
   D. The weather in 1890-1891 led to the Great Famine of 1891; the lack of food in turn affected the empire's economy and thus weakened the imperial state.

5. Why does the author likely include the section entitled “Changing Russia”? [RI.6]
   A. To prove that Nicholas II was actually a good leader but that his rule was marred by tragedies out of his control
   B. To acknowledge that progress was being made in Russia under Nicholas II but that the rate of change was too slow
   C. To point out that the progress made under Nicholas II contributed to the revolution, for more people were being educated and began demanding change
   D. To note that the changing structure of the cities (i.e. increased population) made it easier for riots to break out and eventually violent revolution

6. Why did Marxism likely find a particular foothold in Russia and its politics? [RI.3]
   A. Marxism appealed to the working class in Russia, as well as the intelligentsia, and their frustration with the elite upper class by promising a fairer system of economics.
   B. Marxism gained a foothold in Russia because it detailed the transition from a feudal system (like Russia recently had) to an economic paradise.
   C. Marxism appealed to the Russian working class' frustration with the upper classes by advocating class warfare.
   D. Marxism allowed the educated middle class to take advantage of the lower working class by manipulating them into eliminating the elite.
7. Compare and contrast the author’s depictions of Nicholas II and Vladimir Lenin. [RI.6] [RI.3] What do these depictions reveal about these historical figures? Cite evidence in your answer.

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

8. Why, according to the text, was the Russian Revolution a failure? Consider the goals of [RI.6] the revolutionaries in your answer. Cite evidence to support your answer.

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________

___________________________________________________________________________
Discussion Questions

*Directions:* Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. Based on your reading of the text, how could the Russian Revolution have been avoided? What factors could have been changed that might have stemmed the call for revolution? Or was it inevitable?

2. Who would you rather live under, Nicholas or Lenin? Whose leadership style was more dangerous?

3. Based on your reading and your knowledge or experience, provide your own definition of a “revolution.” How does the Russian Revolution of 1917 fit this definition?

4. In the context of this article, how do people create change? Were the methods by which change was created in the 1917 Russian Revolution right? Is there a way to morally incite a revolution? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.