

Causes of the Russian Revolution Part 2

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[Causes Part 1.](#)

Ineffective Government

The ruling elites were still mostly land owning aristocracy, but some in the civil service were landless. The elites ran the state bureaucracy and sat above the normal population. Unlike other countries the elites and the landed depended on the tsar and had never formed a counter to him. Russia had a strict set of civil service ranks, with jobs, uniforms etc., where advancement was automatic. The bureaucracy was weak and failing, losing the experience and skills needed in the modern world, but refusing to let people with those skills in. The system was a vast overlapping chaos, full of confusion, tsarist divide and rule and petty jealousy. Laws overrode other laws, the tsar able to override all. To the outside it was arbitrary, archaic, incompetent and unfair. It stopped the bureaucracy from becoming professional, modern, efficient or as a counter to as medieval looking monarch.

Russia had got like this by making a choice. An influx of professional civil servants produced the Great Reforms of the 1860s, to strengthen the state through western reform after the [Crimean War](#).

This included 'freeing' the serfs (of a sort) and in 1864 created zemstvos, local assemblies in many areas leading to a form of self-rule sandwiched between nobles, who resented it, and peasants, who often did too. The 1860s were liberal, reforming times. They could have led Russia towards the west. It would have been costly, difficult, prolonged, but the chance was there.

However, the elites were divided on a response. Reformists accepted the rule of equal law, political freedom, a middle class and opportunities for the working class. Calls for a constitution led Alexander II to order a limited one. The rivals of this progress wanted the old order, and were made up of many in the military; they demanded autocracy, strict order, nobles and church as dominant forces (and the military of course). Then [Alexander II](#) was murdered, and his son shut it down. Counter reforms, to centralize control, and strength the personal rule of the tsar followed. Alexander II's death is the start of the

Russian tragedy of the twentieth century.

The 1860s meant Russia had people who had tasted reform, lost it and looked for... revolution.

Imperial government ran out below the eighty nine provincial capitals. Below that peasants ran it their own way, alien to the elites above. Localities were under governed and the old regime was not a hyper powerful all seeing oppression. Old government was absent and out of touch, with a small number of police, state officials, who were co-opted for more and more by the state as there wasn't anything else (for instant checking roads). Russia had a small tax system, bad communications, small middle class, and a serfdom which ended with the landowner in charge still. Only very slowly was the Tsar's government meeting the new civilians.

Zemstvos, run by locals, became key. The state rested on landowning nobles, but they were in decline post emancipation, and used these small local committees to defend themselves against industrializing and state government. Up to 1905 this was a liberal movement pushing for safeguards and provincial society, e.g. peasant versus landowner, calling for more local power, a Russian parliament, a constitution.

The provincial nobility were the early revolutionaries, not workers.

Alienated Military

The Russian military was full of tensions against the Tsar, despite it supposedly being the man's biggest supporter. Firstly it kept losing (Crimea, Turkey, Japan) and this was blamed on the government: military expenditure declined. As industrialization was not as advanced in the west, so Russia became poorly trained, equipped and supplied in the new methods and lost. The soldiers and self-aware officers were being demoralized. Russian soldiers were sworn to the Tsar, not the state. History seeped into all aspects of the Russian court and they obsessed over little details like buttons, not fixing a feudal army lost in a modern world.

Also, the army was being used more and more to support the provincial governors in suppressing revolts: despite the facts much of the lower ranks were peasants too. The army began to fracture over demand to stop civilians. That was before the condition of the army itself where people were seen as serfs, sub civilian slaves by officers. In 1917, many soldiers wanted a reform of the army as much as of the government.

Above them were a group of new professional military men who saw the faults through the system, from trench technique to supply of arms, and demanded effective reform. They saw the court and the tsar as stopping it. They turned to

the Duma as an outlet, beginning a relationship which would change Russian in early 1917. The Tsar was losing the support of his talented men.

An Out of Touch Church

The Russians were involved in a foundation myth of being at one with and defending the Orthodox Church and orthodox Russia, which began at the very start of the state. In the 1900s this was stressed this over and over. The Tsar as political-religious figure was unlike anywhere in the west and he or she could damn with the church as well as destroy with laws. The church was vital for controlling the mostly illiterate peasants, and priests had to preach obedience to the Tsar and report objections to police and to state. They allied easily with the last two Tsars, who wanted a return to medieval times.

But industrialization was pulling peasants into secular cities, where churches and priests lagged behind the vast growth. The church did not adapt to urban life and a growing number of priests called for reform of it all (and the state too). Liberal clergy realized reform of church only possible with a move away from the tsar. Socialism was what answered the workers new needs, not old Christianity.

Peasants not exactly enamored of priests and their actions harked to a pagan time, and many priests were underpaid and grasping.

A Politicized Civil Society

By the 1890s, Russia had developed an educated, political culture among a group of people who were not yet numerous enough to truly be called a Middle Class, but who were forming between the aristocracy and the peasants / workers. This group were part of a 'civil society' which sent their youth to be students, read newspapers, and looked towards serving the public rather than the Tsar. Largely liberal, the events of a severe famine in the early 1890s both politicized and radicalized them, as their collective action outlined them to them both how ineffective the Tsarist government now was, and how much they could achieve if they were allowed to unite. The members of the zemstvo's were chief among these. As the Tsar refused to meet their demands, so many of this social sphere turned against him and his government.

Nationalism

Nationalism came to Russia at the end of the nineteenth century and neither Tsars government nor liberal opposition could cope with it. It was the socialists who pushed regional independence, and socialist-nationalists who did best among the different nationalists. Some nationalists wanted to stay in the

Russian empire but get greater power; the Tsar inflamed this by stamping on it and Russifying, turning cultural movements into fierce political opposition. Tsars had always Russified but it was now much worse

Repression and Revolutionaries

The Decembrist uprising of 1825 triggered a series of reactions in Tsar Nicholas I, including the creation of a police state. Censorship was combined with the 'Third Section', a group of investigators looking into acts and thoughts against the state, which could exile to Siberia suspects, not just convicted of any transgression, but just suspected of it. In 1881 the Third Section became the Okhranka, a secret police fighting a war using agents everywhere, even pretending to be revolutionaries. If you want to know how the Bolsheviks expanded their police state, the line started here.

The revolutionaries of the period had been in harsh Tsarist prisons, hardened into extremism, the weak falling away. They started as intellectuals of Russia, a class of readers, thinkers and believers, and were turned into something colder and dark. These derived from the Decembrists of the 1820s, their first opponents and revolutionaries of the new order in Russia, and inspired intellectuals in succeeding generations.

Rejected and attacked, they reacted by turning to violence and dreams of violent struggle. A study of terrorism in the twenty first century finds this pattern repeated. A warning was there. The fact that western ideas which had leaked into Russia ran into the new censorship meant they tended to be distorted into powerful dogma rather than argued into pieces like the rest. The revolutionaries looked to the people, who they were usually born above, as the ideal, and the state, who they reviled, with guilt driven anger. But the intellectuals had no real concept of peasants, just a dream of the people, an abstraction that led Lenin and company to authoritarianism.

Calls for a small group of revolutionaries to seize power and create a revolutionary dictatorship to in turn create a socialist society (including removing enemies) were around far before the 1910s, and the 1860s were a golden age for such ideas; now they were violent and hateful. They didn't have to choose Marxism. Many didn't at first.

Born in 1872, Marx's Capital was cleared by their Russian censor as they thought to too hard to understand to be dangerous, and about an industrial state Russia didn't have. They were terribly wrong, and it was an instant hit, the fad of its day – the intelligentsia had just seen one popular movement fail, so they turned to Marx as a new hope. No more populism and peasants, but urban workers, closer and understandable. Marx seemed to be sensible, logical science, not dogma, modern and western.

One young man, **Lenin**, was thrown into a new orbit, away from being a lawyer and into being a revolutionary, when his older brother was executed for terrorism. Lenin was drawn into rebellion and expelled from university. He was a fully blown revolutionary derived from other groups in Russia's history already when he first encountered Marx, and he rewrote Marx for Russia, not the other way round. Lenin accepted the ideas of the Russian Marxist leader Plekhanov, and they would recruit the urban workers by involving them in strikes for better rights.

As 'legal Marxists' pushed a peaceful agenda, Lenin and others reacted with a commitment to revolution and creating a counter Tsarist party, strictly organised. They created the newspaper *Iskra* (the Spark) as a mouthpiece to command the members. The editors were the First Soviet of the Social Democratic Party, including Lenin. He wrote *What Is To Be Done?* (1902), a hectoring, violent work that set out the party. The Social Democrats split into two groups, the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, at the second Party Congress in 1903. Lenin's dictatorial approach pushed the split. Lenin was a centraliser who distrusted the people to get it right, an anti-democrat, and he was a Bolshevik whereas the Mensheviks were prepared to work with the middle classes.

World War 1 Was the Catalyst

The First World War provided the catalyst for Russia's revolutionary year of 1917. The war itself went badly from the start, prompting the Tsar to take personal charge in 1915, a decision which placed the full responsibility for the next years of failure on his shoulders. As demand for ever more soldiers increased, the peasant population grew angry as young men and horses, both essential for the war, were taken away, reducing the amount they could grow and damaging their standard of living. Russia's most successful farms suddenly found their labour and material removed for the war, and the less successful peasants became ever more concerned with self-sufficiency, and even less concerned with selling a surplus, than ever before.

Inflation occurred and prices rose, so hunger became endemic. In the cities, workers found themselves unable to afford the high prices, and any attempt to agitate for better wages, usually in the form of strikes, saw them branded as disloyal to Russia, disaffecting them further.

The transport system ground to a halt due to failures and poor management, halting the movement of military supplies and food. Meanwhile soldiers on leave explained how poorly supplied the army was, and bought first hand accounts of the failure at the front. These soldiers, and the high command who had previously supported the Tsar, now believed he had failed them.

An increasingly desperate government turned to using the military to curb the strikers, causing mass protest and troop mutinies in the cities as soldiers refused to open fire. A revolution had begun.