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WORLD WAR I AND REVOLUTION IN RUSSIA, 1914-1918



This collection documents the Russian entrance into World War I and culminates in reporting on the Revolution in Russia in 1917 and 1918. The documents consist primarily of correspondence between the British Foreign Office, various British missions and consulates in the Russian Empire and the Tsarist government and later the Provisional Government.

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NB: This collection comprises the complete contents of the former Scholarly Resources microfilm collection entitled British Foreign Office: Russia Correspondence, 1914-1918

The onset of World War I exposed the weakness of Nicholas II's government. A show of national unity had accompanied Russia's entrance into the war, with defense of the Slavic Serbs the main battle cry. In the summer of 1914, the Duma and the zemstva expressed full support for the government's war effort. The initial conscription was well organized and peaceful, and the early phase of Russia's military buildup showed that the empire had learned lessons from the Russo-Japanese War. But military reversals and the government's incompetence soon soured much of the population. German control of the Baltic Sea and German-Ottoman control of the Black Sea severed Russia from most of its foreign supplies and potential markets. In addition, inept Russian preparations for war and ineffective economic policies hurt the country financially, logistically, and militarily. Inflation became a serious problem. Because of inadequate matériel support for military operations, the War Industries Committee was formed to ensure that necessary supplies reached the front. But army officers quarreled with civilian leaders, seized administrative control of front areas, and refused to cooperate with the committee. The central government distrusted the independent war support activities that were organized by zemstva and cities. The Duma quarreled with the war bureaucracy of the government, and center and center-left deputies eventually formed the Progressive Bloc to create a genuinely constitutional government.

After Russian military reversals in 1915, Nicholas II went to the front to assume nominal leadership of the army, leaving behind his German-born wife, Alexandra, and Rasputin, a member of her entourage, who exercised influence on policy and ministerial appointments. Rasputin was a debauched faith healer who initially impressed Alexandra because he was able to stop the bleeding of the royal couple's hemophiliac son and heir presumptive. Although their true influence has been debated, Alexandra and Rasputin undoubtedly decreased the regime's prestige and credibility.

While the central government was hampered by court intrigue, the strain of the war began to cause popular unrest. In 1916 high food prices and fuel shortages caused strikes in some cities. Workers, who had won the right to representation in sections of the War Industries Committee, used those sections as organs of political opposition. The countryside also was becoming restive. Soldiers were increasingly insubordinate, particularly the newly recruited peasants who faced the prospect of being used as cannon fodder in the inept conduct of the war.

The situation continued to deteriorate. In an attempt to alleviate the morass at the tsar's court, a group of nobles murdered Rasputin in December 1916. But the death of the mysterious "healer" brought little change. Increasing conflict between the tsar and the Duma weakened both parts of the government and increased the impression of incompetence. In early 1917, deteriorating rail transport caused acute food and fuel shortages, which resulted in riots and strikes. Authorities summoned troops to quell the disorders in Petrograd (as St. Petersburg had been called since 1914, to Russianize the Germanic name). In 1905 troops had fired on demonstrators and saved the monarchy, but in 1917 the troops turned their guns over to the angry crowds. Public support for the tsarist regime simply evaporated in 1917, ending three centuries of Romanov rule.

By early 1917, the existing order in Russia was verging on collapse. The country's involvement in World War I had already cost millions of lives and severely disrupted Russia's already struggling economy. In an effort to reverse the worsening military situation, Nicholas II took personal command of Russian forces at the front, leaving the conduct of government in Petrograd to his unpopular wife and a series of incompetent ministers. As a consequence of these conditions, the morale of the people rapidly deteriorated.

The spark to the events that ended tsarist rule was ignited on the streets of Petrograd in February 1917. Driven by shortages of food and fuel, crowds of hungry citizens and striking workers began spontaneous rioting and demonstrations. Local reserve troops, called in to suppress the riots, refused to fire on the crowds, and some soldiers joined the workers and other rioters. A few days later, with tsarist authority in Petrograd disintegrating, two distinct groups emerged, each claiming to represent the Russian people. One was the Executive Committee, which the Duma, the lower house of the Russian parliament, had established in defiance of the tsar's orders. The other body was the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.

With the consent of the Petrograd Soviet, the Executive Committee of the Duma organized the Provisional Government on March 15. The government was a cabinet of ministers chaired

by aristocrat and social reformer Georgi L'vov. A legislature, the Constituent Assembly, also was to be created, but election of the first such body was postponed until the fall of 1917. Delegates of the new government met Nicholas that evening at Pskov, where rebellious railroad workers had stopped the imperial train as the tsar attempted to return to the capital. Advised by his generals that he lacked the support of the country, Nicholas informed the delegates that he was abdicating in favor of his brother, Grand Duke Michael. When Michael in turn refused the throne, imperial rule in Russia came to an end.

The collapse of the monarchy left two rival political institutions—the Provisional Government and the Petrograd Soviet—to share administrative authority over the country. The Petrograd Soviet, drawing its membership from socialist deputies elected in factories and regiments, coordinated the activities of other soviets that sprang up across Russia at this time. The Petrograd Soviet was dominated by moderate socialists of the Socialist Revolutionary Party and by the Menshevik faction of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party. The Bolshevik faction of the latter party provided the opposition. Although it represented the interests of Russia's working class, the Petrograd Soviet at first did not seek to undermine the Provisional Government's authority directly. Nevertheless, the Petrograd Soviet's first official order, which came to be known as Order Number One, instructed soldiers and sailors to obey their officers and the government only if their orders did not contradict the decrees of the Petrograd Soviet—a measure formulated to prevent continuation of Russia's war effort by crippling the Provisional Government's control of the military.

The Provisional Government, in contrast to the socialist Petrograd Soviet, chiefly represented the propertied classes. Headed by ministers of a moderate or liberal bent, the new government pledged to convene a constituent assembly that would usher in a new era of bourgeois democracy modeled on European constitutionalism. In the meantime, the government granted unprecedented rights—full freedom of speech, press, and religion, as well as legal equality—to all citizens. The government did not take up the matter of land redistribution, however, leaving that issue for the Constituent Assembly. Even more damaging, the ministers favored keeping Russia's military commitments to its allies, a position that became increasingly unpopular as the war dragged on. The government suffered its first crisis in the "April Days," when demonstrations against the government's war aims forced two ministers to resign, an event that led to the appointment of Aleksandr Kerenskiy—the only socialist among the government's ministers—as war minister. Quickly assuming de facto leadership of the government, Kerenskiy ordered the army to launch a major offensive in June. After early successes, that offensive turned into a full-scale retreat in July.

While the Provisional Government grappled with foreign foes, the Bolsheviks, who were opposed to bourgeois democracy, gained new strength. Lenin, the Bolshevik leader, returned to Petrograd in April 1917 from his wartime residence in Switzerland. Although he had been born into a noble family, from his youth Lenin espoused the cause of the common workers. A committed revolutionary and pragmatic Marxist thinker, he astounded the Bolsheviks in Petrograd with his April Theses, in which he boldly called for the overthrow of the Provisional Government, the transfer of all power to the soviets, and the expropriation of factories by

workers and of land belonging to the church, the nobility, and the gentry by peasants. Lenin's dynamic presence quickly won the other Bolshevik leaders to his position, and the radicalized orientation of the Bolshevik faction attracted new members.

Inspired by Lenin's slogans, crowds of workers, soldiers, and sailors took to the streets of Petrograd in July to wrest power from the Provisional Government. But the spontaneity of the "July Days" caught the Bolshevik leaders by surprise, and the Petrograd Soviet, controlled by moderate Mensheviks, refused to take power or to enforce Bolshevik demands. After the uprising had died down, the Provisional Government outlawed the Bolsheviks and jailed Leon Trotsky, leader of a leftist Menshevik faction. Lenin fled to Finland.

In the aftermath of the "July Days," conservatives sought to reassert order in society. The army's commander in chief, General Lavr Kornilov, who protested the influence of the soviets on both the army and the government, appeared as a counterrevolutionary threat to Kerensky, now prime minister. Kerensky dismissed Kornilov from his command, but Kornilov, disobeying the order, launched an extemporaneous revolt on September 10. To defend the capital, Kerensky sought help from all quarters and relaxed his ban on Bolshevik activities. Railroad workers sympathetic to the Bolsheviks halted Kornilov's troop trains, and Kornilov soon surrendered, ending the only serious challenge to the Provisional Government from the right.

Although the Provisional Government survived the Kornilov revolt, popular support for the government faded rapidly as the national mood swung to the left in the fall of 1917. Workers took control of their factories through elected committees; peasants expropriated lands belonging to the state, church, nobility, and gentry; and armies melted away as peasant soldiers deserted to take part in the land seizures. The Bolsheviks, skillfully exploiting these popular trends in their propaganda, achieved domination of the Petrograd and Moscow soviets by September. Trotsky, freed from prison after the Kornilov revolt, was recruited as a Bolshevik and named chairman of the Petrograd Soviet.

Realizing that the time was ripe to seize power by force, Lenin returned to Petrograd in October and convinced a majority of the Bolshevik Central Committee, which had hoped to take power legally, to accept armed uprising in principle. Trotsky won the Petrograd garrison over to the soviet, depriving the Provisional Government of its main military support in Petrograd.

The actual insurrection—the Bolshevik Revolution—began on November 6, when Kerensky ordered the Bolshevik press closed. Interpreting this action as a counterrevolutionary move, the Bolsheviks called on their supporters to defend the Petrograd Soviet. By evening, the Bolsheviks had taken control of utilities and most government buildings in Petrograd, thus enabling Lenin to proclaim the downfall of the Provisional Government on the morning of the next day, November 7. The Bolsheviks captured the Provisional Government's cabinet at its Winter Palace headquarters that night with hardly a shot fired in the government's defense. Kerensky left Petrograd to organize resistance, but his counter coup failed and he fled Russia. Bolshevik uprisings soon took place elsewhere; Moscow was under Bolshevik control within three weeks. The Second Congress of Soviets met in Petrograd to ratify the

Bolshevik takeover after moderate deputies (mainly Mensheviks and right-wing members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party) quit the session. The remaining Bolsheviks and left-wing Socialist Revolutionaries declared the soviets the governing bodies of Russia and named the Council of People's Commissars to serve as the cabinet. Lenin became chairman of this council. Trotsky took the post of commissar of foreign affairs; Stalin, a Georgian, became commissar of nationalities. Thus, by acting decisively while their opponents vacillated, the Bolsheviks succeeded in effecting their coup d'état.

On coming to power, the Bolsheviks issued a series of revolutionary decrees ratifying peasants' seizures of land and workers' control of industries, abolished laws sanctioning class privileges, nationalized the banks, and set up revolutionary tribunals in place of the courts. At the same time, the revolutionaries now constituting the regime worked to secure power inside and outside the government. Deeming Western forms of parliamentary democracy irrelevant, Lenin argued for a "dictatorship of the proletariat" based on single-party Bolshevik rule, although for a time left-wing Socialist Revolutionaries also participated in the Council of People's Commissars. The new government created a secret police agency, Cheka, to persecute enemies of the state (including bourgeois liberals and moderate socialists). Having convened the Constituent Assembly, which finally had been elected in November with the Bolsheviks winning only a quarter of the seats, the Soviet government dissolved the assembly in January after a one-day session, ending a short-lived experiment in parliamentary democracy.

In foreign affairs, the Soviet government, seeking to disengage Russia from World War I, called on the belligerent powers for an armistice and peace without annexations. The Allied Powers rejected this appeal, but Germany and its allies agreed to a ceasefire. Negotiations began in December 1917. After dictating harsh terms that the Soviet government would not accept, however, Germany resumed its offensive in February 1918, meeting scant resistance from disintegrating Russian armies. Lenin, after bitter debate with leading Bolsheviks who favored prolonging the war in hopes of precipitating class warfare in Germany, persuaded a slim majority of the Bolshevik Central Committee that peace must be made at any cost. On March 3, Soviet government officials signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, relinquishing Poland, the Baltic lands, Finland, and Ukraine to German control and giving up a portion of the Caucasus region to Turkey. With the new border dangerously close to Petrograd, the government was soon transferred to Moscow. An enormous part of the population and resources of the Russian Empire was lost by this treaty, but Lenin understood that no other alternative could ensure the survival of the fledgling Soviet state.

Soon after buying peace with Germany, the Soviet state found itself under attack from other quarters. By the spring of 1918, elements dissatisfied with the radical policies of the communists (as the Bolsheviks started calling themselves) established centers of resistance in southern and Siberian Russia. Beginning in April 1918, anticommunist forces, called the Whites and often led by former officers of the Tsarist army, began to clash with the Red Army, which Trotsky, named commissar of war in the Soviet government, organized to defend the new state. A civil war to determine the future of Russia had begun.

The White armies enjoyed varying degrees of support from the Allied Powers. Desiring to defeat Germany in any way possible, Britain, France, and the United States landed troops in Russia and provided logistical support to the Whites, whom the Allies trusted would resume Russia's struggle against Germany after overthrowing the communist regime. In March 1918, the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party officially was renamed the Russian Communist Party [Bolshevik.] After the Allies defeated Germany in November 1918, they opted to continue their intervention in the Russian Civil War against the communists, in the interests of averting what they feared might become a world socialist revolution.