RUSSIAN RADICALS, WAR, AND REVOLUTION
Between 1861 and 1874, Tsar Alexander II undertook a limited program of liberalization in Russia’s administrative, educational, judicial, and social apparatus known as the Great Reforms. This era of enlightened despotism ended with Alexander’s assassination in 1881. The radicals who murdered him thought he’d done too little, too slowly. Now, the enlightenment would fade. Only the despot would remain in the form of Alexander’s successors, who ruled oppressively and absolutely. Revolution would come on the heels of World War I, the devastating global conflict that pitted Russia against Germany on the brutal Eastern Front, and which left ordinary Russians hungry, cold and demoralized—with no faith that their government could manage the crisis.

The Breaking Point

The last Romanov tsar, Nicholas II—who ruled from 1894 until early 1917—tried to stave off popular unrest, largely through fear and repression. The breaking point came when his government proved incapable of steering Russia safely through World War I, the greatest crisis Russia had seen since the Napoleonic invasion of 1812.

Alexander Guchkov, the leader of the moderate Octobrist party, warned in 1913 of a greater impending catastrophe. He felt that Russia was on the verge “of being plunged into a period of protracted chronic anarchy which will lead to the dissolution of the Empire.”

In February 1914, the tsar’s security chief, Pyotr Nikolaevich Durnovo, warned the tsar himself that Russia was unprepared for World War I and likely faced defeat. Durnovo would die the next year, before his predictions became history—and fact.

Alexander Guchkov
Russia had tried its hand at revolution once already. In October 1905, after a turbulent year of strikes and protests—and the unsuccessful Russo-Japanese War of 1904 and 1905—Nicholas II raised the collective hopes of his people with a proclamation known as the October Manifesto.

Issued to halt a 10-day general strike that crippled the country, the manifesto established a state duma—a legislative body whose members would be popularly elected—and indicated that Russia would finally enjoy freedom of speech, press, and assembly.

In addition, Nicholas announced the amnesty of political prisoners to quell the raging turmoil that threatened to engulf the empire. However, over the next several years, thousands more replaced those freed. The tsar also declared that workers now had the right to form unions and strike. In the ensuing decade, the state inevitably responded viciously and repressively to interrupt work stoppages.

The state duma was only a quasi-parliamentary body, with no control over foreign affairs or military concerns. Furthermore, much of the budget fell outside the duma’s control. The duma couldn’t initiate or finalize legislation without the tsar’s approval.

Emperor Nicholas II retained supreme power. Additionally, the same social, economic, and political tensions that had prompted what became known as the 1905 Russian Revolution still existed a decade later.

In the summer of 1914—as a new diplomatic crisis percolated through Europe—social unrest threatened Russia’s domestic stability, as well. Yet when Nicholas II announced that his country was at war with Austria and Germany in August 1914, 200,000 of his subjects cheered him from Palace Square in St. Petersburg. In contrast, many of the young Russian soldiers called up to serve were less enthused. Massive state conscription campaigns in 1914—and again in 1916, in Central Asia—were met by riots.

Among the worst decisions Nicholas II made was to ban the manufacture and sale of alcohol beginning in July 1914. The Russian state obtained up to a third of its revenue from the government monopoly on the distillation and sale of alcohol. Just when the government needed funds more than ever, the tsarist needlessly slashed an important source of its income.
PETROGRAD

In 1914, the Russian government renamed St. Petersburg to the more Slavic-sounding Petrograd in a burst of patriotic sentiment. It retained that name until Lenin’s death in 1924.

Russian Losses

Russia mobilized almost 15 million men and had a casualty rate greater than 60 percent, suffering more losses during World War I than any other country. Only weeks after hostilities began, 140,000 men were lost to the Germans at the disastrous Battle of Tannenberg, in present-day Poland. And this was just the beginning. By spring 1915, Russia had no choice but to retreat before a combined German-Austrian onslaught.

That year alone, some 2.5 million Russian soldiers were killed, wounded, or taken prisoner. As they fell back, a scorched-earth policy in retreat rendered life untenable for many civilians. Three to four million civilians were displaced. Refugees flooded into cities. Massive inflation threatened economic collapse.
The duma urged Nicholas II to reorganize his government and appoint a new council of ministers. He refused and also took personal command of the army, with staggering losses. Meanwhile, Nicholas was being counseled at home and in the offices of government by his mystical adviser, Grigory Rasputin. With Nicholas at the front after September 1915, Rasputin seemed to exercise ever more influence over his wife, Alexandra, and the government.

In December 1916, conspirators seeking to restore the Romanovs’ reputation murdered Rasputin. By this time, the country was exhausted from three years of war, ethnic tension, food and fuel shortages, and a loss of faith in the government. The concept of the emperor’s divine infallibility evaporated.

1917

On February 23, 1917, a common spark ignited the human tensions into revolution. Women in the capital organized demonstrations to protest food shortages and working conditions as part of the commemoration of International Women’s Day. By the end of the day, more than 100,000 striking workers and demonstrators were in the streets. The next day, 200,000 people turned out.

On Sunday, February 26, 1917, the tsarist government ordered soldiers to fire on the growing crowds. Some followed direction, killing hundreds of people. However, a general—and increasing—reluctance of soldiers to use force against the people did not go unnoticed.

The next day, February 27, was decisive. The state duma now declared itself to be the provisional government, having disobeyed the tsar’s order to disband the previous day. Soldiers openly refused to move against the demonstrators.

Meanwhile, professional revolutionaries called upon workers to organize workers’ councils—or soviets—outside of the largely privileged duma. Industrial workers answered the call. Within a week, more than 1,200 deputies were elected to the newly formed Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies.
Nicholas II never expected the situation to deteriorate so rapidly. He left military headquarters for Petrograd in an attempt to reclaim control. Along the way, his imperial railcar was stopped, and he was confronted by his complete loss of authority. After consulting with military leaders, and being forced to acknowledge that he had no other choice, Nicholas abdicated. He initially passed power to his brother, Mikhail Alexandrovich Romanov, who himself abdicated on March 3. The Romanov dynasty had ended.

**After Abdication**

In the weeks after Nicholas II’s abdication, political and civic energy gripped the capital. Some 40,000 middle- and working-class women participated in the largest suffrage demonstration in the country’s history—demanding that the provisional government extend to them the right to vote. Just a few months later, the provisional government declared universal suffrage along with broader political and civil rights. Voting—at a date still to be determined—would elect a new constituent assembly.
Two institutions were competing for legitimacy in the capital. Middle-class aspirations were represented by the provisional government, while workers and soldiers were more likely to align with the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies. The Soviet refused efforts by the provisional government to merge the groups into a unified body.

Meanwhile, other soviets formed in cities across Russia—some 700 of them, consisting of 200,000 deputies. By October 1917, the number of soviets had doubled to 1,400. These were not Bolshevik-dominated bodies. Although there were Bolsheviks among them—that is, members of the self-described majority faction of the Russian Social Democratic Party—the soviets were diverse and fluctuating arrays of socialists, workers, intellectuals, and other activists.

In spite of hopes that Russia would end its involvement in the war, the government instead declared its commitment to see the campaign through to conclusion. Russia’s Western allies recognized the provisional government as the country’s legitimate authority, but the Russian working class was less convinced.

**The Bolsheviks**

By the fall of 1917, it fell to the revolutionary Bolsheviks and their leader, Vladimir Lenin, to settle the uncertainty. Lenin had been living in exile in Western Europe, but he had returned to Russia after February’s revolution gained momentum. He had arrived on April 3, 1917.

Upon disembarking from a train at Finland Station in Petrograd, the Bolshevik leader delivered a famous address to supporters that had assembled to greet him. In it, Lenin called for an immediate peace, bread for the people, land for the peasants who worked it, and for all power to be transferred to the soviets.
Over the next several months, his message resonated with those most in need. Support grew, and by September, the Bolsheviks held majorities in both the Moscow and Petrograd soviets. In turn, Lenin planned to seize control of the government on the people’s behalf. A Congress of Soviets—that is, a gathering of representatives from the many hundreds of smaller soviets across the country—was scheduled to convene in Petrograd in October.

That was when Lenin planned to strike. The provisional government unintentionally abetted his plans. The former legislative body had reorganized and appointed as prime minister Alexander Kerensky, who was a socialist but not a Bolshevik. Kerensky was also both a government minister and a soviet member, but he’d increasingly demonstrated that his primary allegiance was to the provisional government.

In early October, Kerensky’s government announced that half the Petrograd garrison of Russian soldiers would be moved out of the capital to defend against the advancing Germany army. The Petrograd Soviet, however, viewed this as a provocative move and created its own military revolutionary committee to resist the transfer of Russian troops. When Kerensky’s government gave the order to the garrison to march out, the military revolutionary committee ordered it to stay put. A confrontation was unavoidable.

In the early morning hours of October 24, 1917, Kerensky ordered the Bolsheviks’ printing press closed, in the first organized move against the party that had defied the will of the provisional government. In retaliation, Leon Trotsky—the head of the soviet’s military revolutionary committee— instructed his men and armed supporters to seize strategic points in the city.

By October 25, this group—known as the Red Guards—was in control of many important sections of the city. That morning, the Red Guards broke up a meeting of the Council of the Republic, which was filled with leading political figures from a wide assortment of parties. The Red Guards herded them out at gunpoint. Then, they besieged the tsar’s former residence, the Winter Palace, where the provisional government was housed.
That evening, after a delay of several hours occasioned by the skirmishes between Red Guards and the defenders of the provisional government, the Second All-Russian Congress of Soviets opened. With cannon fire in the distance, some socialist leaders condemned what they described as a Bolshevik conspiracy and urged members to forge a united, democratic government.

A delegation of moderates now departed to offer their support to the provisional government. As they did so, Trotsky rose to condemn them. Hours later, news arrived that the Red Guards had seized the Winter Palace.

Just before 5:00 am on October 26, 1917, the Bolshevik intellectual Anatolii Lunacharsky stood to read a proclamation from Lenin’s pen. Before a rump congress of Bolshevik supporters, Lunacharsky relayed Lenin’s pronouncement: The Provisional Government had been overthrown, and the mantle of Russian power had been transferred to the Soviets. A second revolution had occurred, and a new era had begun.