

A COUNTRY IN TURMOIL: RUSSIA 1900-1918

In 1883, Karl Marx died in London, England. At the time of his passing, the full-scale revolutions he had predicted had not occurred, and no nations had declared themselves communist. Between 1848 and 1883, however, Marx had been busy spreading his creed. In the 1850's and 1860's he succeeded in forming various councils which directed broad revolutionary strategies. Throughout Europe, discontented workers met to plot the overthrow of political systems that were not communist in nature. Among the leaders of these wide-spread movements were two Russians--Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky. Having been banished from Russia on the charge of treason, both promoted revolution from abroad. Within Russia itself, a young man recently converted to the cause of democratic socialism hoped to unseat the leader. His given name was Joseph Dzhugashvili, but he adopted the surname Stalin, which translates as "man of steel."

As the dawn of the 20th Century approached, Russia lingered in the past. Where other European nations had begun the process of "industrialization," which sent citizens pouring into the cities and brought the unmatched power of machines to their daily lives, Russia remained a country of farmers tethered to the old-fashioned plow. Illiteracy was higher in Russia than elsewhere, poverty was more widespread, land was scarce, and food was hard to come by.

More significantly, Russia's political system was a remnant of the past. In Great Britain, France and Germany, democratic political systems had replaced the ancient rights of kings and queens, and yielded partial power to the common man. Voters elected representatives to governing bodies, and thus secured a voice in the national decision-making process. In Russia, however, little had changed in centuries. The Czar (pronounced "zar") still occupied the royal throne and dictated state policy without regard to the concerns of the people. He claimed to draw his power directly from God, and passed the throne to a chosen successor without the interference of elections. His rule was absolute, those who protested his decisions were subject to severe and immediate punishment, including execution.

Russian citizens thus faced enormous hardships: grinding poverty, hunger, and joblessness were widespread. In 1914, tensions between the expanding and increasingly wealthy nations of Europe exploded in World War I. Russia joined the battle on the side of the British, French, and Italians; they fought the united Germans and Austrians. From the beginning of the conflict, Russia was outmatched. Money, food, and raw materials flowed out of the country to support the war effort. A dangerously unstable populace sunk deeper into despair: Food was even more scarce, the cotton needed to make clothing was used by the soldiers; precious metals were fashioned into guns and bullets. Starvation and disease ran rampant throughout the country, and still the Czar persisted in the war effort. The royals, it was understood, were not as deeply affected by the war as the common people were; they possessed luxuries even while the peasants desperately sought the barest necessities.

Between 1914 and 1917, the cities of Russia witnessed many minor revolts among the citizenry. Tens of thousands of hungry workers joined the communist "soviets"--the Russian word for "councils"--which organized massive protests and labor strikes to show their displeasure at food shortages and the endless prosecution of the war. The well-organized communists dominated the soviet leadership, and made impassioned speeches demanding "land, bread, and peace." The workers, ignored by their government, rallied to the soviets and thus added themselves to the communist cause.

Meanwhile, the Russian army suffered numerous defeats in the field, and Russian territory began to be lost to the enemy. Finally, in February of 1917, weeks of violent street skirmishes backed by the soviets ended with a mob assault on the seat of government. In a remarkable and long-awaited moment, the Czar's soldiers stood aside and let the people take control of the streets. On February 28, 1917, Czar Nicholas II admitted defeat, and left the royal throne.

"ALL POWER TO THE SOVIETS": THE COMMUNIST TAKEOVER

For eight months following the czar's abdication in late February, 1917, there was no unified, widely accepted government within Russia. A council of acknowledged leaders formed a Provisional Government, but it proved weak and ineffective. Worse, what little power the Provisional Government possessed it used foolishly: It repeatedly decided to keep Russia in World War I, despite continuing street protests and disastrous shortages of food and raw materials.

Meanwhile the soviets--now fully controlled by the brilliant organizer and motivator Vladimir Lenin--focused on winning the support of army troops, and began to take control of Russia's railroads and telegraph lines. In this way the soviets could manipulate all movement and communication within the country. With the full backing of the troops, they would possess the means with which to secure state authority for themselves.

Lenin was aided by two prominent communist allies: his old friend Leon Trotsky, and a new acquaintance, Joseph Stalin. The three guided soviet policy, promising workers and soldiers food, abundant land, and an end to Russia's involvement in the war. In the future, Lenin declared, goods would not be stolen from the poor and given to the rich. Vast tracts of land would not be held aside for the church, the royal family, or the wealthy. Everyone, he said, would benefit equally from a new social order, an experiment that had never been tried before. "Land, bread, and peace" for everyone, Lenin promised: "All power to the soviets!"

In October of 1917, Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin decided to make their move. Thousands of soviet workers and soldiers were armed and informed of a plan to seize the government. On October 24, 1917, the assault on the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, where the Provisional government was headquartered, began. By the following night, the Provisional Government had fallen, and Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin were poised on the verge of ushering in the first-ever Communist government.

THE AFTERMATH: COMMUNISM'S FIRST YEARS, 1917-1922

Days after the successful revolution, Lenin called a meeting of all Russian soviets. He opened this Congress with words of characteristic bravado: "We shall now proceed to the construction of the communist order." The new soviet government quickly stripped all land from owners, and forbade the holding of private property. Fields were to be redistributed according to need. Hired labor was outlawed. Banks and businesses would be "nationalized" gradually; that is, they would come under state control, so that owners could not divide profits unfairly. The communist era had begun: Its goal was equality and peace for all, and forever.

A peace agreement proved difficult to accomplish. Eventually, the Russians were forced to accept an unfavorable treaty at Brest-Litovsk, Poland, in March of 1918. They agreed to give up a great deal of their own territory, and pay a huge monetary penalty to the enemy. Within Russia, the formerly well-placed and wealthy--now displaced from their land and divested of their possessions--began to organize a campaign against the soviets. General dissatisfaction with the peace treaty brought more members to their cause. Concerned foreign nations, including the United States and Great Britain, contributed money and resources to these opponents of the revolution.

The soviet leadership--Lenin, Trotsky, and Stalin--faced a dilemma. How did they bring about an age of peace and equality when they were confronted with opposition? Their answer was quick and brutal: The dissenting elements must be rooted out and destroyed. The soviets formed the "Red Army" and began a terror campaign which identified and executed suspected anti-Communists. Between 1918-1921, a civil war raged between the communists and their enemies. Led by Leon Trotsky, the "Red Army" prevailed, and the communists maintained their hold on power. Some wondered whether the communist revolution had already been betrayed: How could tranquility come to the Russian nation now that so many citizens had been killed?

Before Lenin could formulate an answer, and bring about the golden days of the new government, he suffered three paralyzing strokes. In 1922, the last episode took his life. A new leader must step forward, but both Leon Trotsky and Joseph Stalin coveted the seat of power.

TROTSKY AND STALIN: 1922-1940

Trotsky was a brilliant speaker and writer. His passionate support of communism had provided much of the fire in the early years of the soviets. Trotsky was a man with an appetite for books and ideas. He was a visionary thinker, and hoped to transform Russia into an industrial powerhouse, the envy of the whole world. When he spoke in defense of these dreams, he did so with such eloquence--and with such command of his subject matter--that he gained many loyal followers. He was an intellectual giant, and a formidable opponent for Joseph Stalin.

Stalin had his strengths as well. His mind was quick and he spoke well, but he was not of Trotsky's caliber in these realms. Where Trotsky dreamed, Stalin focused instead on administrative duties and on creating bonds of loyalty between himself and powerful men within the soviets. By the time Lenin died in 1922, Stalin's strategy had paid off. In the ensuing discussion of new leadership, he had the hard-won support of important allies. Even the brilliant words of Trotsky could not turn them from backing Stalin.

The Stalin era lasted for 25 years. Among his most important contributions to the Soviet Union were his "Five Year Plans," ambitious programs to propel Russia into the industrial age. The first "Plan" began in 1928 and ended in 1933; the second and third were undertaken in the following ten years. By the early 1940's, Russia had achieved an industrial strength that was equal to the former world leaders in the capitalist countries.

The changes came with a price. Unable to tolerate any competing voices or ideas, Stalin maintained his grip on power through the use of political and social terror. He increased the size of Russia's internal police force (KGB) drastically, and he used them to spy on suspected enemies within the country. In effect, Stalin silenced all opposition, and any words uttered against him became a rationale for incarceration, or worse. Vast prison systems sprung up in the hinterlands of the Russian state. These "Gulags" used inmates as cheap labor and deprived them of even the barest necessities. It was a brutal institution, designed to inspire fear in prisoners, and in free citizens who contemplated criticizing the Stalin regime.

In 1934, Stalin set a series of political "purges" in motion. High-ranking officials in the Soviet government were systematically arrested, forced to admit to crimes they did not commit, and summarily executed. The purges grew in scope quickly, so that by the conclusion of the purge years much of Russian society had come under its terrifying gaze, and many estimates put the total number killed at between 2 and 7 million people. Many more were made prisoners. Thus the Soviet Union became simultaneously one of the most powerful, and most despotic, of all the world's governments. Stalin's death in 1953 brought many of his excesses to an end, but the basic institutions and patterns of the life that he had created remained.

THE WORLD AFTER STALIN

Between the death of Stalin and the early years of the 1980's, the Soviet Union remained a highly repressive government. Internal spying was rampant, voices of protest were brutally squashed, and all organs of communication were tightly monitored by the communists. Ideas that were not officially sanctioned by the State were dangerous, and those who held or published them risked threats, imprisonment, or worse. Newspapers and TV stations tirelessly promoted communist doctrine, or were shut down. Individual ownership of business was still strictly forbidden. In all aspects, the Soviet government retained an iron grip on the nation, and attempted to control the lives, ambitions, and even the thoughts of its citizens.

In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev took the reigns of Soviet power. A courageous and far-sighted leader, he saw that the Soviet Union had both economic and social shortcomings that inhibited growth. The Western nations, by contrast, were increasingly prosperous, and their world-wide influence grew correspondingly. Gorbachev knew that Russia must change to compete.

Thus, in 1985 Gorbachev announced the twin pillars of a radical new policy - *perestroika* (economic restructuring) and *glasnost* (social and political openness). Soon, he introduced legislation that loosened the restrictions on individual ownership of property and business, and allowed for greater freedom of expression. Ideas long unspoken coursed through the Russian nation: Perhaps socialism was not best for Russia; maybe the Communist leaders were ineffective, even corrupt; perhaps new leaders and new ways of governing were needed. Once unleashed, these ideas proved difficult to stop; indeed, they were hard to influence or temper in any way. Within several years, the once unassailable Soviet government teetered on the verge of collapse.

By 1991, the rising tide of voices opposed to the communist government had reached a critical mass. Large-scale street protests throughout Russia and in its closely allied satellite states shook the foundations of the Soviet system. The people were free to speak, and in vast numbers they rejected the long experiment with communism. In December of 1991, the communist government of the Soviet Union acknowledged its own end, and an anxious period of instability and doubt began.

In eras when governance is not clearly assigned, opportunities for abuse of power present themselves. In the former communist republics of Czechoslovakia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Yugoslavia, for example, ancient ethnic hatreds re-emerged and spiralled towards violence once the Soviet insistence on internal unity disappeared. In Yugoslavia, in particular, bitter rivalries between peoples of different heritages drifted catastrophically towards open warfare. Serbian, Croatian, and Albanian peoples faced each other in tense standoffs over land, religion, and culture.

Leaders like Serbian President Slobodan Milosevic sought to exploit the situation by inflaming hatreds and calling for policies of direct, violent conflict with perceived enemies. He began a plan of systematically banishing minority ethnic groups from their homelands and reclaiming the emptied towns as part of a greater Serbia. Under his guidance, Serbian troops burned, looted, and killed in a widespread policy which came to be called "ethnic cleansing." The presence of concentration camps, mass graves, and other atrocities have been, and are currently being verified in the contested lands of the former Yugoslavia.

To implement such inhumane policies, voices of protest must be silenced, and the media must be made to serve the state. The appearance of nationwide support--even if is untrue--creates a climate in which challenges seem futile, or unpatriotic. With all open discussion effectively blunted, the truth becomes unknowable, and unthinkable acts of brutality become commonplace. Yugoslavia is emblematic of this phenomenon, but it is only a single example.

Questions of power are universal, and in every nation decisions about the distribution of authority have vast implications for the future of justice, equality, and freedom within its borders. When governments abuse power, these hallmarks of a healthy society are jeopardized. In extreme cases, leaders protect their own authority through the use of state-sponsored terrorism, propaganda, and murder. Individual citizens become expendable, and maintenance of the power and authority of the State becomes of paramount importance. Brutality and violence become the dominant cultural characteristics; the lives of thousands, even millions of people are ruled by fear and despair.

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