

RUSSIA, 1894-1945

Problems Facing Tsar Nicholas II

When Tsar Nicholas II became the ruler of Russia in 1894, he had many problems. People in Russia were very poor and unhappy. Most Russians were peasants, working on farms and living in bad conditions. The country was not as modern as other European countries, and many people wanted change. There were also many different ethnic groups in Russia, and some wanted independence. Nicholas II believed in ruling with absolute power, but many people wanted a more democratic government.

The Revolution of 1905

In 1905, there was a revolution. This started with 'Bloody Sunday', when peaceful protesters were killed by the Tsar's soldiers in St. Petersburg. People were angry about high taxes, poor working conditions, and lack of political freedom. Workers went on strike, peasants rioted, and soldiers mutinied. The Tsar had to make concessions to calm people down. He promised to create a parliament, called the Duma, and allow more freedom. However, these changes were limited, and many people were still unhappy.

The February Revolution

By 1917, Russia was suffering greatly from World War I. There were food shortages, and people were starving. The war was going badly, and soldiers were deserting. In March 1917, people in St. Petersburg (then called Petrograd) started protesting for bread and peace. The protests grew, and the Tsar's soldiers joined the protesters. Tsar Nicholas II was forced to give up his throne. This ended over 300 years of Romanov rule in Russia. A temporary government, called the Provisional Government, took over.

Provisional Government

The Provisional Government tried to rule Russia after the Tsar stepped down. It was led by Alexander Kerensky. However, this government faced many problems. It continued fighting in World War I, which was very unpopular. The Provisional Government also had to deal with food shortages, economic problems, and demands for land reform from peasants. Many people did not support the Provisional Government, and it struggled to maintain control.

October Revolution

In November 1917, a second revolution took place. This was led by the Bolsheviks, a group of revolutionary socialists led by Vladimir Lenin. They believed in communism and wanted to give power to the working class. The Bolsheviks took over key government buildings in Petrograd in a nearly bloodless coup. They promised "peace, land, and bread" to the people. The Provisional Government was overthrown, and the Bolsheviks took control of Russia.

Bolshevik State: 'War Communism'

After the Bolsheviks took power, they introduced policies often called 'War Communism'. Under so-called 'War Communism', the government took control of all industry and forced peasants to give their grain to the state. Private trade was banned, and rationing was introduced. This policy aimed to introduce a socialist culture into Russian society, and to supply the Red Army and keep the cities fed, but it led to severe food shortages and a lot of suffering among the population.

Civil War

From 1917 to 1922, Russia was torn apart by a civil war between the Bolsheviks (Reds) and their opponents (Whites). The Whites included monarchists, capitalists, and other groups who opposed the Bolsheviks. The Reds were able to win the war because they were more organized and controlled key areas like major cities and railways. The Red Army, led by Leon Trotsky, was very effective. The civil war caused immense destruction and loss of life. Millions of people died from the fighting, disease, and famine.

New Economic Policy

After the civil war, Lenin introduced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1921 to rebuild the economy. The NEP allowed some private business and small-scale private farming. Peasants could sell their surplus crops on the open market. This was a temporary retreat from full communism to help the economy recover. The NEP led to an improvement in the economy, but some communists were unhappy with the policy because it seemed like a step back from true socialism.

Stalin Takes Power

After Lenin died in 1924, Joseph Stalin gradually took control of the Communist Party by playing off different factions against each other. By the late 1920s, he had become the undisputed leader of the Soviet Union. Stalin was very different from Lenin. He was more ruthless and willing to use violence to achieve his goals. He wanted to consolidate his power and to transform the Soviet Union into a modern, industrialized country.

Purges and Terror

In the 1930s, Stalin launched a series of purges to eliminate his enemies and anyone he saw as a threat. Thousands of Communist Party members, military officers, and ordinary citizens were arrested, imprisoned, sent to prison camps (the Gulag) or executed. This period is known as the Great Terror. Stalin used secret police, propaganda, and fear to maintain control over the country. Many innocent people were caught up in the purges, and the terror had a devastating impact on Soviet society.

Collectivisation

Stalin also introduced collectivization to transform agriculture. He wanted to replace small, individual farms with large, state-run collective farms. This was supposed to increase agricultural productivity and support rapid industrialization. However, many peasants resisted collectivization. The government used force to take their land and livestock, leading to widespread suffering. Millions of peasants were killed or sent to the Gulag. The disruption caused by collectivization also led to a terrible famine, especially in Ukraine 1932-33, where millions died.

5-Year Plans

To industrialize the Soviet Union, Stalin introduced a series of Five-Year Plans. The first plan began in 1928. These plans set ambitious goals for industrial production, including steel, coal, and machinery. The government focused on heavy industry and building infrastructure like factories and railways. While the Five-Year Plans led to significant industrial growth, they also caused hardship. Workers faced long hours, poor conditions, and strict government control. Despite these challenges, the Soviet Union became a major industrial power by the late 1930s.

Impact of World War II

In 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union in a surprise attack. The Soviets initially suffered massive losses, but they eventually managed to stop the German advance. The Battle of Stalingrad in 1942-1943 was a turning point. The Soviet Union began to push back the German forces and advanced into Eastern Europe, capturing Berlin in 1945.

World War II had a huge impact on the Soviet Union. It caused enormous devastation and loss of life in the Soviet Union, some 27 million soldiers and civilians killed. However, by 1945, the Soviet Union emerged as one of the world's superpowers, having played a crucial role in defeating Nazi Germany.