

# The concise history of the russian revolution

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



The Russian Revolution was an extraordinary episode in the history of Russia. The source of the revolution, its nature and consequences, are complex and understanding those aspects have dominated the study of twentieth century Europe. What began as a peaceful bread demonstration on International Women's Day soon transformed into a revolution that was successful in toppling the Tsarist regime that had ruled Russia for centuries.

The Russian Revolutions of February and October 1917 have been widely researched so that there are now numerous histories available of the events that happened. The two books reviewed, Richard Pipes' *The Concise History of the Russian Revolution* and Sheila Fitzpatrick's *The Russian Revolution* offer different perspectives on the social, political and cultural matters of the Russian Revolution. Both authors are well-respected in their field but are not without their detractors. Pipes argues that October was a "classic coup d'état, the capture of governmental authority by a small band, carried out, in deference to the democratic professions of the age, with a show of mass participation, but with hardly any mass involvement." [1] Fitzpatrick considers the revolution to be a "single process" set in motion with the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II in 1917 and ending with Stalin's Five-Year Plan.

In writing the introduction to *The Concise History of the Russian Revolution*, Pipes states that this volume is a "précis" of two of his earlier, well-received, works, *The Russian Revolution* (1990) and *Russia under the Bolshevik Regime* (1994). Nonetheless, he provides a detailed account illustrating how the Russian Revolution "was not a single incident or even a process but a sequence of disruptive and violent acts that occurred more or less concurrently yet involved actors with differing and in some measure

contradictory objectives.”[2]Pipes further argues that it is the radical intelligentsia that shoulders primary responsibility for both the revolution and its Bolshevik outcome.

Pipes divides his account into three parts. The first, “ The Agony of the Old Regime,” offers a description of Tsarist Russia and the “ thousands of men and women [who were] committed to fundamental change.”[3]He provides insight into Russia’s difficulties in introducing a constitutional government, her disastrous involvement in World War One, and the February Revolution. The principal theme is that the traditions and values that the Tsar inherited from his ancestors were supreme. As a result, the Tsar could reject the call from the masses “ to bring representatives of the population into the decision-making process.”[4]However, the autocratic monarchy that had ruled Russia for centuries had run its course and was no longer capable of dealing with the pressures of modernism. The Tsarist system failed because it was unable to establish a system where peasants and the intelligentsia might play a part. The peasantry made up the vast majority of the Russian population yet for the most part it was unfamiliar to and remained largely detached from the state. For its part, the intelligentsia was opposed to supporting those who ruled Russia. It advocated discontent and resisted reform making it unrealistic for Russia to solve its problems peacefully.

Part two, “ The Bolsheviks Conquer Russia,” recounts the rise of Lenin, the October Coup, and the creation of the terror state. Pipes describes the Bolshevik Party as Lenin’s creation, he founded it, “ conceived it in his own image and, overcoming all opposition from within and without, kept it on the

course he had charted.”[5]There are historians who consider the revolution of October 1917 to be a popular, democratic movement that represented the interests of the people of Russia. Yet, Pipes has another opinion, he considers “ the events that led to the overthrow of the Provisional Government were not spontaneous but carefully plotted and staged by a tightly organized conspiracy.”[6]Lenin was able to seize power with remarkably little public support, he misled the common people and grabbed control during a period of turmoil and succeeded in supplanting all existing institutions until he had established a totalitarian regime. A brilliant description of War Communism follows where the author argues that it was a consequence of Bolshevik intent instead of the pressures brought on by War.

Part three, “ Russia under the Bolshevik Regime,” Pipes describes the campaigns of the civil war in detail including a thorough review of White leaders, their military and civic agendas, and their relationship with Allied powers. He suggests various reasons why the Bolsheviks triumphed in the civil war, in particular the fact that the Communists were unified whereas their adversaries were not. He then discusses the new regimes difficulties in a free market under the New Economic Policy. The methods by which the Bolsheviks sought to spread communism are intriguing since Lenin “ seized power in Russia not to change Russia but to use her as a springboard from which to change the world.”[7]

The author’s conclusion, “ Reflections on the Russian Revolution,” is an excellent summary where the author presents an analytical assessment of the Revolution. Because he ends his text with the death of Lenin, this is

where he discusses the continuity between Lenin and Stalin and summarizes “ Stalinism grew out of the authoritarian inclinations of Bolshevism which were apparent before Stalin took power and every ingredient of what has come to be known as Stalinism, he had learned from Lenin.”[8]Stalin did not seize power upon Lenin’s death, he had been preparing for is slowly in partnership with Lenin mainly because he was devoted to Lenin’s political philosophy.

The events described by Pipes are largely familiar ones and there is very little of his analysis of particular affairs such as the February Revolution, the April crisis, the Constituent Assembly crisis, the Kornilov affair, the October coup, and Brest-Litovsk that will be original to those who have an understanding of Russian history. On one point, that the Bolshevik regime was unpopular and illegitimate from its inception, the author offers an impressive argument. A Concise History of the Russian Revolution covers a lot of information effectively and is an excellent introduction to the events that occurred in Russia during the first few decades of the twentieth century as well as the origins of Communism. A just over four hundred pages, Pipes’ work is anything but concise. Compared to the two substantial and exhaustive volumes that this text is derived from, it is a valuable introduction to the events leading up to and the consequences of the Russian Revolution.

Distinguished Russian historian Shelia Fitzpatrick’s purpose in The Russian Revolution is to show how the revolution succeeded in transforming Russia from a Tsarist regime into a socialist power. The book is considered one of

the finest surveys available on the events that transpired in Russia between 1917 and 1938. Unlike Pipes who condensed two extremely large volumes into a standard length synopsis, Fitzpatrick provides comprehensive analysis of the problems present in tsarist society, the growth of the revolutionary movement, and the political struggles of 1917 in relatively few pages. Her goal is to provide the reader with a “ history of the Russian Revolution as experienced in Russia, not in the non-Russian territories that were part of the old Russian Empire and Soviet Union”[9]To that end, she analyzes the political, social, and economic issues inside Russian society for the period of the Revolution with the purpose of offering a full interpretation of the Russian Revolution.

The book examines three broad themes that hold special importance to the author. Modernization played a significant role in the history of this period and Fitzpatrick shows how the revolution was used as a “ means of escaping from backwardness.”[10]The second theme, that of class, is not new, and Fitzpatrick highlights the importance of the proletariat and the role they played in determining the revolution’s outcome. The third theme is the Bolshevik Party’s use of revolutionary violence and terror as a means of dealing with enemies both within and outside the party. These themes are expertly interwoven throughout the text.

The author starts off with a review of the problems characteristic of tsarist society, the growth of the revolutionary movement, and the political problems of 1917. She then provides clear explanation of Lenin’s activities that lead to revolution. While she does call October a coup, Fitzpatrick is at

odds with Pipes on just what the October Revolution signified. She makes a case that it was a popular revolt where the Bolsheviks benefited from wide-ranging support of the Russian people, and the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks was not the end, but the beginning of the revolution.

The civil war “ gave the new regime a baptism by fire, and thereby influenced its future development,” and the result was that the Bolsheviks resorted to political oppression, centralized rule, and totalitarianism in order to survive.[11]The author provides an excellent discussion of the Civil War and the New Economic Policy discussing the problems the Bolsheviks faced while putting the NEP into practice. The hardships brought about by war forced the Bolsheviks into abandoning war communism in favor of the New Economic Policy which was an “ improvised response to desperate economic circumstances, undertaken initially with very little discussion and debate in the party and the leadership.”[12]Her observations on the NEP era and how it was perceived in the years following Stalin’s death is informative.

Fitzpatrick had a solid understanding of the Stalinist era and provides an informative introduction to Stalin’s industrialization, economic, modernization, and five-year plans. Stalin went further than Lenin, extending “ direct control over the whole urban economy” and brought about in a cultural revolution that “ left a complex legacy of bitterness, fear, and suspicion.”[13]She argues that there are essential elements of continuity that connect Lenin’s Revolution of 1917 with Stalin’s “ revolution from above” and that the revolution cannot be considered completed until the end of the first Five Year Plan in 1932.

The Russian Revolution is an excellent summary of both the February and October Revolutions of 1917. The New Edition uses recently accessible Soviet archival material and the most recent Russian and Western research and is a respectable interpretation of the causes and the consequences of the Russian Revolution. Although the book is relatively brief, it demands the reader's attention in order to understand what the author is trying to accomplish.