

# A history of 19th and 20th century russia

[War](#), [Cold War](#)



A History of 19th and 20th Century Russia A society's understanding of its history is crucial to a society's perception and definition of itself. During the 1980s the Soviet Union underwent a cultural revival, whereby the Russian people, prompted by Mikhail Gorbachev's invitation to glasnost (more openness), began critically re-examining Soviet and pre-revolutionary history. As the nation engaged in oral discussions and literary readings to study their past, they started to reassess the Soviet Union's theories and practices. Only through untainted assessments of their history could the Soviets truly grasp the present state of affairs in the 1980s.

### IMPERIAL RUSSIA

At the opening of the nineteenth century, Russia was an imperial nation ruled by Tsar Alexander I (1801-1825). By this time, the Russian Tsars had achieved virtually autocratic rule over their nobles, who, in turn, enjoyed a sort of despotic relationship over their serfs. Alexander I made several domestic advancements but focused most heavily on foreign affairs, joining the fight against France's invading Napoleon in 1805 and helping to defeat him in 1814. Though such victory strengthened Russia's international political role, at home the people faced an inefficient government and economic turmoil. When Nicholas I (1825-1855) succeeded his older brother Alexander I in 1825, he faced a public griened by the peasants' hardship and influenced by the neighboring French Revolution. The result came as an uprising, with a group of liberal western-minded nobles and army officers engaging in the Decembrist Revolt of 1825. Tsar Nicholas I crushed the rebellion, and in the aftermath he became increasingly authoritarian-- sending police to detect revolutionaries, abandoning Peter the Great's established Westernization Program and rigorously censoring written

materials. After Nicholas I died in 1855, Alexander II came to power and began a reign of steady, much-needed reform. In 1861 he radically abolished serfdom in Russia--ending the monopoly of landed aristocracy, fueling a rush of free labor to the cities, stimulating industry and contributing to a growing middle class. However, because peasants often received the poorest lands, and because they were often forced to pay lofty taxes for it, revolutionary tensions continued to stir. These tensions were further fueled by an emerging Nihilist movement in the 1860s. Nihilists deemed all human institutions and laws as basically corrupt, arguing that aristocrats should listen to the wisdom of common people. The Nihilists engaged in terrorists activities and in 1881 a group of anarchists assassinated Tsar Alexander II. His son Alexander III then rose to the throne in 1881, though unlike his father, he was not interested in catering to demands for reform. Instead, he instilled an autocratic system of leadership and attempted to bar all Western influences from Russia. His advisor, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, taught him to reject freedom of speech and to abhor democracy, constitutions and the parliamentary system. Alexander III tried to stamp out revolutionaries and enforce " Russification"--or the assimilation of non-Russian regions into Russian culture--throughout the empire. After Alexander III, Nicholas II (1894-1917) ascended to power, and under his reign Russia embarked on an age of industrialization and political revolution. Opposition forces began to emerge, including the Constitutional Democratic Party (founded in 1905, and known as the Kadets), the Socialist-Revolutionary Party (founded in 1901, and known as the Esers) and the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (founded in 1898, and known as the RDSLP). This last group was the most liberal,

attracting support from intelligentsia and the working class, affirming Marxist ideologies and calling for a complete social, economic and political revolution in Russia. The RDSLP split into two groups, the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks. The Mensheviks, led by Julius Martov, hoped that socialism would grow gradually and peacefully, and they advocated for an eventual democratic republic which would cooperate with the liberal bourgeois. The far more radical Bolshevik group was led by Vladimir Lenin, and it proposed overthrowing the Tsar by force. THE REVOLUTION BEGINS 1905 was a year of revolution and change for Russia. Agitated by the country's dismal performance in the Russo-Japanese War, an enormous crowd of dissenters marched to petition at the Palace of St. Petersburg in January of 1905. Massacred by the Tsar army, this uprising is commonly referred to as Bloody Sunday, and it roused the public to a larger strike and demands for a democratic republic. The Russian Revolution of 1905 had begun. Tsar Nicholas II reluctantly conceded to the public, issuing the October Manifesto which created a representative assembly called a Duma. Moderates were satisfied but socialists remained discontented and continued to hold strikes, especially because each successive Duma seemed to possess less power. By 1917, as Russia suffered tremendously from strains of the First World War--losing troops, lacking food and entering a state of demoralization--another insurgence seemed inevitable. Bloody Sunday February 1917 brought the February Revolution, whereby thousands of female textile workers began and strike and others quickly followed their lead. Tsar Nicholas II dismantled the Duma and commanded that workers return to their posts, authorizing troops to shoot at the demonstrators who lined the streets. On March 2,

1917, Nicholas II abdicated the throne and was replaced by a moderate provisional government, eventually headed by Alexander Kerensky. Yet the Bolsheviks insisted that this provisional government was not nearly liberal enough, and in October 1917 they took matters into their own hands. After Lenin returned from exile in Switzerland, he appealed to the people with a slogan of "Peace! Bread! Land!" and the Soviets seized control of the government, forcing Kerensky into exile. A Constituent Assembly then formed, but Lenin later dissolved this system. Soviet Propaganda film promotes October Revolution CREATION OF THE SOVIET UNION (1922-1991)

When the Bolsheviks claimed power in 1917, the Soviets were forced to contend with a large number of opponents, including peasants, right-wing "Whites" and the Socialist Revolutionaries. The Soviets fought a long civil war between the "Reds" and the "Whites" in order to fully control Russia. In what is called "War Communism," land, industry and business all became nationalized, while money and economic activities were restricted by the government. Peasants were acerbated because they could no longer receive cash payments, and they didn't want to hand their surplus grain sources over to the government. Lenin mobilized the Red Army and the Cheka (Soviet secret police) to destroy all "enemies of the Revolution." In 1921, however, the Soviet leader instituted his New Economic Policy (NEP) as a sort of compromise with the dissenting public. Under this plan, peasants were permitted to sell grain and produce in an open market, though the state would still control banking, industry, transportation and public utilities. The Soviet Union was officially established in December of 1922 by leaders of the Communist Party. It initially consisted of four republics: Russian SFSR,

Ukrainian SSR, Belarusian SSR and Transcaucasian SFSR. The Soviet Union created a federal government organized with a succession of soviets from villages, factories and cities to the All-Congress of Soviets. The government was effectively controlled by the Communist Party, specifically the powerful leaders in the policy-making Politburo of Moscow. Amidst such rapid economic and political change, Russian society underwent a series of social changes. In the religious realm, the government advanced atheism and materialism, challenging organized religion (especially the Russian Orthodox Church) and sending countless priests into exile. In keeping with this separation between church and state, education was stressed and revamped, with all religious teachings removed from the curriculum. The government also worked to incorporate minority groups into the Soviet Union and abandon policies of discrimination. In addition, the system of patriarchy slowly weakened and women gained some freedoms and rights, while life expectancy climbed and medical services became more accessible.

Soviet Union National Anthem

### INDUSTRIALIZATION AND TERROR UNDER STALIN

Joseph Stalin obtained almost sole power of Russia after Lenin's death and ruled from 1929 until 1939. He eliminated Lenin's NEP and replaced it with a Five Year Plan, a new economic policy which the nation both toward massive industrialization and a collectivization of the peasantry, setting strict limits on the manufacture of consumer goods. With this move, Stalin ensured that the government would completely control all aspects of the economy. The peasants suffered under Stalin's Five Year Plan. The government also managed agriculture, forcing millions of peasants off of their land and murdering those peasants deemed to be " kulaks. " In protest, many farmers

slaughtered their own herds. This combination of a loss in land and peasant revolts gave rise to a horrible famine, which devastated Ukraine and areas of southwest Russia. Stalin's sovereignty was also characterized by violence and oppression, and it is typically remembered as the "Reign of Terror." With the NKVD (Soviet secret police), Stalin deported and executed tens of thousands of Soviets, and he also authorized a purge of political and military leaders. Over 18 million people were sent to the Gulag labor camps, and another 15 million were dispatched to various other kinds of concentration camps.

#### SOVIETS IN THE INTERNATIONAL SPHERE

The Soviets distrusted anti-communist, fascist Germany, apprehensive of Hitler's eastward movement and threats of an outright attack. Hoping to normalize Soviet-German relations, Stalin signed a non-aggression pact with Hitler in 1939, but despite this effort, the Germans invaded Russia during World War II and attempted to capture Stalingrad. Eventually, Stalin forced the German army to surrender, and the Red Army turned to occupy Eastern Europe. The Soviets continued to expand westward, but the war left its domestic economy in practical ruins. After World War II, a conflict surfaced between the United States and the Soviet Union, as Stalin and President Harry Truman disputed over the future of Eastern Europe. Known as the Cold War, this tension lasted until the 1980s, as the United States feared Communist expansion throughout the continent, while the Soviets hoped to establish a stronghold and buffer zone between Germany and his own nation. Both sides engaged in an arms buildup. The countries were further divided when the United States sponsored the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in April 1949—linking Western nations together in a mutual defensive pledge—and the Soviet Union

created an Eastern counterpart to NATO called the Warsaw Pact in 1955. Stalin died in 1953, and by 1956 Nikita Khrushchev became the new Communist leader in Russia. A year later he helped launch Sputnik, the world's first artificial satellite, but in the 1960s—after years of increasing US-Soviet hostilities and growing nuclear arms—Khrushchev faced a defining calamity in the Cuban Missile Crisis. Ultimately this situation was a large setback for the Soviet Union in terms of international standing, and Khrushchev was later overthrown in 1964 for his failed handling of the situation. Leonid Brezhnev took Khrushchev's place, continuing previous efforts to halt the arms race with SALT I and SALT II. Nevertheless, Soviet-US relations continued to worsen when the Soviets sent the military to occupy Afghanistan in December of 1979. The Russian economy stagnated as Brezhnev allocated vast resources to the armed forces. The country became increasingly dependent upon grain imports from the West. Brezhnev was succeeded by Yuri Andropov in 1984, who in turn was replaced by Konstantin Chernenko. THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION When Chernenko passed away in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev rose to power. Gorbachev introduced an economic policy called perestroika (reconstruction), which involved a relaxed government control over the economy. This policy failed to drastically improve the struggling Soviet economy. Gorbachev also began a policy known as glasnost, relaxing censorship laws and allowing a liberalization of the media. In 1986, when a nuclear power plant exploded at Chernobyl in Ukraine, the catastrophe was initially covered up in the secret Soviet manner, but then Gorbachev realized that concealment of information was causing public panic. He reasserted his belief in glasnost, and freedom of



speech grew. Russia was finally able to openly discuss its national problems, including poverty, corruption and the unpopular Afghan war. Yet it was apparent to Gorbachev that the government was quickly becoming the target of criticism, especially with the emergence of radical reformists like Boris Yeltsin—the new Moscow Party chief—and nonconformists like Andrei Sakharov. In 1989, Gorbachev removed Soviet troops from Afghanistan, but at the second convocation of the Congress of People’s Deputies in December 1989, members eradicated the quota system which had traditionally secured parliamentary seats for the Communist Party. With this decision, Gorbachev’s own position was no longer secure, his perestroika had virtually met its end, and the country embarked on a new phase of open multi-party politics. The Soviet Union truly began to crumble in 1990, as constituent republics started issuing decrees of independence. Yeltsin became the chairman of Parliament in the Russian Republic, and Gorbachev was faced with mounting opposition forces. Conservatives criticized glasnost and perestroika, while radicals called for democracy instead of mere democratic reforms. Large scale strikes and demonstrations intensified, the economy declined and crime escalated. Gorbachev found himself unable to appease his people. On August 18, 1991, a conservative coup in Crimea attempted to detain Gorbachev, placing the Soviet leader under house arrest. The Russian people, however, gathered behind Boris Yeltsin to stop this conservative uprising, and they successfully obtained Gorbachev’s release. The coup collapsed after three days, but by the time Gorbachev returned to office he knew that his position had become obsolete. Gorbachev resigned on December 25 after the Soviet Union was abolished and replaced by a

Commonwealth of Independent States, and on December 31, a Russian tricolor flew high atop the Kremlin in place of the once powerful Soviet flag.