Russian Revolution and Civil War: Crash Course European History #35

Crash Course: European History
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https://nerdfighteria.info/v/U6KR4cLLVzQ

Hi I'm John Green and this is Crash Course European History.

So, World War I unleashed seemingly endless violence. But while it was happening, even more violence was taking shape across Europe, most notably the Russian revolution and civil war. [Intro] The failure of Tsar Nicholas II's government in directing the war effort caused immense suffering.

He built no efficient administration to ensure adequate weaponry, or transportation, or food, or medical care, or the other necessities of modern warfare. I know we often like to make fun of bureaucracy, but governments without it tend to … fail miserably. So even though Russian soldiers were loyal and effective fighters, they suffered from a lack of basic materials--like bullets, for instance, and soldiers often went without boots, wearing rags on their feet.

Some generals were first rate but others were totally uninstructed in modern techniques and more concerned with conducting pogroms against their own Jewish troops than effectively fighting the enemy. As hundreds of thousands of wounded people and millions of refugees crossed back into an entirely unprepared Russia from 1915 on, soldiers deserted while civilian organizations picked up where the imperial administration failed. Local organizations called zemstvos took responsibility for civilian well-being, joining other groups to take care of the wounded and maintain the home front more generally.

And throughout history, when people see such groups doing the work that governments traditionally do, it can deeply undermine support for governments. On the warfront, the government wasn't much more inspirational. After a string of Russian defeats, Czar Nicholas decided that he should personally oversee the battlefront, which made him appear incompetent--because, you know, to be fair, he was--and also he seemed uninterested in the survival of ordinary Russians--which, again, you could make the case.

All of this meant that a revolution was around the corner. But before we get there, I think the center of the world just opened. CAT CA

LENDAR: We explain that Russia would soon adopt the calendar used in Europe and the United States, but at the time, was still using a somewhat different calendar, which is why the International Women's Day we are about to refer to happened in Russian. February and American March. Because dates are not very important, we are not going to overanalyze this, but everyone should use the exact same calendar--specifically, this cat calendar. It's a calendar!

And it's not just any calendar, it's our editorial director Meredith's vintage cats calendar. So shortly, Russia would adopt this calendar, the one used in Europe and the United States. But at the time, it was still using a somewhat different calendar, which is why the International.

Women's Day we are about to talk about happened in Russian February, and not American March. Now because the memorization of dates is overrated, we are not going to overanalyze this, but for the record, everyone should use the exact same calendar all the time, specifically this vintage cat calendar. OK.

So, on Russian February 23, 1917 it was International Women's Day. Working women took to the streets of Petrograd--oh, god I feel another explanation coming on. (OK, Petrograd had been St. Petersburg, but that sounded too German, so they made it Petrograd.

But soon it would be Leningrad, only eventually to become St. Petersburg again). Right, so it's February, sort of, and we're in Petrograd, sort of.

The important thing is that these women were protesting the effects of a totally mismanaged war effort: soaring inflation, food scarcity, casualties in the millions, and an army often defeated and in retreat. Protests surged in the capital and then traveled the empire. Rebellious soldiers and the persistence of angry crowds along with the insistence of his wider family eventually persuaded Nicholas to abdicate his throne.

Members of the Duma—the assembly of elected representatives that Nicholas very reluctantly set up to end the revolution of 1905--constituted themselves as a Provisional Government, consisting of monarchist, conservative, liberal, and a variety of socialist members. Both disorder and new forms of organization unfolded. Workers and soldiers revived the councils, or "soviets," they had used during the revolution of 1905 and began claiming a large voice in ruling Russia.

And as wealthy leaders of the Provisional Government and the less privileged members of the soviets jostled for administrative supremacy, wartime chaos accelerated in Russian cities—especially in Petrograd, where soldiers and workers shot opponents, including random officials and military officers, because they stood for the oppression and starvation of the old regime. This competition for power on the home front coexisted with general support for World War. I, which itself brought more death and more deprivation, which further weakened government and other institutions.

Still some were optimistic that life would change for the better or as one poet put it "that our false, filthy, boring, hideous life should become a just, pure, merry, and beautiful life." Peasants confiscated some noble estates, while rank-and-file soldiers ended the degrading deference they had traditionally shown to aristocratic officers. And to some, equality and an expansion of rights felt imminent. In April 1917, the Germans organized Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin's passage from exile in Switzerland back to Russia.

Bolsheviks, breaking with Marx's idea of the working-class spearheading revolutionary change, believed that an elite cadre of leaders needed to lead the revolution. Once Lenin returned to Russia, he began making public speeches and declared a platform of "Peace, Bread, Land," an explicit rejection of continuing the war, and also the kind of populist slogan that deeply appealed to hungry, landless, and war-weary people. Lenin, along with another Bolshevik leader, Leon Trotsky, helped make the Bolsheviks stand out with their publicity and grass-roots organizing in factories and among soldiers.

And the pair craftily altered their own positions as the wind blew, sometimes appearing to agree with the soviets or certain provisional government positions and at other times calling for violence and an end to the democratic politics that most middle-of-the-roaders and other socialists wanted. For Lenin, it was violence alone that would bring about an overthrow of the old and the creation of a new, Bolshevik society. Only deliberately inflicted bloodshed would crush the aspirations for a democratic Russia.

In the summer of 1917, charismatic lawyer Alexander Kerensky came to head the Provisional. Government with the aim of reviving Russia's capacity to fight in World War I. But the effort ultimately failed.

The government, targeted by Bolshevik propaganda and organizing, had grown fatally weak. Let's go to the Thought Bubble. 1. By the fall, Lenin determined the time was right to overthrow the Provisional Government 2. and with it the mixture of democratic policies espoused by the hodge-podge of politicians, 3. including various kinds of socialists, and anarchists, and constitutional monarchists, and liberals who sought rights and the rule of law. 4.

Lenin didn't believe the revolution could proceed via peaceful change or negotiation with all these various leaders; 5. instead, he insisted on the use of violence against them and rejected peaceful change or negotiation. 6. In October 1917, the Bolsheviks led a coup at a meeting of the Soviets, 7. taking over government buildings, arms depots, transportation networks, and other infrastructure. 8. The party then endorsed elections to a Constituent Assembly that met in January 1918. 9.

The Bolsheviks won only a minority of the seats 10. but forced the dismissal of the Assembly before it could be constituted as a government. 11. The Bolsheviks then developed a tactic meant to destroy, in the words of one, "constitutional illusions." 12. They imprisoned and murdered advocates for democracy, and constitutions, and freedom of political expression by the tens and eventually the hundreds of thousands. 13.

And as they took control, the Bolsheviks shuttered local institutions such as zemstvos. 14. They nationalized industries and banks 15. and by late 1917, began seeking a negotiated withdrawal from the war. 16. The Germans offered only the draconian Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, 17. which gave Russia's western holdings to Germany. 18.

Lenin initia1lly called the German offer "obscene." 19. But as the Central Powers continued their advance through Russian territory, 20. he finally accepted the treaty. Thanks Thought Bubble.

So by this time, the Russian capital of Petrograd/St. Petersburg had been moved to Moscow because German troops had gotten too close. Lenin believed that an imminent uprising of Europe's entire working class would overturn the entire Brest-Litovsk settlement anyway, and restore Russia's original boundaries, although he ultimately rejected his initial faith in worldwide revolution, settling instead for "socialism in one country." That said, the Bolsheviks did want to promote and control the rise of Communist parties elsewhere, so they established the Communist International or Comintern in 1919.

Brest-Litovsk was a turning point for many, including those who were ready to continue fighting for a Russian victory in World War I. Dissident generals received volunteers from an array of those who feared the rise of the Bolsheviks, from monarchists and liberals to other kinds of socialists. And we're emphasizing the diversity of beliefs here, to show that Bolshevism was just one of many responses--some radical, some moderate--to the dysfunction and deprivation of early 20th century Russia.

But at any rate, these diverse non-Bolshevik groups were united primarily by their dislike of the Bolsheviks, who by this time had rejected the word "socialist" in favor of a new party name: Communist. Bolsheviks felt the socialists in Russia and elsewhere were just too reform-minded, and compromise-oriented, and pro-democracy. And so eventually, Civil War broke out, and until 1922, Russia and a good part of eastern.

Europe were wracked with violence, and disease, and famine, and starvation. The Bolshevik dictatorship and its "Red Terror" battled the so-called "White Movement," which even in its name defined itself primarily by its opposition to the Bolshevik Reds. Meanwhile, in areas like Ukraine, the Baltic States, and Central Asia, people were seeking independence from Russia, although in many places, the independence movements were themselves also divided by beliefs around the role the state should play in the lives of its citizens, whether democracy was compatible with a strong state, and whether businesses should be government-held or privately run.

The Bolsheviks took advantage of these divisions both by taking on factions individually and by pitting them against each other. As Trotsky simultaneously built a loyal "Red" army and as the newly created "Chekha" or secret police picked off opponents, the "Whites" were eventually defeated. Not only was the White movement disunited in its goals, they especially lacked a brilliantly brutal leader like Lenin or an organizational talent like Trotsky.

The Communist society the Bolsheviks established was far different from the one envisioned by the Marxist socialists of the nineteenth century. It was to be led by an elite, according to Lenin's plan, not by workers. In fact, the Bolsheviks crushed a "green" opposition from peasants who were angry about the army confiscating their grain, which the Bolsheviks justified as necessary for "War.

Communism." The Bolsheviks also executed sailors at Kronstadt who objected to the growing privileges of the Bolshevik elite. But instead of the state "withering away" after a workers' revolution as Marx had predicted, the Bolshevik state became ever more powerful, albeit with the support of many in the population. Beginning with Lenin, It inflicted perpetual violence on its own people, inventing constant threats from civilian "enemies." Lenin believed such violence was key not just to establishing a Bolshevik state, but also to maintaining one.

In 1922, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was declared. Up and coming Bolshevik activist Joseph Stalin helped forge this federation from the ethnic groups of the former Russian empire. The USSR supposedly fulfilled a Bolshevik promise to more than 100 ethnicities of the old Russian empire that they might retain their culture, and language, and other local ways.

But to say those promises would not always be kept would be something of an understatement. Big challenges loomed for the Bolsheviks even after these triumphs. Industrial production had fallen to 13 percent of its prewar level The death toll of the civil war and the accompanying disease and famine is estimated at 10 million.

Still, the postwar Bolshevik propaganda machine thrived, drawing in people enthusiastic about the idea of a workers' paradise, and in some cases, real progress was made. The strapped government set up health clinics and daycare centers so that everyone could work to revive the economy. The daughter of an imperial general Aleksandra Kollontai oversaw the welfare system and wrote easy-to-read novels about the wholesome relationships between men and women under communism.

Communist enthusiasts taught rural people to read, and proselytized to make Muslim communities adopt what Bolsheviks interpreted as "modern" ways--a reminder that not all missionaries are religious. Pioneering filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein produced classic celebrations of ordinary people such as "Battleship Potemkin" which is about a bunch of sailors' rebelling against tsarist brutality. But it's inaccurate to imagine the Bolshevik revolution led to some immediate and total.

Communism. In fact, in 1921 Lenin declared the New Economic Policy in which elements of capitalism such as individual businesses would be allowed to help boost productivity. Communist entrepreneurs were encouraged to "grow rich" and wealth became valued.

So-called NEP-men flourished as did women dripping in jewels and furs. It was one more compromise the Bolsheviks made as a temporary means to the end of domination. Beginning in 1922, Lenin suffered a series of strokes that eventually killed him in January 1924.

Joseph Stalin organized and led a lavish funeral, handing out minor roles to other Bolsheviks and sidelining his rival Trotsky, who would

go on to be murdered via ice axe to the face at Stalin's order. We'll get to that and much more when Crash Course returns to Soviet Russia in two weeks. Thanks for watching.

I'll see you then.