

# February 1917: The Tsar falls

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In 1917 Russia still used the old Julian calendar and so was 13 days behind most other countries which used the Gregorian calendar we use today. That is why the great events which are called the February Revolution took place between 8-15 March in our calendar. Under the old-style Russian Calendar 23 February to 1 March. But Russia was not simply 13 days behind central and Western Europe. In terms of its political regime it was any thing from fifty to a hundred years behind.

A vast secret police network, [the Okhrana](#),<sup>[1]</sup> was the only up-to-date feature of the Russian state and it spied on all oppositionists. It was responsible for the publication in 1903 of the notorious anti-semitic forgery, the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The Tsar himself personally sponsored a forerunner of fascism, the Black Hundreds. Its ideology centred on anti-semitism. Nicholas II and his wife the German-born Tsarina Alexandra were themselves pathological anti-semites as their private correspondence reveals. They personally encouraged pogroms. They ordered bloody repression against the workers, most famously on 9 January 1905, the original Bloody Sunday, when hundreds of unarmed workers and their children were shot down in the streets and squares around the Winter Palace in St Petersburg (renamed Petrograd in 1914).

## War exposes bankrupt Tsarist regime

By late 1916 the Russian army had lost between 1.6 and 1.8 million soldiers, with an additional two million prisoners of war and one million missing out of the 14 million it had mobilized since 1914. The front was on the point of collapse.

Even the ruling class of landowning aristocrats now craved regime change. In mid-December 1916, conspirators led by Prince Yusopov and [Grand Duke Dmitri Pavlovich](#)<sup>[2]</sup>, assassinated Rasputin. The entire extended royal family? apart from the Tsar himself and his wife? warmly congratulated the blue blooded terrorists.

At the same time the Russian bourgeoisie ? the capitalist class ? was also plotting ?regime change?. They still heartily supported the war because they wanted to seize the choicest parts of the German and Ottoman empires and share in the spoils of Allied victory. In this sense the Russian capitalist class, backward and weak as it was, was nevertheless an imperialist bourgeoisie. The dominant bourgeois [INT <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/apr/x02.htm>] political parties in the Duma were the Octobrists ? conservative liberals who supported the Tsar?s deceitful constitution of 1905 ? and the Cadets (Constitutional Democrats). They passed resolutions calling for a ministry answerable to the Duma. Their leaders were, respectively, Alexander Guchkov and Pavel Milyukov.

The French and British backed the bourgeois and aristocratic opposition to the Tsar and Tsarina and their court clique. Buchanan, the British ambassador, told the Tsar at the end of 1916 that he needed to regain the confidence of his people. ?Don?t you mean they have to regain my confidence,? the royal moron replied.

With reactionary conservatives and moderate liberals alike plotting against him, with even his wartime imperialist allies in open collusion with them, Nicholas' entire regime was headed for collapse.

The first condition of a revolution is that the ruling class is unable to go on ruling in the old way. This condition was met in full. The other condition is that the exploited classes are unwilling to be ruled in the old way. That was about to be fulfilled too.

## Revolution

The Russian working class was only a small minority of the population of the vast Empire but it was powerfully concentrated in a few major cities, the twin capitals Petrograd and Moscow.

Wartime production had led to a substantial increase in the number of factory workers in the two capitals: from 242,600 in Petrograd in 1914 to 391,800 in 1917. In Moscow their numbers grew from 153,223 to 205,919. The giant Putilov works in Petrograd alone had 30,000 workers by 1917, making it the largest factory in the world.

In Petrograd and Moscow people were starving. Women queued for hours, starting at two in the morning, to bring home barely enough bread for their family to survive on. The winter of 1916-17 was a desperately cold one; temperatures fell to minus -40°C. Meanwhile the rich and the war profiteers lived a life of ostentatious luxury.

The revolution began with a lockout and strike at the Putilov works. On 21 February, the Putilov management locked out a section of their workers, provoking a strike. The workers demonstrated and other factories came out in their support. Scuffles and protests also took place outside bakers' shops, when supplies ran out. The next day, 22 February (8 March in Western Europe) was International Working Class Women's Day. Early in the morning thousands of women were on the streets. Textile workers spearheaded their ranks.

Well over 7,000 left their looms. Chanting 'Bread!' they marched through Petrograd's Vyborg district, the city's main centre of heavy industry, to the New Lessner works, the Nobel plant, the Russian Renault factory and finally the Erikson mills. Their numbers began to swell as workers, men and women, from all over the city left their jobs to protest. By ten o'clock, 20,000 were marching. Before noon, numbers had swelled to more than 50,000.

The next day the [demonstration grew even bigger](#),<sup>[3]</sup> reached more than 214,000 workers from more than 2,000 factories and enterprises. By now they were shouting not only for bread but an end to the war and occasionally the overthrow of the autocracy. The Vyborg workers marched towards the centre of Petrograd, finally coming to a halt at the wide Neva river. The bridges were blocked by Cossacks and soldiers. The people, however, walked across the solidly frozen ice. The Cossacks and the soldiers did not move.

The third day of the revolution proved the decisive day. Attention now focused on what the city's garrison would do. The exact number of troops in Petrograd at this point is unknown; figures of between 220,000 and 466,000 men are given. In addition there were the hated police (3,500 men) and the Cossack cavalry (3,200). What would they do? The final and decisive factor in the success of a revolution was about to come into play: the morale of the soldiers. How would they respond, faced with workers willing to die? Would they obey officers, ordering them to kill people, who might be their fathers and brothers, their sisters, wives, girlfriends and mothers?

The marchers' columns were by now more frequently led by members of the revolutionary parties:

particularly the Bolshevik Party, plus Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries. They did not and could not act as a centralised leadership of the whole movement. Repression and illegality made this impossible. The average Bolshevik, for example, was able to undertake only around three months of underground activity before being arrested.

Who were these revolutionaries? Most of them were very young, with an average age of 16-17. Many joined the party between the ages of 13 and 15. A larger number of the main leaders had been active in the 1905 revolution, but even these were only in their late twenties or early thirties.

[Lenin](#) <sup>[4]</sup> and the principal leaders of the Bolshevik Party were all in exile, either in Western Europe or in distant Siberia. Lenin was not able to return from exile to Petrograd until 3 (16) April, in the famous 'sealed train' provided by the German authorities for the Swiss socialist exiles of all parties. Other leaders, like Lev Kamenev, Yakov Sverdlov and Josef Stalin, arrived from Siberia in mid-March. The most senior leader in Petrograd was the metalworker [Alexander Shlyapnikov](#). <sup>[5]</sup> He alone was in any sort of regular correspondence with Lenin and the party leadership abroad. Together with Petr Zalutskii and Vyacheslav Molotov, he formed the national leadership of the Bolshevik Party.

Perhaps half the party membership was concentrated in the Vyborg district, a huge concentration of metal working factories and textile mills. In Vyborg a district committee made up of Vasily Kayurov, Ivan Chugurin and Dmitry Pavlov led the local Bolshevik Party. They were to become the de facto leadership in the coming days.

The total number of Bolsheviks in Petrograd at the onset of the February revolution was just 2,000. They had organised party nuclei in the key factories: around 75-80 in the Old Lessner factory, some 30 in the Russo-Baltic and Izhorsky shipyards and smaller groups in other factories. In the giant Putilov works, with its 30,000 employees, there were 150 Bolsheviks. These party cadres were influential leaders but not yet recognised spokespersons of mass factory organisations? indeed such organisations did not yet exist.

Initially the Bolshevik leadership in Petrograd had been working towards an escalation of strikes and mass demonstrations, with a timetable stretching from 9 January, the anniversary of [Bloody Sunday 1905](#), <sup>[6]</sup> through to [May Day](#) <sup>[7]</sup>; the latter was to serve as the signal for an armed uprising. But first the lockout and strike at the Putilov works on 22 February and then the huge response to the demonstration on International Women's Day upset these plans. Kayurov and the Vyborg committee had actually initiated the call for the International Women's Day march. Vyborg was the main centre of the textile mills. But they did not foresee and initially did not want this mobilisation to continue on the following days. Kayurov records in his memoirs his indignation with the women strikers for not carrying out the instructions of the party. He feared it would lead to premature clashes with the troops.

Kayurov recalled how he had spoken at a meeting of women workers:

'I explained the meaning of 'Women's Day' and of the women's movement in general, and when I had to talk about the present moment I endeavoured first and foremost to urge the women to refrain from any partial demonstrations and to act only on the instructions of the party committee.' But the women workers were in no mood to wait for instructions. Kayurov recalls that later he learned with 'astonishment' and 'indignation' that the women had totally ignored his advice. 'I was angered by the behaviour of the strikers,' he wrote. 'The previous evening I had called on the working women to show restraint and discipline' and now, out of the blue, there was this strike.'

Leon Trotsky, in his epic [History of the Russian Revolution](#), <sup>[8]</sup> remarks that at a certain point in a revolution the masses suddenly move into action, and the rising quantity of their exasperation undergoes a qualitative

transformation. Of course they need and they find courageous, determined leaders, initiators of action, new ones as well as old militants from past struggles. But for this qualitative change to occur they do not always need a highly structured organisation and prepared plan. Thus, at a certain conjuncture, the masses move far faster than even the best revolutionary leadership.

Nonetheless, by the 25 February the Bolsheviks realised that they had a full-blown revolution on their hands. Still they were unable, for logistical and perhaps also for political reasons to issue a leaflet until 27 February.

Sunday 26 February was the most worrying day. The troops obeyed orders to fire on demonstrators and many workers were killed. Police raids resulted in the arrest of many revolutionary leaders; Shlyapnikov escaped by the skin of his teeth but was completely isolated. Kayurov and the Vyborg organisation, however, remained intact. The Vyborg district committee now became, de facto, the Bolshevik leadership in Petrograd, and thus responsible for the party's tactics in the crucial days of the February revolution. At that moment, they feared that the movement had been defeated.

But on the next morning ? 27 February ? Kayurov and the Vyborg fighting detachment led a daring raid on an arsenal, removed its stocks of rifles and mounted an attack on the prisons holding the revolutionaries, setting them free. They then went on to launch attacks on the police stations. At the same time Shlyapnikov's plans too came to fruition. This was the day the troops in Petrograd decisively came over to the side of the revolution.

Various memoirs, both from Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, make it clear that across the city members of the Bolshevik Party were in the thick of the fighting, playing a leading role in winning over the troops, seizing arms, forming detachments in the factories, and helping organise and give slogans to the mass demonstrations.

The loyalty of the soldiers now hung in the balance; as usual in mutinies it was the non-commissioned officers who took the lead. That night in the Volynsky regiment, Sergeant Kirpichnikov addressed his fellow soldiers:

?Fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers and even brides are begging for bread. Will we strike them down? Have you seen the blood which runs in the streets? I propose that we do not march tomorrow.? The entire regiment vowed they would not fire on the people. Following their lead, that day more than 66,000 soldiers joined the side of the revolution.

The Volynsky was soon joined by the Pavlovsky, Litovsky and Preobrazhensky guards' regiments. Under Bolshevik leadership the central arsenal of the Petrograd garrison was broken into ? 40,000 rifles and 30,000 revolvers were distributed. When the guards' regiments marched out of their barracks, their regimental bands struck up the republican marching song of the bourgeois revolution, the Marseillaise. At this point everybody realized that the Tsar was finished... apart from the Tsar himself.

Nicholas' ministers panicked. They resigned en masse and fled. It was left to the chairman of the parliament, the Duma, [Mikhail Rodzianko](#) <sup>[9]</sup>, a member of the Octobrist Party, to telegram Nicholas, pleading with him to do something before it was too late. Nicholas' response was typically myopic and cretinous. He told his Court Minister Frederiks: ?Again that fat-bellied Rodzianko has written me a lot of nonsense, which I won't even bother to answer.?

Nicholas finally decided to return to the capital, believing that somehow his imperial presence would restore order. En route to Petrograd, his train was stopped by revolutionary railworkers, who simply told the

Tsar of All the Russias that he would not be allowed to return to the capital. The train tried another line but was stopped again. The workers vetoed his every move. The Tsar's diary records the pathetic end to his reign and his dynasty:

Ruzsky came in the morning and read me his long telephone conversation with Rodzianko. In his words, the situation in Petrograd is such, that at present a ministry from the Duma is powerless to do anything, because they are opposed by the Social Democratic Party in the guise of the worker's committee (i.e. the soviet of workers and soldier deputies ? ed.) My abdication is necessary. Ruzsky communicated his conversation to headquarters, and Alexe?ev to all the commanders-in-chief. By about 2.30 answers had arrived from all. The crux of the matter is that it is necessary to take this step, for the sake of Russia's salvation and of maintaining calm in the army at the front. I agreed...?

One of Nicholas' last moves had been to suspend the Duma. It had been thrown into a frenzy of indecision. If they defied the Tsar, not only might they one day feel his wrath, but, even worse, their defiance might encourage the revolt of the masses. That was the last thing the liberal bourgeoisie wanted to happen. Indeed they had actually pleaded for the Tsar to restore order, that is, for the troops to fire on the workers. Here was no revolutionary bourgeoisie such as the Mensheviks dreamed of, but a thoroughly counter-revolutionary one, such as Lenin and Trotsky had long insisted on.

### **The soviet**

Only on 1 March (14 March) when it became clear that the Tsar's ministers had fled, the garrison was completely on the side of the revolution, and the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks had summoned the factories of the capital to elect delegates and send them to the Tauride Place to reconstitute the Petrograd Soviet, did Rodzianko, Milyukov and co. finally decide that since they could not stop the revolution they had to lead it. Thus did the provisional government come into existence ? not to lead a revolution but to abort it.

On 27 February the revolutionary movement triumphed on the streets. In these vital days the Bolshevik fighters stood at the head of the movement, not alone but in larger numbers than the Mensheviks, the Socialist Revolutionaries or the Mezhrayontsi (a grouping, strong in Vyborg, standing between the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks and favouring a reunification of the old Russian Social Democratic Labour Party). But victory brought a sudden and rapid change in the leadership of the movement. The Menshevik leaders, who had been freed from prison, did not rush to take part in the fighting but rather to the Tauride Palace where the Duma was sitting. There they began to make arrangements for calling the first session of a Petrograd soviet, a council of workers deputies, the institution that had led the revolution in the city in 1905.

Now that the fighting and dangers were over thousands of people from the intelligentsia and professional classes flooded into the ranks of the ?revolutionaries?. Such was the Menshevik Nikolai Sukhanov, who attended the first session of the soviet on the evening of the 27th and who became a member of its Executive Committee. Another was Alexander Kerensky, a lawyer close to the populist SR's Party, who was to become the soviet's vice-chairman.

The first evening meeting of the [Petrograd soviet gathered some 250 workers' delegates](#) <sup>[10]</sup>. But delegates from the regimental barracks that had risen in revolt soon joined them. It was decided to make the soviet into a ?council of workers? and soldiers? deputies?. The meeting also issued its famous ?Order No. 1?, which directed all the soldiers to obey exclusively its orders.

A situation of dual power was established. On one side was the soviet which had the allegiance of the revolutionary worker and soldier masses. The soviets spread across the vast Russian empire with amazing



speed and took effective power because the soldiers obeyed them, as did the armed workers' militias. Everywhere the local soviet's approval was needed for supplies or troops to move.

But on the other hand the majority of delegates within the soviets turned out not to be Bolsheviks but either Mensheviks, Socialist Revolutionaries or non-party people. The Mensheviks led the soviets into a position not of taking state power into their own hands, but of supporting the new bourgeois provisional government.

This was headed by a liberal aristocrat, Prince Lvov, a member of the Cadets. Its leading figures were Paul Milyukov of the Cadets and Alexander Guchkov of the Octobrists. Both were determined to carry on with the imperialist war and, if possible to save the Romanov dynasty by finding a liberal member of it to head a constitutional monarchy. But the most dynamic force in the provisional government was the petit bourgeois radical lawyer Alexander Kerensky. He too was determined to carry on the imperialist war until final victory?

In short the programme of the Duma meant that the demands for which the masses had fought and died – bread, an end to the war, the end of Tsarism – would be ignored or compromised out of existence. Once again the counter-revolutionary character of the bourgeoisie was on display. But the determination of the Mensheviks that the revolution was a bourgeois revolution and that therefore power had to be handed to representatives of the capitalist class, meant that the bosses were to receive the fruits of the revolution as a free gift.

When the focus of events moved off the streets and into the Tauride palace, the Bolsheviks immediately lost the initiative and the leadership of the movement. This was due in part to their own uncertainty as to what to do when it came to the question of government. Should they critically support the provisional government? All the instincts of the Petrograd fighters said no. But at the same time they had no clear slogan as to who should form a government or what to do to install it.

In future articles in this series, we will show that Lenin had already come up with the answer to this conundrum – that the soviet must take the power as a workers' government and begin the transition to socialism. We shall also show that this took several weeks of inner party struggle to achieve. The Bolshevik Party was not the monolithic forces that either its anarchist and Labourite detractors or its Stalinist worshipers claim. At this time it had the internal democracy needed to make this correction – one vital to enable it to take the power in October 1917.

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**Source URL:** <https://fifthinternational.org/content/february-1917-tsar-falls>

**Links:**

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- [2] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand\\_Duke\\_Dmitri\\_Pavlovich\\_of\\_Russia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Duke_Dmitri_Pavlovich_of_Russia)
- [3] <http://www.marxists.org/glossary/events/f/e.htm#february-1917>
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- [10] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrograd\\_Soviet](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Petrograd_Soviet)