

The Russian Revolution

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[Introduction](#) -- [Years of Repression/Serfdom](#) -- [The 1905 Revolution](#) -- [The February Revolution](#)-- [The October Revolution/The Struggle for Power and The Rise of the Bolsheviks](#) -- [Independence for the Baltic](#) -- [Bibliography](#)

Introduction

The Russian Revolution of 1917 is also called the Bolshevik Revolution or the October Revolution. In 1917 there were actually two revolutions in Russia. One was the February Revolution in which the Tsar abdicated his throne and the Provisional Government took power. The other was the October Revolution in which the Provisional Government was overthrown by the Bolsheviks.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 played a very important role in world history and also a major role in the history of the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Baltic peoples also played a major role in the 1917 Revolution, particularly the Latvian Bolsheviks who comprised a key portion of the Red Guards that defended the Bolsheviks at a crucial time in its early existence.

Earlier, during the 1905 Revolution in Russia, the peasants in the Baltic took this as their cue to revolt against their rulers. At different times in history, the Estonian and Latvian peasants had been ruled by Tsarist Russia, the Kingdom of Sweden, and the Baltic German nobility; Lithuanian peasants were governed by Russia and before it, by the Kingdom of Poland (1569 to 1791). They saw this time period as an opportunity to finally take control over their destiny and to rule them selves. Though it didn't lead to independence at this time, it independence did emerge from 1918 till 1940 for the people of the Baltic States.

I. Years of Repression/Serfdom

The people of the Baltic territories where today the countries of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania exist were enslaved by serfdom from about the time of the 12th century to about the 19th century. The Baltic has been fought and ruled over by many different people, most notably ethnic German nobles, Poland, Sweden, and finally Tsarist Russia. The natives of the Baltic who comprised the majority of the population, the Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians, did not own the land and thus they did not have political power. The peasants did the back breaking labor but the result of it was not their own enrichment but that of the local German and Polish nobles.

At the start of the 1800's the Baltic peasants received some freedom from the Baltic German nobles in Estonia and Latvia, while Lithuanian serfs were emancipated in 1861, together with all serfs in the Russian Empire.

II. The 1905 Revolution

In Russia in 1905, the people's faith in Nicholas II, the Russian Tsar, was waning. In that

year, Russia was defeated by the Japanese in number of navy battles. "But the one event that unleashed a fury of mass action and set Russia well and truly on the path to revolution was the cold-blooded shooting of hundreds of unarmed demonstrators in St Petersburg on 22 January 1905. 'Bloody Sunday' triggered a wave of massive demonstrations and strikes throughout the empire (Kirby 228)." Not only in Russia did the workers react, but throughout the empire. The empire that included the Baltic, where in Riga 50,000 workers went on strike (Kirby 228). In Kurland, today Western Latvia, 184 estates were burned and 82 Baltic Germans were killed by angry farmers (Von Rauch 14). In Estonia, farmers saw these revolts as a chance to grab land that had previously been noble land (Raun 89).

The Tsar reacted harshly to these uprisings and in so doing he "provided symbols and martyrs.... In other words, 1905 made revolution for Latvians concrete (Ezergailis 21)." Nearly one thousand people in the Baltic were captured and executed and thousands were exiled to Siberian prison camps (Von Rauch 14). But there was a positive outcome to these uprisings. Not only did the people feel more empowered than ever before but one concession that the Tsar made was to grant people representation in the Russian government in the form of the Imperial Duma. Though the Dumas may not have had much real power, they did teach the Baltic political leaders valuable lessons, which they would later use in their countries when revolution appeared yet again. Some of the lessons learned by Baltic leaders were ones of political leadership, coalition building, and "parliamentary debate and procedure" (Von Rauch 15). Both the Estonian leaders Jaan Tonisson and Konstantin Pats were schooled in the Dumas (Von Rauch 15).

It is important to mention that Lenin met with and supported the Latvian Social Democratic Party (LSDP) in 1901 in Riga (Von Rauch, 12). The importance of these meetings is that the LSDP would later form a coalition with the Bolsheviks. When the October Revolution in 1917 finally came to pass, the Latvian Strelki (or Latvian Rifleman) were instrumental in protecting the newly formed Bolshevik government (Council of People's Commissars) from counterrevolutionaries. Not only did they protect the newly formed Bolshevik government in Petrograd but they blocked Kornilov and his troops from getting to Petrograd via railroad stations in Latvia. They later performed basic police duties throughout the city of Petrograd and were members of the Cheka, the Soviet secret police (Ezergailis 15).

III. February Revolution

In 1917 Russia was again at war (WWI) and they were losing to the Germans mainly because they lacked the modern industry to support its war effort and didn't have an adequate railroad system to get supplies to the front. As in 1905 when revolution broke out, confidence was not very high in the Tsar Nicholas II.

The situation in Petrograd (formerly St Petersburg) was dire for most of the population. Because of the war, food supplies were low, unemployment was high, and inflation was out of control. Because of these conditions many workers became politicized and joined revolutionary organizations known as soviets. The miserable conditions coupled with 385,000 workers on strike in Petrograd led to a combustible situation. "It was the lack of bread that provided the spark to light the dry tinder of revolution, in a city whose military garrison sided with the insurgents at the crucial moment (Kirby 245). Fed up with the Tsarist regime, the workers, peasants, and soldiers rose up and demanded the redistribution of land. On February 28, 1917 Nicholas II abdicated his throne, tsarist forces surrendered, and the Tsar's ministers were arrested. This was to be the end of the last of the tsarist regimes in Russia. Put in its place was the Provisional Government which consisted of a coalition of conservative, moderate, and

liberal socialists. More specifically, the Provisional Government was made up of Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries. Aleksandr F. Kerensky, the minister of justice, was one of the key people of the Provisional Government.

It is important to note that when the Provisional Government first took power in Russia, that for a time there existed both the Provisional Government and the worker soviets. So in a sense there was a duality of power. Soon after the Provisional Government took power the worker soviets consolidated their power. One of the first things they voted on was to free political prisoners. This brought some of the most radical leaders back into Petrograd. It also brought other leaders back from abroad who fled the country to escape tsarist persecution (Le Blanc 5).

IV. The October Revolution/The Struggle For Power and the Rise of the Bolsheviks

On the one hand, "The property owning classes were becoming more conservative and the masses more radical (Reed 1)" Soon after the Provisional Government was in power many of the problems that helped them overthrow the Tsar still existed: Russia was still doing badly in the war, bread was still scarce and the people were calling for more drastic changes. The newly released radical leaders were whipping the common people into a frenzy and the policies of the Provisional Government were not helping them. The Provisional Government began arresting radicals and the recently returned political prisoners and shut down what they deemed as radical newspapers. As the American eyewitness John Reed points out, "The policy of the Provisional Government alternated between ineffective reforms and stern repressive measures (Reed 3)," which had the result of alienating the working class.

One of the key people to return to Russia from exile was Vladimir Ilich Lenin. He provoked the workers with statements like "Bread, Peace, and Land" and "Down with the Provisional Government-All Power to the Soviets! (Le Blanc 5)" The Bolsheviks were continually organizing workers, peasants, and soldiers. The soldiers would later play a key role when the Bolsheviks seized power. Another focal point of the Bolshevik agitation was a call for peace. The Bolsheviks felt that Russia should make peace with Germany and get out of the war immediately.

Kerensky, who by mid-summer had become somewhat of a dictator, appointed Lavr Kornilov to the head of the armed forces. A couple of months later Kornilov started to march on Petrograd with designs on seizing power for himself and a coalition he created. Kerensky, fearing for his life and that of his newly formed government, freed the Bolsheviks he had arrested and armed them so they could help stop Kornilov (Le Blanc 6). The Bolsheviks, who at this time played a key role in defending the Provisional Government, helped themselves to gain even deeper support from the Russian people. When in the month of September elections took place, the Bolsheviks won a majority of the seats in the soviets in Petrograd, Moscow, and other cities.

On October 24-25, 1917, pro-Bolshevik soldiers, sailors, and Red Guards stormed the Winter Palace and arrested members of the Provisional Government. This is often referred to as the "bloodless coup" that put the Bolsheviks in power. The following day elections handed the majority of seats to the Bolsheviks (Le Blanc 7). But one month later when elections were held again, the Bolsheviks failed to gain a majority of the seats. The next day the Bolsheviks simply dissolved the Constituent Assembly and took control. This immediately led the Bolsheviks into a Civil War with the "Whites" (White Guard Volunteer Army) led by General Kornilov. The Whites were a group of different factions including former officials, Cossacks, moderate socialists,

nobles, and military leaders that wanted a return to monarchy or at least an end to the Bolsheviks (Kirchner 242). Other than their desire to oust the Bolsheviks the Whites weren't a very unified coalition.

Latvian troops were instrumental in helping the Bolsheviks defeat the Whites. They defended against revolts in Moscow in July of 1918 and fought against the Whites, now led by Denikin, on the southern front in 1919 (Von Rauch 56). In September of 1918, Jukums Vaciētis, the Latvian commander was promoted to Commander-in-Chief of the Red Army (Von Rauch 57). Other Latvians were also promoted to high ranks in the Red Army and a number of Latvians held important positions in the Communist Party. Though the Bolsheviks (now called the Communists) were besieged from not only the Whites, but also the Allies (Great Britain, France, and the United States), and Japan, they somehow survived this onslaught with the help of the Latvian regiments. Great Britain landed troops not only in Soviet Russia but also in what would become Estonia as well. When the Allies finally withdrew their troops from the Soviet Union in 1920 the Civil War came to an end (Kirchner 243).

V. Independence for the Baltic

What the people of the Baltic became very aware of near the end of World War I (1914-1918) was that the Russians and the Germans were busy. The Russians were engrossed in a revolution and then immediately afterwards a civil war. The Germans had their hands full with the Allies and the Allied bombing of the German cities of Berlin, Leipzig, and Dresden. Independence for the Baltic countries was repeatedly declared and finally recognized. "The Brest-Litovsk Treaty instead of being a block became a stepping stone to Baltic Independence (Hiden 30)." The Brest-Litovsk Treaty was the peace treaty signed that ended WWI in 1918. "Estonians exploited the Allied fears of German ambitions so successfully that Britain, France, and Italy recognized Estonian Independence in May 1918 (Hiden 32)"

Estonia and Lithuania were the first to declare their independence in February of 1918 and Latvia declared independence in November, 1918. All three of the new Baltic States set up a democratically elected single-chamber parliaments. In Latvia and Lithuania, presidents were elected to head the new governments but in Estonia no president was elected. Instead in Estonia, a Prime Minister would take care of any official duties as necessary. In Estonia Konstantin Pats led the newly formed government. In Latvia, the new government was headed by Karlis Ulmanis and Antanas Smetona was to be Lithuania's first President (Von Rauch 76-78).

In all three of the newly formed Baltic States, none of the governments lasted for very long and all of the governments, after a short-lived democratically elected government, became dictatorships. Interestingly, all of the dictatorships were led by the men (Pats, Ulmanis, and Smetona) that were the leaders of their respective countries when they first achieved independence. According to Kirby, all three leaders "eschewed the Hitler model in favor of a more modest projection of themselves as fathers of the nation (Kirby 325-326)". In Lithuania the democratic government was overthrown in 1926, in Estonia and Latvia it took until 1934.

Sources Cited

Ezergailis, Andrew, The Latvian Impact on the Bolshevik Revolution The First Phase: September 1917 to April 1918 (Boulder: East European Monographs, 1983)

This book is a fascinating and in depth view of how Latvians helped the Bolshevik Revolution succeed. Many people don't realize or do not want to admit the impact that Latvians had on the Bolshevik Revolution according to Ezergailis. It includes a look at the various Latvian armed forces that helped Lenin and the Bolsheviks seize power and remain in power at the beginning of the October Revolution. This book is filled with maps, photos, and tables that help to explain the subject at hand.

Halsall, Paul, "Internet Modern History Sourcebook: Russian Revolution", Fordham University <<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook39.html>> Created 1997: Last revised 1/18/1999. (Accessed April 10, 2002).

This website is an extensive source of data on Russian history including the Russian Revolution and Post-revolution. This website includes important quotes and documents of the day.

Hidden, John and Salmon, Patrick, The Baltic Nations and Europe (Essex: Longman, 1991), 25-88.

This book briefly documents the early stages of the October Revolution and then looks at what it took to create the three independent states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Next it explores what these three states were up against in gaining their independence and what it took to survive in this revolutionary climate. It also looks at the economics of the Baltic States during this time.

Kirby, David, The Baltic World 1772-1993: Europe's Northern Periphery in an Age of Change (London: Longman, 1995).

This book gives a view of history from the common people of the Baltic's not merely from the viewpoint of the major leaders and nations. The book has a wealth of information and tells it from a more personal stand point than is often found in history books.

Kirchner, Walter, Russian History, 7th Ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 228-246.

A condensed history of Russia and the Soviet Union. Book is written in outline form with short descriptions of major events.

Le Blanc, Paul, "Russian Revolutions of 1917", Microsoft Encarta Online Encyclopedia <<http://www.encarta.msn.com>> Created 2001. (Accessed April 13, 2002).

This website has an extensive overview of the Russian Revolution compiled in a summarized fashion. Without having a subscription to Encarta access is limited.

Marxists.org Internet Archive, "Soviet History: Revolution" <<http://www.marxists.org/history/ussr/revolution/>> (Accessed April 10, 2002).

This website contains excerpts from John Reed's "Ten Days That Shook the World" which is a fascinating book and well worth reading. The movie "Reds" was based on John Reed's life. The website also contains excerpts from Leon Trotsky's "History of the Russian Revolution."

Page, Stanley W., The Formation of the Baltic States (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959)

This book looks briefly at the period of time leading up to the early 1900's and then the remainder of the book details the 20-year period up to about 1920. Interestingly enough, Page has an opposing view from Toivo Raun. In Raun's book Estonia and the Estonians he suggests that the Estonians were indeed supportive of the Bolsheviks during the Russian Revolution. On the other hand, Page spends a whole chapter on this same subject called "Estonia Rejects Bolshevism".

Rauch, George Von, The Baltic States, trans. Gerald Onn (London: C. Hurst, 1970n), 1-106.

Von Rauch looks at the Baltic's as a whole instead of from a country-by-country basis. I believe it is good to look at history in a regional way as Von Rauch is doing in his book, The Baltic States. This book gives some historical background leading up to the Russian Revolution and then looks at the short lived period of independence for Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Raun, Toivo U., Estonia and the Estonians, 2nd ed. (Stanford: Hoover Institution, 2001), 57-111.

This book is a source of how the 1905 revolution affected Estonia at this time in its history. It explains how the Estonians were very supportive of the overthrow of the Tsar Nicholas II and how some Estonians saw this as an impetus to attack noble estates. The Tsar put down this civil upheaval very harshly and revolution in Estonia failed. But the seeds of revolution and political interest were now planted in the minds of the peasant's.

Reed, John, Ten Days That Shook the World (New York: International Publishers, 1934).

This book is a first hand account and a primary source of the Bolshevik Revolution seen through the eyes of the American Socialist and author, John Reed. A book that even Lenin labeled a wonderful description of the revolution. Though a dry book, it is an excellent documentation of the Bolshevik Revolution and one I find very fascinating. It chronicles the fairly bloodless ten days that led to the switch from the Provisional Government to a Socialist state. It also describes the siege the new Socialist State defended itself against.

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