



## **The Legacy of Russia's Revolution: Millions Died for a Horrible Idea**

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A century has passed since revolution came to Russia. But the abdication of Tsar Nicholas II in March 1917 passed without any remembrance in St. Petersburg, where a new Russia was birthed.

The Russian Revolution was one of the most remarkable and decisive events in history. Last year Putin acknowledged: "We know well the consequences that these great upheavals can bring." Alas, little good emerged from what became a totalitarian tsunami.

Sadly, revolution may have been inevitable once World War I convulsed the prosperous, populous, and civilized continent of Europe.

Life was good in 1914. The industrial revolution had delivered tens of millions of people from immiserating poverty. "Progress," that omnipresent human desire, beckoned in the future.

Then on June 28 in Sarajevo in the province of Bosnia, recently annexed by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a Serbian nationalist assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie. His murder set in motion diplomats and statesmen, generals and admirals, and finally armies and fleets.

Countries mobilized their militaries to the applause of their populations. However, the predicted swift and glorious victories failed to appear. Instead, the destruction of lives and wealth was prodigious.

The Russian Empire stretched from Europe to the Pacific. But Imperial Russia was the proverbial giant with feet of clay.

In 1904, it went to war with Asian upstart Japan, losing army, fleet, and war. The following year popular unrest forced constitutional reform, creation of the elected State Duma, and the promise, largely unrequited, of further liberalization. Liberals hoped for eventual evolution to a better future.

Then came June 28, 1914. A month later Austro-Hungary declared war on Serbia and the continent went over the cliff into the abyss. Germany declared war on Imperial Russia on August 3.

Russia's involvement was not inevitable. Serbian officials had been implicated in the murder of Ferdinand, making it an act of state terrorism. But Imperial Russia was not willing to accept the destruction of its small ally and the resulting boost in Vienna's Balkans influence.

Many people viewed these events with joy. A Russian princess declared to the French ambassador: "There's going to be war. There'll be nothing left of Austria ... Our armies will meet in Berlin, Germany will be destroyed."

She was not alone in her obscene enthusiasm, but some were not so sanguine. In February 1914 former Interior Minister Pyotr Nikolaevich Durnovo wrote a memorandum to the tsar warning that the burden of a European war would fall on Russia and likely result in defeat, which would be blamed on the government. Russia would "be flung into hopeless anarchy."

His warnings proved tragically prescient.

After weeks of diplomatic and military maneuvers, Russian officials debated mobilization. On July 29, the German chancellor warned the Russian government: "further continuation would force us to mobilize, and in that case a European war could scarcely be avoided."

Tsar Nicholas, at least, seemed to understand the stakes. At one point the tsar declared to his ministers: "I will not become responsible for a monstrous slaughter." He told the French ambassador: "Remember it is a question of sending thousands and thousands of men to their death."

But on July 30 he gave in to the clamoring war party in St. Petersburg. In the months to come Russia suffered catastrophic losses. By mid-1915 soldiers were sent to the front unarmed, told to pick up weapons from fallen comrades.

In February 1917 revolution broke out. By then the "idiot Romanov," as Bolshevik leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin called Nicholas, had little support. Liberals and moderate socialists dedicated to a democratic future took charge, giving Russia a second chance. But they refused to make peace.

Despite abundant war weariness the new leaders chose to fulfill the previous government's commitment to the Entente. The human slaughter continued, giving an opening to the Bolsheviks.

On November 7, the Bolsheviks bid for power. They easily ousted outmaneuvered more moderate forces on the left, made peace with Germany, and won a bitter, four-year civil war against the Whites, an uneasy mix of royalists and liberals.

The Soviet Union went on to survive many crises, including early revolts and uprisings. The U.S.S.R. never ceased to murder, oppress, and impoverish its people, but survived until

Christmas 1991, when the Soviet flag finally was lowered from the Kremlin. Estimates of the number of dead under communism ran 150 million and up.

No wonder the Putin government has said little about the revolution. But that's no excuse for ignoring history. The world cannot afford a repeat of the last century of communism.

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