

# Forbes

## **The Legacy Of Russia's First Revolution A Hundred Years On: How 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 on March 15, 1917 passed without an official remembrance in St. Petersburg, where a new Russia was birthed.

The Putin government may want to preserve national unity or fear encouraging modern revolutionaries. Indeed, President Vladimir Putin looks a lot like a tsar of old. Official silence has not, however, stopped a group of Russians under former television journalist Mikhail Zygar from creating Project 1917 to recreate the events of a century ago.

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. Globalization was an expanding reality.

Even stunted democracies provided some constitutional and political accountability for governments. The great autocracies of Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary were influenced by liberal currents and seemed poised to evolve into freer and more just societies. “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. Ferdinand was the heir to the Hapsburg throne, a member of one of Europe’s most venerable aristocratic families

His murder set in motion diplomats and statesmen, generals and admirals, and finally armies and fleets. Common across the continent was the attitude of Adm. Georg Alexander von Mueller, Germany’s Chief of the Naval Cabinet and relative moderate: his nation should not “shrink from war if it were inevitable.”

Countries mobilized their militaries to the applause of their populations. However the predicted swift and glorious victories failed to appear. Instead, the mutual destruction of lives and wealth was prodigious. The slaughter was particularly horrendous on the Eastern Front, as the population-rich Russian Empire substituted men for technology. Peasants died in a conflict started by aristocrats for reasons no one understood.

The Russian Empire stretched from Europe to the Pacific. The country's vast expanse had destroyed Napoleon Bonaparte, ending his aggressive pretensions. St. Petersburg long was a force of conservatism, even reaction. Germany's famed "Iron Chancellor" Otto von Bismarck forged the Dreikaiserbund, or Three Emperors' League, holding Austro-Hungary, Germany, and Russia together. The pact lapsed in 1887, but Bismarck replaced it with the Reinsurance Treaty with St. Petersburg, which provided that both parties would remain neutral if the other became involved in a war with another great power, meaning France or Austria-Hungary.

However, the young, egotistical, and flighty Kaiser Wilhelm II dumped Bismarck and dropped the Reinsurance Treaty soon after ascending the throne. Russia allied with the French Republic, which desired revenge for territory lost to Prussia in 1871. France's humiliation had been heightened by the declaration of the newly created German Empire in the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles, outside of Paris.

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. Tsar Nicholas II believed in his imperial prerogatives, but lacked the personality to preserve them. His and Russia's weaknesses were evident to all—documented in such literary extravaganzas as "Nicholas and Alexandra"—but were masked by peace and prosperity. Liberals hoped for eventual evolution to a better future.

Then came June 28, 1914. The following month may be the most studied period in world history, as participants and historians alike sought to place blame for the conflict to come. On July 28, 1914 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. In turn, Germany believed it could not allow its sole reliable ally, Austria-Hungary, to stand alone against Russia. But confronting Russia brought in France. The United Kingdom, Ottoman Empire, Italy, and other nations including America chose sides and joined the mass murderfest.

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 arguing that Imperial Russia should not align itself with the Entente, which included the UK, since "The Triple Entente is an artificial combination, without a basis of real interest."

In contrast, Durnovo argued, “The vital interests of Russia and Germany do not conflict.” There were no territorial disputes and the two states were commercially compatible. In his view the burden of a European war would fall on Russia and likely result in defeat, which would be blamed on the government. The defeated army, the “legislative institutions and the intellectual opposition parties, lacking real authority in the eyes of the people, will be powerless to stem the popular tide, aroused by themselves, and Russia will be flung into hopeless anarchy.”

His warnings proved tragically prescient.

After weeks of diplomatic and military maneuvers, Russian officials debated mobilization. Many civilian leaders across Europe failed to understand the gravity of taking that step, while the French ambassador, in the words of historian Luigi Albertini, proceeded “to fan the flames” in St. Petersburg. Given the European nations’ respective alliances and war plans, full Russian mobilization effectively meant war. 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. He temporized in the midst of the famous “Willy-Nicky” telegrams with his cousin, Kaiser Wilhelm, who pled for Russia to back away from the brink. 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, millions of dead, wounded, captured, and missing. By mid-1915 soldiers were sent to the front unarmed, told to pick up weapons from fallen comrades. The country continued to fight only through the heroism and sacrifice of common soldiers. After two years dynastic loyalty and patriotic appeals wore thin. Popular unrest was widespread. The liberal leader in the Duma, Pavel Milyukov, asked of the government’s failures: “What is it, stupidity or treason?”

In February 1917 revolution broke out. By then the “idiot Romanov,” as 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.

War weariness was evident across the continent. Only in Russia, however, had the entire system of government fallen. Perhaps nowhere else did the conflict’s aims seem so distant from people’s realities: who in Russia but an elite few benefitted from the continued fighting? Yet in June the Provisional Government launched another offensive, which proved to be a predictable disaster. To fulfill the previous government’s commitment to the Entente the human slaughter continued. Which gave an opening to heretofore marginal radicals, most notably the Bolsheviks, led by Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, or Lenin.

At the war’s start he had been in exile in Zurich, Switzerland. As the tsarist regime tottered, he received reports from his homeland: “They write that the mood of the masses is a good one, that chauvinism is clearly declining and that probably our day will come.” To speed the bacillus of revolution Germany provided for Lenin’s passage to Russia, where he arrived in April.

The collapse of the latest offensive, growth of radical sentiments in the army, and attempted putsch by Gen. Lavr Kornilov all sapped authority from Alexander Fyodorovich Kerensky's government. Indeed, Kerensky the orator "was not a revolutionist; he merely hung around the revolution," sneered leading Bolshevik Leon Trotsky. On November 7 the Bolsheviks bid for power. They easily ousted the man described by Lenin as "boastful" and a "loud mouth," 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 who received haphazard backing from Imperial Russia's erstwhile allies.

The Soviet Union went on to survive many crises, including early revolts and uprisings, as well as a bitter leadership contest to succeed Lenin, who died in 1924. The victor was Joseph Stalin, to the great tragedy of the Russian people, including most of those who supported him. The U.S.S.R. never ceased to murder, oppress, and impoverish its people, but survived until Christmas 1991, when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev resigned. The next day the Soviet flag was lowered from the Kremlin for the last time.

Unfortunately, the new Russian Federation could not reverse the harm resulting from its communist interregnum. Observed my friend Richard M. Ebeling at the Citadel: "The entire history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century reeked of mass murder. Not one country that followed the Soviet revolutionary model in the hundred years after the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917 practiced anything noticeably different in form or content." Estimates of the number of dead in the U.S.S.R., People's Republic of China, various Eastern European communist wannabes, assorted Third World hellholes, and horrid monstrosities such as Cambodia (Kampuchea) and North Korea ran 150 million and upwards to 200 million.

No wonder the Putin government has said little about the revolution. There's so much more to lament than celebrate. But that's no excuse for ignoring history. As Philosopher George Santayana warned, "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." The world cannot afford a repeat of the last century of communism.

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