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The Stalinist Era

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To my sisters Jill and Karen

fueled Cold War tensions with the United States and its allies. In domestic policy, the mammoth task of rebuilding the country, where millions were homeless and hungry, was accomplished through continued state economic controls and coercion. Despite people's hopes for political liberalization after the war, the Stalinist regime remained just as repressive. The wartime victory seemed to vindicate the Stalinist system, and the Cold War dictated continued vigilance.

The conclusion considers the legacy of Stalinism, a legacy that cast a long shadow over the remainder of the Soviet period and even beyond. Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin's successor, embarked on a contentious campaign of de-Stalinization, denouncing Stalin's cult of personality and his use of violence against Party members. But with Khrushchev's ouster in 1964, discussion of Stalinist repressions ceased, to be revived only in the late 1980s under Mikhail Gorbachev. At that time, fuller disclosure of Stalinist repressions discredited the Soviet government and, along with a host of economic and ethnic discontents, contributed to the rapid demise of the Soviet system. The end of the Soviet Union, however, did not end the debate over Stalinism, which is bitterly contested in Russia even to this day.

Stalinism is of central importance to our understanding of twentieth-century world history. During the Stalinist era, the Soviet Union became a military and industrial superpower, capable of winning World War II and rivaling the United States during the Cold War. But Stalinism is not simply a tale of industrial modernization and military triumph. While the Stalinist system represented an alternative model of development and a grave ideological challenge to liberal democracy and capitalism, it also exacted an appalling human toll. Our obligation to study the Stalinist era stems not only from its importance, but also from our responsibility to come to terms with one of the darkest pages in all human history.

1 Prelude to Stalinism

In his 1835 book *Democracy in America*, French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville predicted that Russia and the United States would eventually become the most powerful countries on earth. He wrote, "There are at the present time two great nations in the world . . . the Russians and the Americans . . . Each of them seems marked out by the will of heaven to sway the destinies of half the globe."¹ By the middle of the twentieth century, his prediction had come true. The United States and Russia, by then called the Soviet Union, had emerged as the world's two superpowers, and they were locked in a Cold War struggle for world domination. But fifty years earlier, at the dawn of the twentieth century, few observers could foresee this. True, Russia was an enormous land empire and was considered one of the Great Powers of Europe. But the country's economic and military strength seemed to be diminishing compared to the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and the United States. Whereas these countries were undergoing rapid industrialization, Russia remained an agrarian country, in only the early stages of industrialization. Militarily the country was also falling behind. In 1905, Russia endured a humiliating loss in the Russo-Japanese War. A decade later, the Russian army suffered crushing defeats at the hands of the German army in World War I. How was Russia going to defend itself in this era of industrial production and mass warfare? How was it going to mobilize its vast human and natural resources to fashion a modern military capable of preserving its national sovereignty?

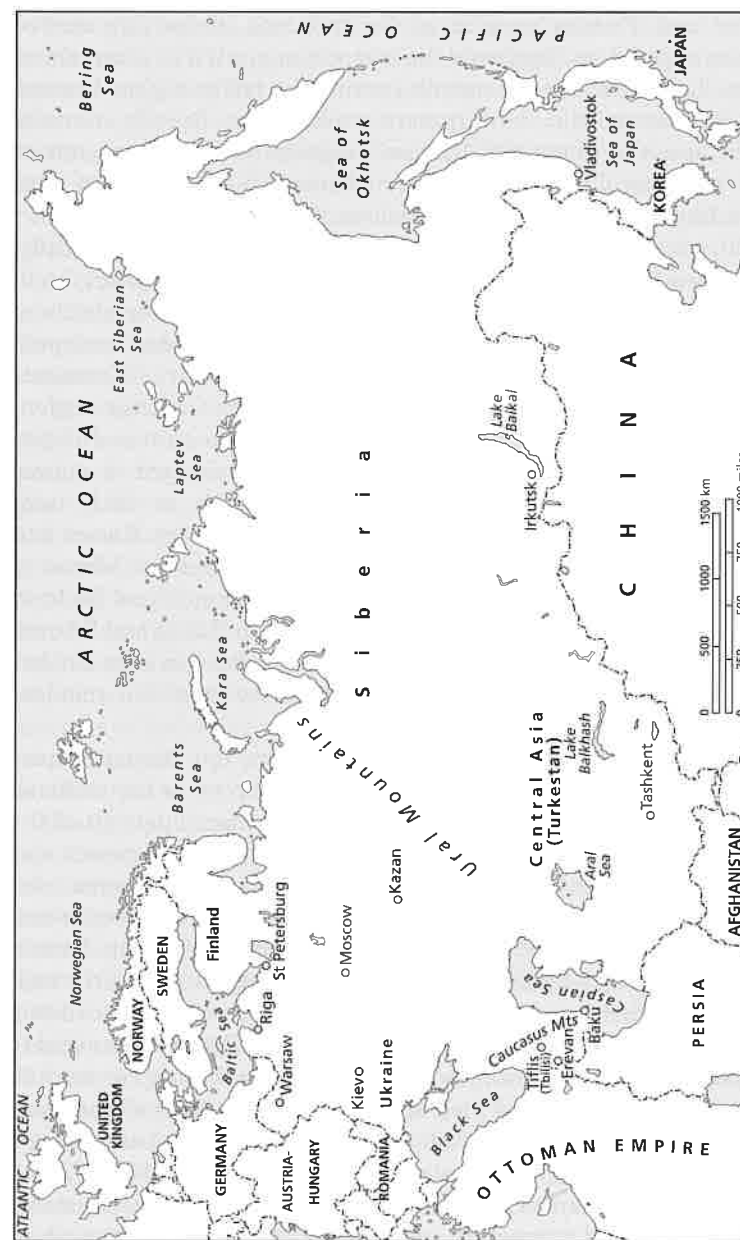
Stalinism was not inevitable. We need to explain how and why it developed. But part of this explanation involves understanding the international context in which Russia operated in the early twentieth century. World War I ushered in a new era of international rivalry and mass warfare, and Russia's lack of industrial development left it militarily vulnerable. Rising international tensions were accompanied by growing interventions by political leaders to ensure the economic capacity and war readiness of their populations. Here too the Russian monarchy had lagged

behind western European governments. But once World War I broke out, the tsarist state vastly expanded its social reach. After the Bolsheviks seized power during the Russian Revolution, they further expanded state control and coercion as they fought a bloody civil war. The Soviet bureaucracy and secret police were formed during the Civil War, and they went on to become fundamental components of the Stalinist state. The origins of Stalinism are complex, and to understand these origins we must consider the prelude to the Stalinist era.

Russia on the Eve of War and Revolution

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Russia was a vast yet underdeveloped empire. The largest country on earth, it stretched 9,000 miles – nearly halfway around the world – from west to east. It extended across the Eurasian land mass, from the Baltic Sea all the way to the Pacific Ocean (see Map 1.1). The northern reaches of Siberia were a seemingly endless expanse of frozen tundra, while the Central Asian part of the Russian Empire was desert and arid steppe. Only 14 percent of the empire's 125 million inhabitants were urban dwellers, meaning that most of the population lived in villages scattered across this enormous region. Transportation and communication remained very poor, so that many of these villages, even in European Russia, were connected to the larger world only by dirt roads, some of which turned to mud and became impassable during spring rains. A decree issued by the tsar, the country's hereditary monarch, might take weeks or months to reach his subjects.

The empire was inhabited by a wide range of ethnic and religious groups. Russians made up just more than 40 percent of the population. Together with other Slavic peoples – Belorussians, Ukrainians, and Poles – they constituted around 70 percent. Although the tsarist state had coopted some ethnic elites, many nationalities felt oppressed by Russian rule. Among Poles, Finns, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians there was a strong desire for independence, something these nationalities achieved following the Russian Revolution. Other nationalities also had aspirations for independence, including those in the Caucasus such as Georgians and Armenians, both of whom possessed distinct political and cultural heritages. A majority of people in the Russian empire were Christian, including ethnic Russians who overwhelmingly were members of the Eastern Orthodox Church, but there were also large Jewish and Muslim populations. Jews felt oppressed by the tsarist regime, as its laws restricted both where they could live and what occupations they could take up. The many Muslim peoples of the empire, including Tatars on the Volga River, ethnic groups in the Caucasus, and



Map 1.1 The Russian Empire, 1914.

the Turkic and Persian peoples of Central Asia, frequently viewed Russians as imperialists. In theory the tsar was supposed to stand above nationality, but in the late nineteenth century the tsarist regime became increasingly nationalistic. Government attempts to Russify minority groups, by teaching them the Russian language or trying to convert them to Orthodox Christianity, only confirmed in the minds of non-Russian subjects the oppressive imperialism of the tsarist state.²

By 1900, western portions of the empire were developing economically. The Polish provinces and the Baltic states, as well as St. Petersburg itself, had substantial numbers of factories and slightly higher standards of living. But most of the empire remained poor and underdeveloped. In provincial European Russia and Ukraine the majority of peasants engaged in subsistence agriculture. Nationalities in the Caucasus region, apart from those in a few urban centers, lived in remote mountain villages. Some residents of Central Asia were nomads who engaged in animal herding, while others relied on agriculture, though in arid, non-prosperous conditions. Given land shortages in European Russia and Ukraine, increasing numbers of peasants migrated to western Siberia to farm there, though the short growing season made conditions far from favorable for agriculture. In the far north of European Russia and Siberia, the Chukchi and other "small peoples of the north" lived in even harsher climatic conditions and subsisted primarily on hunting and reindeer herding.³

In addition to deep ethnic and religious divisions, the Russian empire suffered from severe social stratification. At the top of its hierarchical, caste society was the nobility, which made up less than 2 percent of the population yet controlled much of the country's political power and wealth. In European Russia, the provincial nobility were the landlords for the largest social group, the peasantry, which constituted more than 80 percent of the population. Most Russian peasants farmed the land communally – the peasant commune was an institution through which peasant elders apportioned both land and tax obligations among members of their village. But much of the land in the Russian countryside was owned by the nobility, and peasants had to lease this land or work as sharecroppers in order to feed their families. Peasants generally believed that all the land should belong to those who worked it, and accordingly they felt enormous antipathy toward noble landowners. While some peasants by the late nineteenth century had become involved in trade, handicraft labor, and temporary work in cities, others continued to engage in subsistence agriculture, eating the crops they grew and endangered by periodic crop failures and famines.⁴

Russia lacked the sizeable middle class that had developed by this time in many western European countries. Merchants and industrialists represented only a tiny fraction of the population, and Russia had little in the way of entrepreneurial traditions – in fact, most Russians detested profit seeking and the accumulation of wealth.⁵ With a scarcity of private capital and entrepreneurship, much of what little industrial development occurred was the result of state investment. In the 1880s and 1890s, the tsarist government embarked upon a program of railroad construction and state-sponsored industrialization. While still small relative to Russia's size, factory output increased. Coal, iron, and steel industries arose alongside preexisting textile mills, and the number of industrial workers grew substantially.

Although nascent industrial growth boosted the country's economy, it did little to ease social tensions. In fact, the early stages of industrialization and urbanization only made differences in wealth and status more glaring. Whereas for centuries peasants had lived in poverty, their misery had been dispersed across an enormous rural expanse. Industrial workers crammed into urban slums and tenements were far more visible, and the contrast between the workers' poverty and the wealth of urban nobles and merchants highlighted the country's social polarization. Dangerous factory conditions, long hours, and low wages further added to workers' discontent.⁶ Workers' proximity to one another also offered greater possibilities of collective organizing and political action. The tsarist government increasingly saw the growing working class not only as a social problem but as a political threat as well.

Russia's political system provided no outlet for social grievances and no democratic basis to resolve tensions. Until 1905 it was an absolute monarchy, which meant that the people had no voice in their government and all power rested with the tsar. It was also a hereditary monarchy – the eldest son of the tsar inherited the throne, whether or not he was competent to lead the empire. Russia's last tsar, Nicholas II, who reigned from 1894 to 1917, was a weak ruler (see Figure 1.1). He was devoted to his family and was known for his good horsemanship and ballroom dancing. But he completely lacked the will and ability to reign. Upon inheriting the throne, he confided to his brother-in-law, "I am not prepared to be a Tsar. I never wanted to become one. I know nothing of the business of ruling. I have no idea of even how to talk to the ministers."⁷ Government ministers soon discovered that Nicholas II constantly changed his mind, agreeing with whomever he had spoken to last. Dim-witted and indecisive, Nicholas II provided no leadership for an empire that desperately needed it. He proved resolute only in his resistance to political reforms, despite the fact that monarchical institutions were becoming obsolete.



Figure 1.1 Tsar Nicholas II, ca. 1900.

The tsar ruled the empire through a huge bureaucracy, which had grown to nearly 400,000 officials by the early twentieth century. Most tsarist bureaucrats worked in St. Petersburg, the capital city located in the far northwest corner of the country. They generally had little knowledge of the local conditions of the empire's various peoples, many of whom lived thousands of miles away. As ethnic Russians, central bureaucrats tended to be disdainful of ethnic minorities and their customs, contributing to the imperialist nature of the tsarist government. Moreover, tsarist

administrators were notoriously incompetent and corrupt, as people learned to expect inefficiency and bribe-taking when trying to deal with government officials.

The intelligentsia, the relatively small number of highly educated people in Russia, despised the tsarist autocracy and longed for political and social reform. In the early nineteenth century most members of the intelligentsia had come from the nobility, but by 1900 there were growing numbers of educated professionals – doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, agronomists – who were not of noble birth. Some were the sons and daughters of the clergy, while others had come from less privileged groups but had managed to get a university education. These people often felt alienated from both the government elite and the lower classes. Yet members of the intelligentsia were also characterized by a sense of obligation to help peasants and workers. They were aware of the wretched living conditions, widespread malnutrition, and high rates of infectious diseases among the lower classes.

In 1887, life expectancy in the Russian empire was only 32 years, and Russia's infant mortality rate was the highest in Europe – one-quarter of all infants died in their first year of life. Nearly three-quarters of all peasants were illiterate, though with the spread of new schools, literacy rates were increasing at the end of the tsarist era.⁸ Peasant villages were characterized by poverty – dank, smoky huts with dirt floors, farm animals living alongside humans, swarms of flies in the summer, cold and darkness in the winter. Drunkenness was widespread among the peasantry, as was superstition and domestic violence. Educated Russians hoped to uplift the masses and to improve their lives and living conditions.⁹

The intelligentsia's efforts at social amelioration mirrored reform movements in western Europe, where public health specialists, social workers, and educators sought to teach hygiene, sobriety, and literacy to the burgeoning ranks of urban, industrial workers. But the Russian intelligentsia hoped to avoid many of the pitfalls of Western modernization. The fact that Russia industrialized later than the countries of western Europe meant that its intelligentsia was aware of the problems associated with industrialization and urbanization, including overcrowding, exploitation, crime, and social strife. Industrialization had seemingly destroyed the organic unity of traditional societies. Educated Russians could draw upon socialist thought, which proposed an alternative to industrial capitalism and class antagonism. The intelligentsia, then, was eager to modernize, but sought Russia's own path to modernity, one that might avoid the social disruption and alienation of industrial capitalism. They wanted to modernize the country not only to bolster national

defense, but to improve people's lives and overcome the population's high rates of illiteracy and infectious disease.¹⁰

Members of the Russian intelligentsia had much in common with reformers in other late-developing countries, such as the Ottoman Empire, Persia, Japan, and Mexico. In those countries too, educated professionals were aware of their populations' "backwardness" and were eager to modernize. They too looked at "the West" with a mixture of admiration and apprehension. While they hoped their societies would emulate Western material progress and education, they wished to avoid the capitalist exploitation they witnessed in western Europe. The Russian intelligentsia and their counterparts in other developing countries placed their faith in the transformative powers of science and culture as the means by which they might uplift the people. And given that all these countries lacked well-developed civil societies and civic institutions, many of their educated elites hoped to use the power of the state to help enact this social transformation. In the case of Russian intellectuals, they did not look to the tsarist autocracy, but rather to some future, progressive state that would give them a leading role in developing the country.

The Revolutionary Movement

Some members of the intelligentsia went beyond calls for reform and pushed instead for revolution – the violent overthrow of the tsarist order. The origins of the Russian revolutionary movement may be traced to the rise of utopian thought in western Europe. The notion of radically restructuring society had been inconceivable within a traditional worldview that saw God as the sole arbiter of worldly affairs. But Enlightenment thinkers in eighteenth-century France began to question both the existence of God and the sanctity of tradition. And if there were no God to manage society, then should not humankind construct its own rational social order? If there were no heaven above, should not people seek to create a heaven on earth – a perfect society, with liberty, equality, and prosperity for all?

By the nineteenth century, social thinkers in western Europe had developed utopian ideas, and these ideas began to spread to Russia. Some Russian intellectuals found these ideas alluring, but they confronted an enormous gulf between their aspirations and the reality around them. While they hoped to create a perfect society, everywhere they saw poverty, disease, and illiteracy, all presided over by the tyrannical and corrupt tsarist bureaucracy. For them to bridge this gulf and make the leap to a utopian future, it seemed that small incremental steps were too little. Instead, the more radical among them dreamed of bold, dramatic

action – something that in one apocalyptic moment might wipe away all of the injustices of the old world and create something entirely new. In other words, they dreamed of a revolution. And if that revolution were to achieve their utopian goal, where all future generations would live in harmony, then any action including violence seemed justified in order to realize it.

Russian radicals of the 1870s formed a terrorist organization called the People's Will. Its members plotted to assassinate the reigning tsar, Alexander II, in the hopes of sparking a political uprising. In 1881, a member of the People's Will threw a bomb under the tsar's horse-drawn carriage in the streets of St. Petersburg. The explosion injured several guards, but the tsar stepped out of the splintered carriage unhurt. As he thanked God for sparing his life, another terrorist ran up shouting, "It is too early to thank God," and threw a second bomb. This one exploded at the tsar's feet and killed him.¹¹ The assassination of Alexander II, however, did not trigger a revolution. Instead, the next two tsars, Alexander III and Nicholas II, sought to reinforce the monarchy with conservative policies and repression. The tsarist police arrested hundreds of suspected revolutionaries and hanged those involved in terrorist activities. A range of revolutionary groups nonetheless continued to struggle for the overthrow of the autocracy.

Some Russian radicals turned to the ideas of Karl Marx. Like other socialist thinkers, Marx hoped to overcome the social stratification and antagonisms that had accompanied the rise of industrial capitalism in western Europe. He believed that the path to equality and social harmony could be found via proletarian revolution that would usher in an era of socialism. Marx put forward a theory of history according to which humankind was progressing through stages – feudalism to capitalism to socialism, and ultimately to communism, a utopian final stage in which all people would live in prosperity and harmony. Many Russian leftists were drawn to Marxism due to its emphasis on environmental factors as the determinants of human consciousness. They blamed the wretched condition of the masses not on peasants and workers themselves, but on imperial Russia's oppressive economic and social environment. Marx promised the replacement of the old order with freedom and equality under socialism. The particular context in which Marxism took root, then, was one in which members of the Russian intelligentsia fought simultaneously to overcome the tsarist autocracy and to uplift the people. To view Marxism as an ideology artificially imposed on Russia ignores both the reasons it was adopted and the fact that many non-Marxist intellectuals shared this wish for revolutionary change.

Russian Marxists were divided into two factions, the more radical being the Bolsheviks, later renamed the Communists. Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Bolsheviks, was uncompromising in his push for a socialist revolution in Russia. Unlike the more moderate Marxist party, the Mensheviks, Lenin and the Bolsheviks did not see the need for Russia to pass through a long stage of capitalism. Flaunting traditional Marxist thought, which saw proletarian revolutions starting first in the industrialized countries of western Europe, Lenin argued that the working classes in developing countries could become the vanguard of world revolution. In his article, "Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism," Lenin stated that because capitalism was most exploitative in colonial settings (including in Russia), workers there would be the first to rise up against it.¹²

Many Bolsheviks were from non-Russian minorities within the empire, including Georgians, Latvians, and Jews. The fact that these groups were disproportionately represented in this revolutionary political party is not surprising, given that they were largely excluded from positions of power and privilege under the tsarist government. Discrimination toward national and religious minorities naturally aroused opposition within these groups. Among the Bolshevik Party members was a young Georgian named Joseph Djughashvili, alias Joseph Stalin. Stalin came from a poor, working-class family. His mother wanted him to become a priest, and he attended an Orthodox seminary. There he received an education and was also exposed to Marxist ideas. After he left the seminary, he joined the Bolshevik Party and became a revolutionary organizer who planned strikes and protest marches. Like many of the Bolsheviks, he suffered arrest and exile to Siberia several times, but persecution by the tsarist police only heightened his commitment to violent revolution.¹³

Had the tsarist autocracy provided for national defense and increasing prosperity, the Bolsheviks and other radical groups in Russia might never have had the opportunity to carry out a revolution. But instead, military failures combined with widespread privation undermined people's faith in the tsar's ability to lead the country. In the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05, Russia was badly defeated by a country that was not yet considered a leading military power. The Baltic Fleet – the pride of the Russian navy – sailed halfway around the world to engage the Japanese, only to be annihilated in the Battle of Tsushima. Tales of government incompetence coupled with military defeats eroded people's confidence in their government.

The Revolution of 1905 broke out during the Russo-Japanese War. On January 9, 1905 – Bloody Sunday, as it became known – a crowd of demonstrators marched toward the royal palace to petition the tsar. They

sought improved working conditions, better wages, and an end to the war with Japan. Some of the demonstrators carried portraits of the tsar to emphasize their loyalty to him and to plead for his assistance. To prevent the marchers from reaching the palace, tsarist soldiers fired on the crowd, killing and wounding hundreds of people. This massacre of peaceful demonstrators provoked widespread outrage, and workers throughout the country organized strikes and demonstrations in response. As rebellions escalated, tsarist officials seemed paralyzed and unable to quell the unrest. Mutinies broke out in the military. Peasants began to seize land and drive nobles from the countryside. In addition to widespread antipathy toward the monarchy, the Revolution of 1905 revealed the deep social antagonisms between Russia's upper and lower classes. Finally in October 1905, Nicholas II issued the October Manifesto, which promised the creation of a national parliament (the Duma).¹⁴

The October Manifesto divided the revolutionary forces and allowed the autocracy to endure, but it did not lead to a stable constitutional monarchy. Nicholas II and his advisors subsequently limited the Duma's powers and (after dissolving it twice) decreed new electoral regulations that guaranteed conservative noble landowners a majority in the Duma. This change meant that while a Russian parliament existed, it had limited authority and did not democratically represent the population. While the tsarist government carried out harsh repressive measures against revolutionaries, social discontent increased further, particularly among workers after the Lena goldfields massacre in 1912 – another large-scale shooting of peaceful demonstrators by tsarist soldiers.

As if the tsar's authority were not discredited enough, he fell under the influence of a self-proclaimed holy man from Siberia named Grigory Rasputin (see Figure 1.2). Rasputin had gained a reputation as a mystic healer, and in 1907 he was brought to the royal palace to help the tsar's son. Nicholas II's only son and the heir to the throne, Aleksey, suffered from hemophilia, a serious medical condition in which one's blood does not clot properly. Like other hemophiliacs, Aleksey was prone to internal or external bleeding, and doctors at the time could do little to help him. Rasputin seemed to be the only person who could soothe and heal the boy, and in this way he gained influence first over the tsar's wife, Alexandra, and then over Nicholas II himself. Rasputin used this influence to meddle in politics and sway the tsar's decisions.

Prime Minister Peter Stolypin warned the tsar that Rasputin's presence at the palace was discrediting the monarchy. He even showed him police reports on Rasputin's orgies with prostitutes, and agreed to confront Rasputin himself. Stolypin later described their meeting: "Rasputin ran his pale eyes over me. He mumbled mysterious and inarticulate words

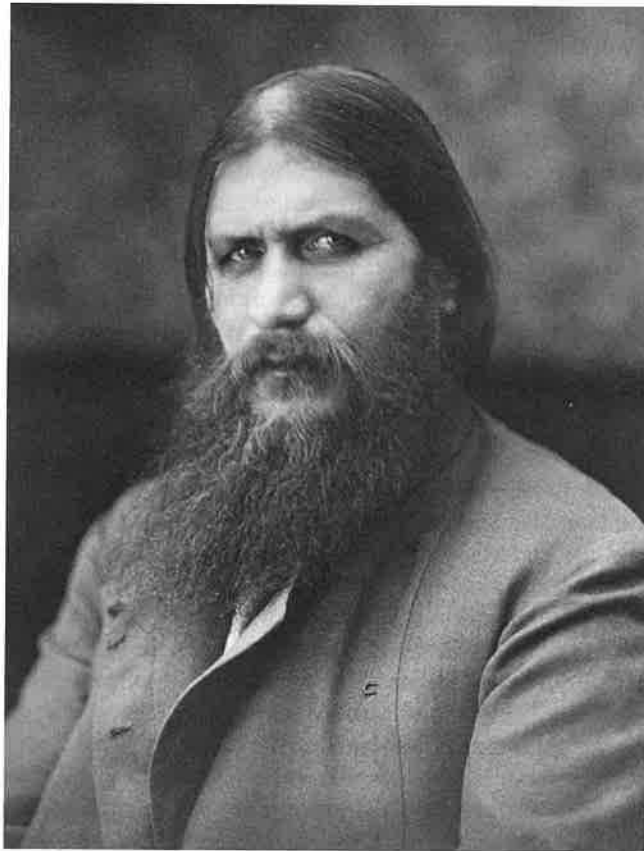


Figure 1.2 Grigory Rasputin, 1916.

from the Scriptures and made strange movements with his hands.” Stolypin sensed Rasputin was trying to hypnotize him, but he threatened “this vermin” and banished him from the capital.¹⁵ Nicholas II promised not to see Rasputin again, but Tsarina Alexandra defended “Our Friend,” and Rasputin was soon back at the palace. At times, Rasputin would go into holy fits, when he would writhe on the floor and speak as if possessed. Nicholas II and Alexandra interpreted Rasputin’s words as the voice of God, and they heeded his advice.

Even among the nobility, many began to doubt the tsar’s ability to lead the country. The fact that a dissolute adventurer like Rasputin could gain such influence over the tsar revealed a fundamental flaw in Russia’s monarchical government. Personalized rule concentrated in the hands

of one person – someone chosen based on heredity, not merit – meant that decisions of the utmost national importance could be made capriciously. Opportunists and charlatans manipulated the tsar and his policies in harmful ways. The Russian monarchy was not only undemocratic, it was arbitrary and corrupt, and clearly unequal to the task of governing a vast empire.

To sum up, Russia on the eve of World War I was the world’s largest country, comprised of many different national and ethnic groups. It was primarily an agrarian country, with an overwhelmingly peasant population and high rates of illiteracy and infectious disease. Compared with western European countries, it was underdeveloped – lacking in industry, infrastructure, transportation, and communication networks. As a consequence, Russia had fallen behind Germany and other countries in terms of military capability. Politically, Russia also seemed backward – a monarchy with weakly developed institutions of civic engagement. Ethnic tensions, social strife, and a growing revolutionary movement increasingly endangered the existing social and political order. Overall the country was ill-prepared for the cataclysm of World War I, a war that the tsarist regime would not survive.

World War I

Never before in history had there been a war fought on the scale of World War I. Nearly 70 million soldiers fought in the war, with more than 9 million of them killed and more than 20 million wounded. Traditionally, European warfare had been the business of professional armies, and the civilian population was largely insulated from wars. But the conscription of millions of young men into armies during World War I, and the mobilization of civilians to produce weapons for the war, changed the face of both warfare and politics. The advent of mass warfare led to the politicization of the masses. Governments could not continue fighting the war without maintaining the morale and support of their populations. Nowhere did this fact become clearer than in Russia, where World War I led to the overthrow of the tsar and eventually to the founding of the Soviet regime. In addition, the mobilizational demands of war led to expanded government control over the economy and the population. World War I, then, not only led to the Russian Revolution, it also established a range of interventionist practices that would become prominent features of Stalinism.

The iconic images of World War I come from the western front, where soldiers were mired in trenches and the battle lines changed very little in four years of war. Infantry charges were repeatedly repulsed as soldiers

were slaughtered by machine guns and artillery. On the eastern front, soldiers also suffered slaughter by artillery bombardment and machine gun fire, but the character of warfare was different. The battle lines there were much more fluid, and vast swathes of territory changed hands in the course of the war. Unfortunately for the Russian army, most of its movement was in retreat. At the outset of the war, the Russian army invaded German territory, only to suffer a catastrophic defeat in the Battle of Tannenberg. While the Russian army did have some success against the Austro-Hungarian army to the south, it was no match for the German army. Because Germany was much more industrialized than Russia, its artillery and munitions were far superior. In addition, Russia's railway network was less developed, so the Russian military had trouble moving troops and supplies. Russia soon began to run short of rifles and ammunition, and by 1915, one-quarter of Russian soldiers were sent into battle without guns.

The tsarist autocracy was clearly not up to the task of mobilizing the vast human and material resources needed for World War I. Indeed, this unprecedented mobilization proved a challenge for all countries, and it deeply affected governments and societies throughout Europe. All major combatants in the war extended the reach of state authority. Governments initiated economic controls, surveillance mechanisms, internment camps, welfare programs, and public health measures. The expansion of state control was dictated by the demands of mass warfare, as political leaders sought to safeguard their countries' "human capital" and "military manpower." New government programs also arose in response to security concerns and social problems caused by the war.

Russia had lagged behind many other European countries in terms of government welfare programs. But wartime mobilizations, widespread epidemic diseases, and massive social displacements required the Russian government to augment state intervention. Government policies included a range of public health and welfare measures. When, for example, locally based physicians proved unable to cope with the millions of war wounded and the spread of epidemic diseases, the tsar finally agreed to the creation of a state ministry of health in 1916 – similar to countries throughout Europe that created ministries of health in the wake of World War I.¹⁶ To provide for the welfare of disabled soldiers, war widows, and refugees, the Russian government replaced private charities with parastatal organizations (nominally independent bodies connected to the state). These organizations offered medical aid, food, and shelter for the hundreds of thousands of citizens in need during the war.¹⁷

Countries involved in World War I all increased government control of their economies. Germany went the furthest, with government planning of industrial production and, in late 1916, universal labor conscription. The United Kingdom's Defence of the Realm Act gave the government power to manage key sectors of the economy. Russia likewise moved toward centralized economic controls through the creation of the War Industries-Committees – organizations of industrialists who worked closely with the government to manage Russia's economy for the war effort.¹⁸ Governments also intervened to manage food supplies, through both rationing and the requisitioning of grain. In Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire (and later in Russia under the Provisional Government), political leaders replaced free-market economies with government grain monopolies, state food supply bureaucracies, and the use of military units to requisition grain.

Governments throughout Europe also vastly expanded surveillance of their populations during World War I. Previously, police in many countries, including Russia, had monitored the activities of small numbers of people – suspected revolutionaries and opponents of the regime. During World War I, governments of combatant countries began to monitor the "political moods" of their entire populations through perustration of letters, the use of informants, and intelligence reports. The French government in 1915, for example, introduced military postal censorship and perustration of mail, whereby censors would secretly open soldiers' letters. Initially these measures were simply to prevent soldiers from revealing sensitive military information, but soon censors began to compile and analyze information on sentiments within the French army. Other countries including Russia similarly began perustration of letters, use of informants, and reporting on the political moods of the population. Surveillance became much more than an effort to keep tabs on subversive individuals. Instead, it embodied an effort to map and mold people's thinking.¹⁹

Hand in hand with surveillance came massive government propaganda efforts. During World War I, political and military leaders throughout Europe came to see the national will as crucial to victory. To maintain their civilians' morale and their soldiers' will to fight, governments formed state bureaucracies or parastatal organizations to produce propaganda posters, leaflets, and films. The British War Cabinet formed the National War Aims Committee, the Austro-Hungarian High Command created the Enemy Propaganda Defense Agency, and the Italian government established the Commissariat for Civilian Assistance and Propaganda. In Russia, the Skobelev Committee, a parastatal organization with close

ties to the tsarist government, produced films and posters to promote patriotism and subservience to the tsar.²⁰

Governments also used new forms of state violence against civilian populations, in particular deportations and concentration camps. The incarceration of civilians in concentration camps first occurred during colonial warfare around 1900 – in Cuba during the Spanish–American War and in South Africa during the Boer War. All major combatant countries then used concentration camps during World War I. German military commanders created a network of civilian labor camps in Belgium and northern France, while Russia, Germany, the United Kingdom, France, Canada, and the United States all established internment camps for “enemy aliens” (citizens of opposing countries) residing on their soil.²¹ Governments of multinational empires – Russia, Austro-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire – also deported and interned segments of their own populations, namely ethnic and religious minorities that they did not trust. The tsarist government deported nearly 1 million of its subjects – ethnic Germans, Jews, and Muslims – from regions near the front.²²

Like other combatant countries, then, Russia instituted a range of total war practices – economic controls, grain requisitioning, government health and welfare programs, surveillance, deportations, and concentration camps. All of these practices would become institutionalized features of the Soviet system and key elements of Stalinism. The fact that they arose outside Russia and prior to 1917 indicates that the origins of Stalinism went beyond Marxist ideology and Stalin himself. Instead, Stalinism represented a system of government mobilization and repression based on wartime practices. As we will see, what distinguished Stalinism was the fact that Stalin and his fellow leaders continued these total war practices during peacetime and used them to pursue their ideological agenda.

World War I in Russia also led to the increasing politicization of the masses. While industrial workers had already been politically active, the peasantry now became politically aware as well. This was particularly true of the roughly 15 million peasants drafted into the army during the course of the war. But even back in the villages there was heightened political awareness, as peasants eagerly gathered to hear newspapers read in order to learn about the course of the war.²³ As the war dragged on and Russian losses mounted, morale in the army began to fall. By the end of 1916, the Russian army had lost 5.7 million men, 3.6 million killed or seriously wounded and the rest prisoners of war. The politicization of soldiers meant that they discussed the failures of the tsarist government and increasingly questioned the authority of their officers. Some soldiers began to desert from the army while others defied their officers and

mutinied. Soldiers garrisoned in Russia’s cities were exposed to propaganda by socialist agitators who denounced the war effort and called for revolution. Whereas in 1905 the army had ultimately played a decisive role in crushing rebellions, in 1917 soldiers could no longer be counted on to shoot protesters. On the contrary, many soldiers became a revolutionary force, deserting from the army and taking their guns with them back to their villages.²⁴

Among the civilian population, unrest also began to grow. The continuing war effort caused severe shortages of fuel and food, so that urban residents were cold and hungry. Workers repeatedly engaged in strikes, literally thousands of which had occurred by 1917. Increasingly they put forward not only economic but political demands. Peasants, who for decades had been wanting more land, began to seize the property of noble landowners. Some non-Russian nationalities began to rebel against tsarist authority. A large-scale revolt took place in Central Asia when the tsarist government tried to conscript Muslims into the Russian army in 1916.²⁵ When the tsarist autocracy finally collapsed in February 1917, Russia entered a period of revolution and civil war – the moment in which the Soviet state would be born.

The Russian Revolution

The overthrow of the monarchy came not at the hands of revolutionary groups, but rather as the result of spontaneous protests. By the beginning of 1917, demonstrations had become regular occurrences in the Russian capital, Petrograd (previously named St. Petersburg). On International Women’s Day in February 1917, a group of women workers called for a strike and began marching through the streets demanding bread and an end to the war. Their protest in the context of worker militancy ignited a political revolution. Marching past factories, the women strikers were joined by more and more workers. By the end of the day, more than 100,000 workers (a third of the city’s workforce) were on strike. During the next few days, the strikes grew into large demonstrations against the war effort and the tsarist regime. Nicholas II ordered authorities to disperse the demonstrators, but after some initial bloodshed, soldiers refused to fire on crowds and instead joined the revolution. The military high command then rejected the tsar’s order to move new troops to the capital. Having lost all authority, Nicholas II abdicated the throne, and the Russian monarchy came to an end.²⁶

When the tsarist autocracy collapsed, Russia was left with a power vacuum. If the Duma had been a truly democratic parliament with the confidence of the people, then it might have formed a government with