



**23**

## **WORLD WAR I AND THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION**

World War I and the Russian Revolution of 1917 were consequences of the developments and chain of events in the second half of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. Both were very significant experiences involving millions of people: they influenced and shaped the entire 20th century.



### **OBJECTIVES**

After studying the lesson, you will be able to:

- identify some of the factors which caused the war in 1914, and discuss whether such factors of conflict exist in the world today;
- explain why the revolution became possible in the Russian Empire of 1917 and not in any other country;
- analyse the immediate and long term consequences of both the War and the Russian Revolution and
- discuss the meaning of the War and the Revolution for India.

### **23.1 HOW WAS WORLD WAR I DIFFERENT FROM PREVIOUS WARS IN HISTORY**

Except for Spain, the Netherlands, the three Scandinavian countries and Switzerland, all the European nations were involved in a war which connected the whole world in its violence and suffering. Troops from other areas—specifically colonies—were also made to fight in this war for countries which ruled over them. For example, Indian soldiers had to fight for Britain outside the territory of India. It is estimated that over three million men came from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and India on the side of Britain (Britain ruled over these areas). The regions involved i. e., the territories of the war zones were also widespread: the war engulfed Europe, Asia, Africa and the Pacific. For the first time almost the entire peoples of the world were involved in a war, which they also knew was a *world* war.

There were new technologies used in warfare, not seen in earlier wars: airplanes, tanks and submarines. But it was fought on the ground in the ordinary way as well and most people remembered it that way later because most images of war depicted soldiers fighting in trenches on ground. Sea battles took place in the South Atlantic



**Notes**

and the Pacific. USA for the first time got involved on a world scale, with more than 100,000 troops on the side of Britain and her allies.

The World War led to huge mobilizations of men as soldiers, while women took on many jobs back in the cities and also as nurses in the battle zones. Governments took many measures to ensure that their own armies do not run short of any supplies. Just as they mobilized men they also mobilized grain for food from peasants. They curtailed workers' rights to make them work longer hours and for same wages to meet the needs of army equipment and ammunition. There was a rise in prices of food and articles of daily consumption because major investments were only in industries related to war and other requirements of war. There was a general sense of despair among people.

We must also remember that there were 10 million who were killed in war or due to hardships caused by war, another 20 million who were wounded, and millions who became refugees or unemployed as towns and industries were destroyed. Homelessness resulted not just on border areas of countries, but all over. Civilian populations were involved and became casualties for the first time in war history: bombings of civilian areas, and the famines and epidemics caused by war, led to millions of civilian deaths.

When it began most people thought the war would be short: it lasted four years. You can imagine what life would have been like for people in countries involved in a war for four whole years. It dismantled quite a few of the existing socio-economic and political structures. It affected the economy of the entire world. Because of the spread and the mobilization of all resources by the warring states on such scale for the first time, it is known as the First World War.

For all these reasons the war marked a turning point in world history.

**23.2 REASONS FOR WAR**

The reasons for World War I are complex, although it was sparked off by a kind of incident which could have happened anywhere at any time. There was hostility between Serbia and Austria during which Arch Duke Franz Ferdinand, heir to throne of Habsburg Empire was murdered at Sarajevo in 1914. This became the event which spiraled into World War I.

But why did one incident have such devastating consequences as to finally lead the entire world into a four year war?

You have already read about the race for colonies in an earlier lesson, and how in the second half of the nineteenth century there was a full fledged imperialist system in place. For example, in 1876 no more than 10 percent of Africa was under European rule, but by 1900 more than 90 percent was colonized. You have also seen that Germany had been left behind in this race, and now it began to feel that she too wanted her own colonies to rule over. By 1914 these powers were ready to increase their own respective spheres of influence, to bring more areas under each one's control, and to have a larger share in the resources of the world.

As most of the world was already divided amongst them, each one could increase its own areas of control, economically or politically, only by 'reordering' the world, or fighting each other to increase their own share at the expense of another. Though none of them thought in terms of a big war, yet potential for conflict was always there.

**Notes**

They made short wars for gaining new territories from another country or to protect territories already under their control, and sometimes in order to check a rival they entered into alliance with another power. Bismarck of Germany entered into an alliance with Austria-Hungary in 1879, known as Dual Alliance, which became the Triple Alliance when Italy joined in 1882. On the other side France in 1894 made an alliance with Russia, in 1904 France made an agreement with Britain and in 1907 Britain made an entente with Russia. This came to known as Triple Entente.

The leaders of Europe thought these alliances would prevent war through a balance of power: in fact what happened was that these alliances tied the countries together. When one country went to war the others would have to get involved to help their ally. The rivalries and conflicts among the imperialist countries thus became the underlying causes of the War.

Nationalist movements were an important feature of the nineteenth century. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth century nationalism also underwent a transformation. In the advanced capitalist countries it became linked with extending areas of control and increasing one's military strength. The dominating perception was no longer one that came with the French revolution and its ideals of 'Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity'. These countries were also no longer concerned with the idea of popular sovereignty in a nation. On the other hand within multi national empires like Austria-Hungary and the Russian Empire people wanted to free themselves and form independent nations, which all big powers were opposed to.

The big powers therefore went in for an unprecedented arms race, and building up of huge armies and navies. Militarism became the main aspect of foreign policy. Domestic policies were aimed at increasing strength vis a vis other powers rather than the welfare of their own citizens. Mass media was made into a major tool: newspapers played an important role in the spread of aggressive nationalism.

In 1901 relatively few people were permitted to vote anywhere, and women practically nowhere. Most citizens therefore hardly had an influence on policy making of their governments. The governments were guided by the interests of capitalists and landlords and under their influence they competed among themselves for increasing areas of control under them. Although ordinary people hardly had a stake in this competition, once the war broke out people did come forward with support for their respective countries.

The horrors of modern war were still not understood. It was the impact of war that made people reconsider the war and begin to demand peace.

**23.3 COURSE OF WAR**

We will not go into the details of the course of war or the major campaigns. But you should know that Austria regarded the murder in Serbia as provocation for war, and once she decided to retaliate, her Triple Alliance partners Germany and Italy were drawn in on her side, and the other powers (Britain, France and Russia) came on the opposing side.

Germany sent troops towards France and seemed to be succeeding, when Russia attacked Germany and Austria from the east. The war became long drawn and more complicated. Fighting in the trenches on the ground continued for four years as both sides were evenly matched. Labour from colonies was used for digging trenches. Then the war spread to areas in Asia and Africa.



**Notes**

Use of technology during the war meant heavy casualties for all countries. For example, on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, 60, 000 British soldiers were killed or wounded.

Italy changed sides during the course of the war. In April 1917 the US also declared war on Germany. The decisive element at this stage was the revolutionary movement in the Russian Empire.

In October 1917 the Russian revolution was successful and Russia came out of the war when communists emerged in leadership there. They signed a peace treaty with Germany in March 1918. This treaty was very harsh on Russia, but the new regime in Russia, led by Lenin, agreed to it because they had been opposed to the war from the beginning.

This complicated matters: not only to Germany, but also to Britain and France, the new Russia seemed a bigger enemy because they were fundamentally opposed to communism.

Therefore when the fortunes of battle began to turn by the beginning of 1918 and the German armies began to retreat, Britain and France agreed to a peace. In Germany too, as in Russia, the workers threatened revolution. Armistice came into effect on November 11, 1918, and then all the powers together put their strength into trying to defeat the revolution in Russia. You will learn something about it in the next section.



**INTEXT QUESTIONS 23.1**

1. What were the new weapons used in World War I?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Name the two main international alliances formed by 1914.  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. How many people were affected by World War I?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. Which side did Indian soldiers fight on in World War I?  
\_\_\_\_\_

**23.4 THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION, 1917**

The Russian Revolution was made in 1917, before the end of the War. It is also known as the Bolshevik revolution, because Bolsheviks as a political group played a leading role in the success of the revolution and also determined its policies.

This was the first socialist revolution in history and it was inspired by the ideals of communism. In your earlier lessons you have learnt something about capitalism and the ideas of socialism, and how socialism represents equality and social justice to a greater degree than is possible under capitalism. The revolution came about as a result of the movements of the working people—the working class and the peasantry.

By 1917 the Russian Empire was under strain both from the consequences of the long war and by the political and social movements within the country. Up to February 1917 Russia was a multinational Empire, ruled by an autocrat, who was known as



the Tsar. Its territory was huge, including a large part of Central Asia and parts of Eastern Europe. There were no representative institutions, no right to form political or trade union organizations, no elections. There was strict censorship and arbitrary arrests. There was no religious tolerance, and the other nationalities and minorities in the Empire did not enjoy equal rights with the Russians, because the Tsar, Nicholas II, belonged to the Russian Romanov dynasty. The Tsar used his military and diplomatic strength against all democratic movements in Europe. For this he was known as the 'Policeman' of Europe. These conditions were very oppressive and very different from Western Europe in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### 23.5 THE OLD AND THE NEW

While the political system remained an autocracy, important changes were taking place in economy and society, which created new aspirations. New ideas were also emerging, and many sections of society were becoming dissatisfied with the oppressive rule of the Tsar. Since they had no parliamentary system or elections through which to express their opposition to the Tsarist policies, they had to adopt a revolutionary path. They had to overthrow the system of autocracy itself to have a say in society and policies which affected them. This was a major difference between other European countries and the Russian Empire.

### 23.6 AGRICULTURE AND PEASANT DISCONTENT

The peasants were also very discontented. As in western and central Europe, the peasant-serfs were freed in the Russian Empire as well, although very much later, in 1861. But despite this land reform, the landed aristocracy remained strong and continued to oppress the peasants. Also, the peasantry just did not have enough land: the peasants constituted about 80 percent of the population, but had hardly 50 percent of the land. The demand for land was therefore a major cause for anger against the Tsar who had let them down by such an inadequate land reform.

Also the freed peasants had to pay very heavily for both land and freedom, because the Tsar was interested in keeping the goodwill and support of the big landlords by giving more than fair compensation to them. The peasants had to pay such a heavy price that they remained continually in debt, and were forced to work very cheaply for the landlords. Peasants were also very heavily burdened with taxes.

Agriculture remained backward because the peasants did not have enough money to invest in the improvement of their land, and the landlords thought: why pay for buying machinery if peasants are there as cheap labour?

In all matters of interest to the peasants the autocracy sided with the landlords, and sent out troops to suppress peasant revolts. Since agriculture was the major sector of Russian economy and peasants were the majority population, the agricultural backwardness and the peasant discontent became important factors for the revolution. There were continuous peasant uprisings during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century they became part of the general revolutionary movement.

### 23.7 INDUSTRIALISATION AND WORKERS' DISCONTENT

The workers movement in the Russian Empire was stronger and more political than anywhere else in Europe. This had something to do with the nature of industrialization here and the political conditions in the Russian Empire. Industrialization in Russia was



**Notes**

late as compared to Western Europe, but it was at a much faster pace. This meant that there were small, but also many huge factories with a great number of workers, even in the early stages of industrialization. Working class movements were therefore able to develop here much faster than they had in the west European countries, and the capitalists here did not get time to consolidate their power before the working class movement became strong. Many strikes took place in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and by 1905 the workers played a leading role in the revolutionary movement.

The workers' movement in the Russian Empire was also much more militant and political than in other countries; and it was both against the Autocracy which did not allow them to form organizations and sided with their employers, and against the employers who were the factory owners and responsible for their low wages and bad working conditions. Their movement also had a greater orientation towards socialism than in other countries.

By the first decade of the 20th century women constituted a sizeable percentage of the working class and also working class organizations, as a result of which many issues pertaining to them began to be reflected in the discussions on workers' rights and women's equality. Working class women participated in a big way in working class movements.

**23.8 DISCONTENT AMONG NATIONALITIES**

The relationship between the Russian Romanov dynasty and the other nationality regions was almost colonial in nature, with these areas being used as sources of raw material for development of industries in Russian regions. You may remember that something like that happened to India as well under British colonial rule. These nationalities such as the Caucasians, the Polish, the Kazakhs, the Latvians, the Estonians and others played an important role in overthrowing the Russian autocracy.

**23.9 LEADERSHIP AND VISION**

For a revolutionary movement to succeed it is necessary that there should be a committed leadership, it should be guided by certain ideals and should have a programme of change. In other words, people should not merely like to destroy something; they should also have an idea of what they want to build, and of how to go about bringing change. They should be able to form organizations to take forward their movements.

Many political groups were active during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but they were illegal and had to work underground, hunted by the Tsarist police and subject to severe repression and punishment if found out. However, they played a very heroic and significant role in raising the consciousness of the people-particularly of the workers and peasants-through political education, political propaganda and agitation. Millions of organizations were formed on the ground among all sections of society-of workers, peasants and soldiers, of students and teachers, of all types of employees, and of women. Many of these organizations had close links with political parties and were very responsive to political discussions and ideas.

By 1917 women's organizations began to reflect working women's interests as well, as did working class organizations, although women had to fight continuously for such attention. Although women constituted a big share in popular movements, there were still very few women in leadership roles.



### Notes

The important political groups were Populists (in late 19<sup>th</sup> century) and Social Revolutionaries, various types of Liberals and the Social Democrats (Marxists). Social Democrats had two parties, Bolshevik (meaning majority in Russian) and Menshevik (meaning minority). They got these names after they split as a result of differences. These groups had different ideas about how to bring about a revolution, of how to change the Russian society and political system.

Lenin was the most important leader of the Russian revolution of 1917. Another was Trotsky. Both were Bolsheviks. It would be correct to say however that there were thousands of important leaders, both men and women, just as there were in our freedom movement, without whose work, heroism and sacrifices the revolution could not have succeeded.

### 23.10 STAGES OF THE REVOLUTION

The Russian revolutionary movement emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when some members of the aristocracy began to feel that the Tsarist political system was too oppressive and Russian society too unjust. They particularly felt for the plight of the peasantry. How could Russia progress if the majority of its people were in such a sorry condition? These members of the aristocracy and the newly emerged middle class formed the intelligentsia, who criticized Russian society and political system and worked for its transformation. They formed secret societies and small political groups. They could not campaign or work openly to spread their ideas because of the strict censorship and ban on political activity. They became dedicated revolutionaries. They demanded a constitution and elections. Many women were active revolutionaries. When caught they were given cruel punishments. Yet the movement grew.

As workers and peasants became confident of fighting the injustices of their lives, they also began to struggle against the Autocracy. When they came into contact with revolutionaries both the movements were enriched. By early 20<sup>th</sup> century the Russian revolutionary movement was a mass based movement, and 'Revolution' became the rallying cry.

The first major popular attack on the Autocracy, took place in 1905. This great revolutionary upsurge was unsuccessful, and the movements were suppressed. But because the people learnt many important lessons through this experience, Lenin later called it the "dress rehearsal" for the 1917 revolution. The main demands were a "democratic republic", universal franchise, land for peasantry, and higher wages and a shorter working day for workers. Women's equality, right of self determination for the different nationalities and abolition of capital punishment were other demands. For the first time there was a General Strike. Sections of the army and navy also revolted, and a revolutionary organization of the working class known as Soviet was formed. It played a leading role in the revolution.

Many years of repression followed, but the revolutionary movement picked up again during World War I as larger and larger sections of people began to directly feel the impact of war and to understand the nature of tsarist policies. The puppet Cabinet did not function and the weak parliament (Duma) could not address popular aspirations.

By 1917 majority of the people of the Russian empire were determined to overthrow the Autocracy and to take matters in their own hands. In this atmosphere the February revolution was sparked off by shortages of bread, and a demonstration of women who called on the soldiers to support their brothers and sisters rather than the Tsar



**Notes**

who oppressed them. The soldiers who were also fed up with the war did not fire on the agitating people.

A few days later came the demand: 'Down with Autocracy'. Red flags dominated the cityscape of St Petersburg, the capital city, and soon the entire territory of the Empire was aflame with cries of revolution. The Autocracy was overthrown and replaced by a Provisional Government. The workers and peasants played an important role in this change, and the bourgeoisie supported it. Even the soldiers came to the side of the revolutionary forces. St.Petersburg was renamed Petrograd.

The Provisional government created conditions for political freedoms, such as right of forming organizations and freedom of speech, but did not bring any major change in policies which affected people; it could not have, as this government was dominated by parties representing landlord and capitalist interests. The workers, soldiers and peasants, along with the Bolshevik party, therefore continued with their movements which culminated in the October-Bolshevik revolution of 1917.

The Bolsheviks were the only political group in tune with the aspirations of the people in 1917: they called for an immediate end to War; they demanded land for peasants, workers' control over industries, and right of nations to self determination. Peace! Bread! Land! Democracy! became the slogans in all the mass organizations of the workers, peasants and soldiers all over the country, and Bolsheviks were elected to their leaderships in a majority in these organizations.

The October 1917 revolution thus had a popular base and was not simply a military coup that overthrew the Provisional Government. You should also remember that although it is known as October revolution, it took place on November 7 1917, and is celebrated on November 7, because after the revolution Russia adopted the international calendar. Prior to that Russia was following its own calendar which was 10 days behind the calendar followed internationally.

**23.11 POLICIES AND IMPACT OF THE REVOLUTION**

Revolutionary Russia not only changed the policies of Tsarist Russia, it also did many things that were different and more just than what existed in capitalist countries of Europe. Its policies laid the foundations of socialism in Russia.

Knowing fully well that people were tired of war and wanted peace, and that war was not in the interest of people in any country, one of its first acts was to withdraw from the war.

The Bolsheviks abolished private property in the means of production i.e., land, factories, and banks, all of which were nationalized and now owned by the state and not by private owners. This means that they could not be used to exploit the labour of others and make private profit anymore. Workers organizations had a greater say in the decision making processes.

Through the land decree of November 1917 landlordism was abolished and land was given over to peasants for hereditary use. Peasants could not sell or mortgage the land or use it to exploit the labour of others, but they were masters of their land and enjoyed the full fruits of their labour and produce from the land. They did not have to depend on former landlords in any way, whose powers over rural economy and society were demolished.



**Notes**

These measures meant that the Russian people became equal beneficiaries of the resources and economy of the country. It also became possible now to plan centrally for the benefit of all parts and all sections of the people. This system of centralized planning was seen as important and was adopted by many countries, including India.

The new constitution guaranteed free medical care, free and equal education for all, an unemployment allowance, equal access to culture and cultural advancement. Not all of this was immediately available, but by making these a right for all, the new regime showed the direction of its policy and commitment. The differentials between people holding middle class type of jobs and those working on land or in the factories were far less than in other countries—both in terms of salaries and entitlement to facilities provided by the state. Standard of life was not dependent on whether one could personally pay, because many things did not have to be paid for.

Women were not just considered equal; a lot of measures were taken to make their equal participation in social and political life possible: maternity leave, public canteens, free crèches at workplaces etc.

They considered their state the ‘dictatorship of the working class’ because the working, ordinary people and their welfare was now the basis of polity and policies.

The new regime gave moral and some physical support to independence struggles against colonial rule, and recognized the right of all nationalities to decide their own future. For this reason the Russian revolution was lauded in all Asian countries and inspired people all over the world. China and India were also greatly influenced by the Russian revolution. There was spread of socialist ideas.

Nationalist leaders in India realized the significance of the intervention of peasants and workers in political struggles. People in India sensed that a ‘kisan-mazdoor raj’ has been established in Russia. The 1920’s thus saw the formation of Workers and Peasants Parties, the All India Trade Union Congress, and increasing efforts in India to organize workers and peasants.

The imperialist countries were however opposed to the Revolution and they sent their troops to defeat the new Bolshevik regime. They were not successful, and the new revolutionary regime survived, due mainly to the support of the people and the dedication of the revolutionaries. What happened in Russia and Europe following the Russian revolution and the end of World War I is another story, which you will read about in the next lesson.

**INTEXT QUESTIONS 23.2**

1. What was the political system in Russia before the Revolution?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. What other name is the Russian Revolution of 1917 known as?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Name the important political groups in Tsarist Russia.  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. What is meant by abolition of private property?  
\_\_\_\_\_



**Notes**



**WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNT**

World War I was very different from the previous wars in history because it connected the whole world in its violence and suffering. There were new technologies used in warfare, not seen earlier, and it had an impact on all aspects of life.

The reasons for the war were immediate as well as long term. The major reasons were the race for colonies, control over the resources of the world. The war continued from 1914 to 1918 and ended with the defeat of Germany and her allies. The Russian Revolution was achieved in 1917, before it ended.

The Russian Revolution came about as a result of the strain of war and the conflicts within Russian society. This was the first socialist revolution in history.

There were three stages: the 1905 revolution, which was defeated; the February 1917 revolution which resulted in the overthrow of the Autocracy; and the October 1917 revolution led by the Bolsheviks, which established a socialist state.

The revolution created a new social and political system, based on social justice. It had a great impact on the rest of the world, including the countries fighting for their national independence.



**TERMINAL QUESTIONS**

1. Describe the political system in Tsarist Russia. Why were peasants dissatisfied with the Autocracy?
2. Why did the different nationalities revolt?
3. Why was the revolution of 1905 important?
4. What happened in February 1917 in Russia?
5. Give the main changes brought about by the Bolsheviks. Do you think they were in the interest of the Russian people?
6. Write a few lines on the impact of the revolution in India.



**ANSWERS TO INTEXT QUESTIONS**

**23.1**

1. Airplanes, tanks and submarines.
2. Triple Entente, Triple Alliance.
3. Ten million killed, 20 million wounded, millions of refugees.
4. Britain.

**23.2**

1. Autocracy.
2. Bolshevik Revolution.



**Notes**

3. Social Democrats, Liberals, Social Revolutionaries.
4. Means of production owned by the State.

**HINTS TO TERMINAL QUESTIONS**

1. See 23.4 para 2.
2. See 23.8.
3. See 23.10 para 3.
4. See 23.10 paras 5 and 6.
5. See 23.11 paras 1-7.
6. See 23.11 paras 9 and 10.

**GLOSSARY**

- Autocracy** - A political system ruled by a king who holds all power and in which there are no effective representative institutions that can share political power.
- Social democrats** - Those who believed that it is not enough to have political and legal equality alone, but also to have economic and social equality. Therefore they believed in socialism.
- Capitalism** - A system based on rights of private property and market, and therefore also private profit, in which the owner of property derives his/her profit from the exploitation of labour of those who work on it.
- Socialism** - A system based on state ownership of means of production, so that the labour of those who work on it cannot be exploited for the private benefit of a few, and in which the political system is such in which the interests of the working people predominate.