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The Russian Revolution, 1917



Communist leader Vladimir Lenin urges action as the Russian Revolution gets under way in 1917.

JIM WHITING



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NOTE ON DATES: Roman Emperor Julius Caesar adopted what is known as the Julian calendar in 45 BCE. Over the succeeding centuries, it proved to be inaccurate. In 1582, Pope Gregory XIII approved the more accurate Gregorian calendar. Besides adjusting the yearly calendar, it skipped thirteen days the year it was approved. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Gregorian calendar had been adopted almost everywhere. Russia was a notable exception. One of the earliest acts of the new Soviet government was to adopt the Gregorian calendar on January 31, 1918. The following day was February 14.

As a result, events leading up to and including the Russian Revolution are often expressed in two dates: Old Style (Julian calendar) and New Style (Gregorian calendar). This book takes the approach of many historians: Dates of events inside Russia are shown as Old Style before the change, then as New Style afterward. Dates of events outside Russia are indicated in New Style.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE: This story is based on the author's extensive research, which he believes to be accurate. Documentation of such research is contained on page 47.

The internet sites referenced herein were active as of the publication date. Due to the fleeting nature of some web sites, we cannot guarantee they will all be active when you are reading this book.



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*For Your Information

The Death of a Brother

It was still dark when the prison guard roughly shook Alexander Ulyanov awake. “You will be hanged in two hours,” the man said.

The twenty-one-year-old’s impending death was a shock to many people. He came from a prosperous and important family in Simbirsk, Russia. When he graduated from high school, he received a gold medal. He did just as well when he became a university student. He studied zoology and won another gold medal for his research work with worms.

The university Alexander attended was in St. Petersburg, the capital of Russia. For centuries, the country had been under the rule of all-powerful czars. Their regimes were often harsh and cruel. Early in the nineteenth century, secret societies began emerging. Their aim was to make changes in Russia. They wanted a less oppressive government, one more open to the will of the people. Their strategies increasingly turned to violence. A group called the People’s Will was formed in 1879. Their goal was to assassinate Czar Alexander II. They succeeded two years later.

After the assassination, Russian secret police carefully watched people for any signs of trouble. Late in 1886, several of Alexander Ulyanov’s friends were sent to do hard labor in Siberia. This created a dilemma for the young man. He could remain politically uninvolved and continue what seemed to be a secure and respected career in science, or he could join the movement toward revolution. *Das Kapital*, a book by Karl Marx, helped him make up his mind.

The czars used censorship to prevent radical ideas from getting into Russia. Books that the censors thought were dangerous could not be published there. In 1872, a Russian publisher gave the censors a copy of *Das Kapital*. The censors knew Marx’s ideas were radical. All of his previous writings, including his *Communist Manifesto*, had been banned in Russia.



Five of the assassins of Alexander II were hanged on April 3, 1881.

The plotters made several attempts on the czar's life before they succeeded. In one, they planted a bomb at a state dinner. Sixty-seven people were killed or injured.

Communist Manifesto laid out a radical plan for changing government. At that time, most Western European countries operated under a capitalist system. A relatively few capitalists (owners) controlled factories and other means of production. They hired people to work for them. In this system, owners were wealthy and workers lived in poverty.

Some people wanted to change the capitalist system. They believed in socialism, a system in which the workers controlled the means of production. As a result, everyone would earn enough money to live comfortably. Extreme wealth and extreme poverty would disappear.

In his *Manifesto*, Marx went even further. He advocated communism, the belief that there would be no need for government after a period of socialism and reeducation. People would work for the common good rather than for their own selfish ends. They would have what they needed for a good life. There would be no more national governments and no more wars.

The Russian Revolution, 1917

Because of Marx's extreme views, the Russian publisher of *Das Kapital* expected the censors to ban it. To his astonishment, two censors approved it for printing. "It is possible to state with certainty that very few people in Russia will read it, and even fewer will understand it,"¹ said one.

The other one said that Marx's book was based on an analysis of the capitalist economic system of Western Europe. Russia was still an agricultural society with little industry. No one would pay attention to it.

Both men were mistaken. *Das Kapital* became a sensation. Until then, Russian revolutionaries had placed their hopes on the rural peasants, but the peasants didn't seem to understand their cause. After reading *Das Kapital*, the revolutionaries could recruit the working-class people in the cities. These workers would be more likely to support them.

Reading Marx helped Alexander Ulyanov decide to commit to the revolutionary cause in St. Petersburg. He and his friends plotted to assassinate Czar

Alexander prepared grenades packed with nitroglycerin and scores of small metal balls. He and his fellow plotters planned to use them to assassinate Czar Alexander III. The group also hollowed out dictionaries and filled the space with dynamite.



Alexander Ulyanov

Alexander III on the sixth anniversary of the death of the czar's father. They thought this deed would lead to reforms and a better life for the Russian people.

They were no match for the czar's secret police. More than seventy revolutionaries, including Ulyanov, were arrested. When the group went to trial, most of the plotters pleaded for their lives. They were sentenced to hard labor. Alexander and four others refused to back down. Tearfully, Alexander's mother begged him to reconsider. Firmly, he told her, "I cannot do it after everything I said in court. It would be insincere. Imagine, Mama, two men facing each other at a duel. One of them has already shot at his opponent, the other has yet to do so, when the one who has shot asks him not to. No, I cannot behave like that!"²

In the predawn darkness of May 8, 1887, the five young men went bravely to their deaths.

As Alexander died, his seventeen-year-old brother, Vladimir, was taking exams at his school in Simbirsk, nearly 1,000 miles from St. Petersburg. Vladimir was a model student with little interest in politics. He never gave "cause for dissatisfaction, by word or by deed, to the school authorities," wrote the headmaster, Fedor Kerensky. "Religion and discipline were the basis of this upbringing."³

Vladimir would also become a revolutionary—and be far more successful in achieving his goal than his brother had been. He would become the leading figure in a revolution that established an entirely new form of government for Russia. The roots of this revolution had been growing for many years. In just over six months in 1917, Vladimir would take over its leadership. He would take the revolution in a direction that few people could have foreseen.

Many other governments were shocked at the changes he made. They bitterly opposed his ideas.

The new government would survive. Soon its beliefs would spread around the world. Other countries would adopt a similar type of government.

By that time, Vladimir Ulyanov had changed his name. Through his work with the Russian Revolution, he would become immortalized as Vladimir Lenin. For several decades, the city where his brother died would be called Leningrad in Vladimir's honor.

After Lenin's death, he would receive the same high honor accorded to ancient Egyptian pharaohs. His mummified body would lie beneath a sealed glass case so that visitors from all over the world could see it.

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