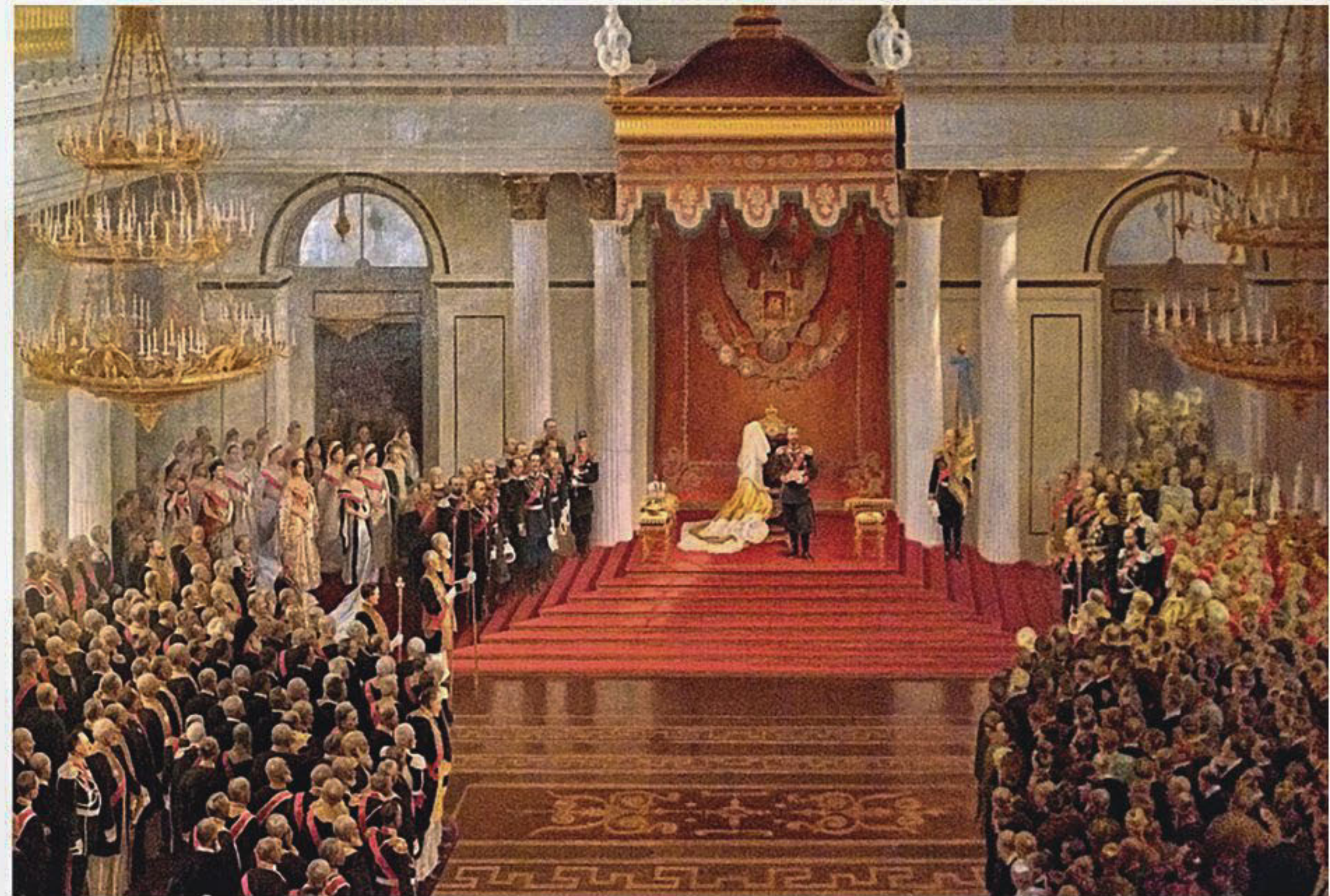




Moscow uprising of 1905.



Speech by Emperor Nicholas II on the opening of the First State Duma of the Russian Empire, 27 April 1906.

PHOTOS: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The October Revolution of 1917

How it changed Russia and the world

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Like most great historical events, the October Revolution of 1917 that shook Russia and helped shape the world into what it is today was the result of a confluence of factors that had slowly gathered momentum. It was preceded by the February Revolution of the same year which overthrew the Tsarist Autocracy and replaced it with a provisional government. And most historians today agree that the events of February 1917 were themselves part of the end chapters of the Russian Revolution of 1905—in particular, the events of Bloody Sunday.

The Russian Bloody Sunday took place in January 1905, when a Russian Orthodox priest known as Georgy Gapon led a massive crowd to the Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg to present a petition to the Tsar. The official response was to have Cossacks indiscriminately open fire on the crowd killing hundreds. Enraged by this massacre, a general strike was declared demanding the establishment of a democratic republic. Strikes were soon to be followed by acts of vandalism, mutinies and the assassinations of various government officials. Workers formed Soviets (councils) to direct revolutionary activity in several cities and key places like Moscow, Poland and Latvia were rocked by armed uprisings.

This forced Tsar Nicholas to issue the October Manifesto in late 1905, which promised to provide some changes to Russia's political system as well as the recognition of basic civil liberties for most citizens. It included the creation of a national Duma (parliament), universal male suffrage and essential civil freedoms such as freedom of speech, freedom of assembly and association. But this failed to satisfy many socialist groups that viewed these concessions as insufficient and argued that the newly formed

allowed Russians to avoid some of the sufferings that were to come during the war years of 1914-1918 ("Nicholas II: Emperor of all the Russias", Dominic Lieven).

Another event of great significance in 1905 for both Russia and the world was Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese war. This was the first time in the modern era that an Asian power had managed a major military victory over a European one. The world was taken aback by the defeat and Russia's entire Baltic and Pacific fleet was sunk along with its international prestige. Restoring this prestige was one of the prime motivators for the Tsar to enter the First World War nine years later in 1914.

After entering the First World War, Russia suffered some major economic problems. Chiefly among them were rising prices due to increased public debt to finance the war and food shortages. By the end of 1915, inflation pulled real incomes down at an alarming rate while the lack of food supply made it very difficult to buy even what one could afford ("A History of Russia", Nicholas Riasanovsky and Mark Steinberg). Resentment among citizens grew as they realised that increasing debt to finance the war was having a severely negative impact on their lives and they blamed the Tsar for it—as it was his ambition that drew Russia into the war, they believed.

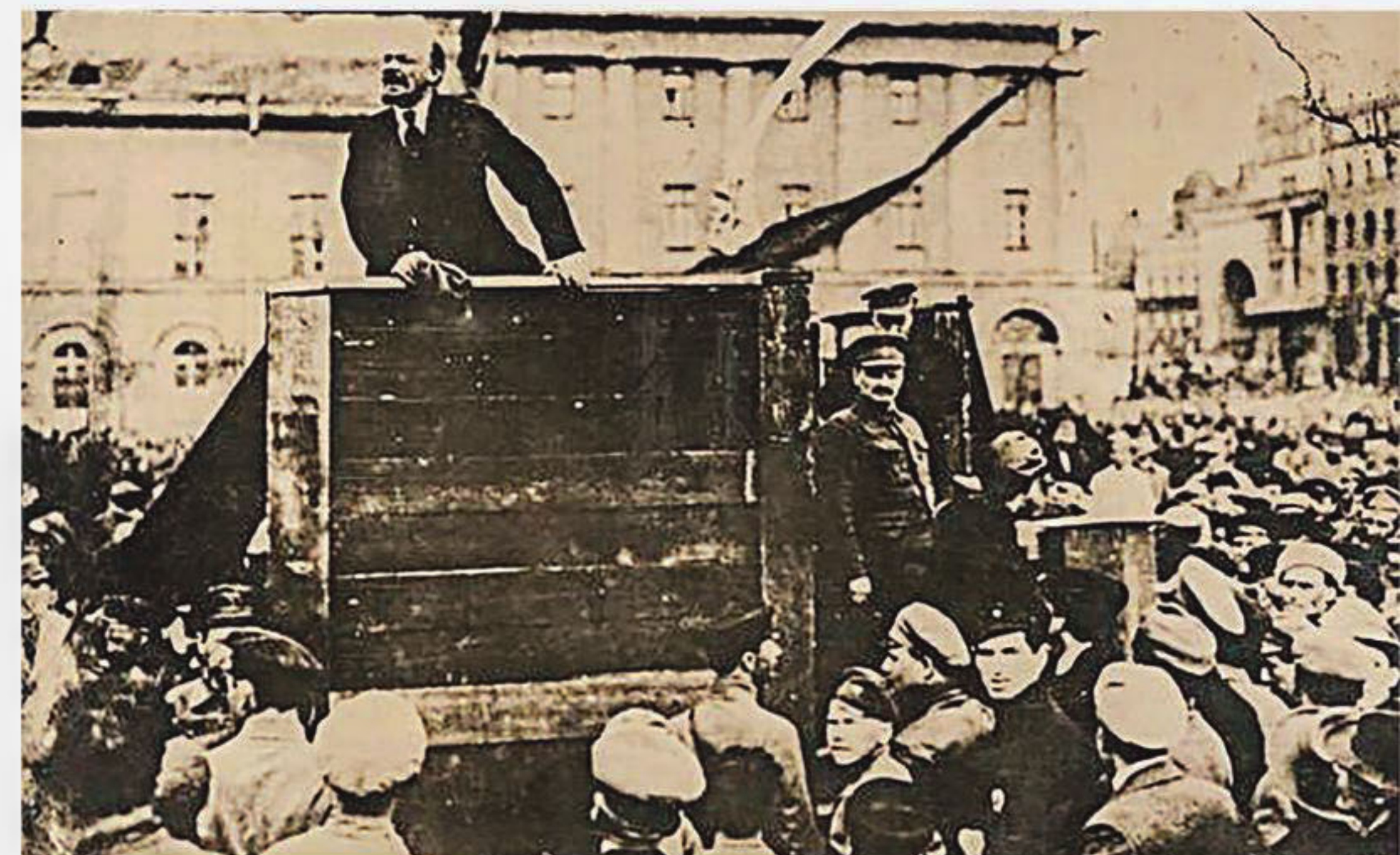
Amidst this reality, government officials feared people's patience could soon start to run out. In November 1916, with discontent clearly growing, the State Duma issued a warning report to Nicholas II which stated that a terrible disaster would inevitably occur unless a constitutional form of government was put in place. Once again the Tsar wrongly decided to ignore these warnings, which eventually ended up costing him both his reign and his life.

Revolutionary Committee, Bolshevik Red Guards began the takeover of government buildings on October 24th (O.S.). The following day, the Winter Palace was captured. Once the Congress of Soviets successfully claimed power from the Provisional Government after the fall of the Winter Palace, the October Revolution was complete.

The Council of People's Commissars quickly organised a political repression campaign by arresting the leaders of opposition parties, thereby

circles in London, Paris, and elsewhere decided to send troops to Russia to support the white counterrevolutionaries against the Bolshevik reds in a conflict that was to morph into a great, long, and bloody civil war. In total, the British alone would send 40,000 men to Russia, with other countries including France, the United States, Japan, Italy, Romania, Serbia, and Greece sending comparatively smaller contingents of troops.

Despite its own hegemonic ambitions,



Vladimir Ulyanov alias Lenin speaks to a huge crowd in Leningrad on April 3, 1917, after his return from more than a decade of self-imposed exile in western Europe.

PHOTO: PINTEREST



Demonstrations before Bloody Sunday.



A barricade erected by revolutionaries in Moscow during Moscow uprising of 1905.

PHOTOS: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

legislative body was flawed because the Tsar still maintained power to veto any legislation he wished, as well as the power to shut down the Duma should the two fail to reach an agreement.

In 1906 the first Russian Constitution was established as a revision of the 1832 Fundamental Laws of the Russian Empire. Trade unions and strikes were legalised—and this would have a major impact on the globe later on as trade unions throughout the world would eventually draw inspiration and strength from the example of Soviet Russia.

Yet, the sense of superiority and entitlement that grips those placed higher up in all autocratic hierarchies and systems remained the same. And Article 4 of the 1906 Constitution would concern "the essence of the supreme autocratic power", stating that obedience to the Tsar was being mandated by God himself—as back then, religious faith was still very much instrumental in helping political authorities maintain order. This absolutist belief made Tsar Nicholas II unwilling to compromise the limits of his own power and allow progressive reforms that could have

The February Revolution of 1917 officially started when soldiers sided with the strikers after the Tsar dispatched troops to shoot at demonstrators and ordered the Duma to disband—as many of the socialists had rightly feared previous to that. Three days after Russian army forces sided with the revolutionaries, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated his power, bringing an end to the Russian Empire and dynastic Romanov rule. A Russian Provisional Government under Prince Georgy Lvov replaced the Council of Ministers of Russia, however, due to the democratisation of politics after the revolution and legalisation of formerly banned political parties, Vladimir Lenin, who at the time was living in exile, saw this as the perfect opportunity to return to Russia. Hoping that his activities would weaken Russia or even, if the Bolsheviks came to power, lead to Russia's withdrawal from the war, German officials arranged for Lenin to pass through their territory.

The Bolsheviks used their authority on the Petrograd Soviet to organise the revolutionary forces. Under the authority of the Military

tearing apart freedom of speech and association promises. In the process, major members of the Constituent Assembly, the Socialist-Revolutionary Party, the Constitutional Democratic Party (Kadets) as well as Menshevik leaders were imprisoned in The Peter and Paul Fortress in Petrograd. On December 20, 1917, the Cheka was created by Lenin's decree, marking the official end of the democratic hope that many believed would come true under Bolshevik rule. Because of the Bolsheviks' decision to continue on the autocratic path of previous centuries, constitutional monarchists and liberals within Russia gathered their forces into the White Army, immediately declaring war against the Bolsheviks' Red Army, which opened up a new phase in Russian History—that of Civil War ("A People's Tragedy", Orlando Figes).

Aside from changing the fate of millions of Russians, the October Revolution arguably had one of the biggest lasting impacts on the world as a whole, ever since the beginning of the 20th century. According to historian Geoff Eley, the rise of the socialists and communists within Russia, and in other places inspired by the events that happened in Russia, would help organise civil society into the basis from which existing democratic gains could be defended and new ones could grow.

According to historian Eric Toussaint, the desire for genuine peace was initially "one of the basic causes of the revolutionary uprising of 1917" as most Russian soldiers that supported the people against the Tsar "were set against pursuing war. The great majority of these soldiers "were peasants who wished to go home and work on the land". During a period of extreme violence, this was one of the most underrated yet largest collective pursuit for peace. Moreover, "for many years, since long before the start of the war, the Bolsheviks, who had been members of the Socialist International until its betrayal of the working classes in August 1914, had opposed the policy of preparation for war".

It is perhaps because of this reason that elitist

perhaps because of its rise to the status of a superpower—which tends to make hegemonic ambitions somewhat inevitable—the Soviet Union that came about as a result of the October Revolution, did play the role of a counter-hegemonic force, at least up to a point, against many of the western powers that sought to dominate other nations of the world. This is why many countries around the world for long periods of time saw the USSR as being a great beacon of hope when it came to promoting the rights of the ordinary man.

But once the more authoritarian side of the USSR became clear, the west did abide by some of the ethos of liberty that it proclaimed to have championed—at least on the surface—so that it could use its assumed moral high ground to hammer away at the USSR and embarrass it on the world stage. That is why, during the lifetime of the USSR, some argue that the west had actually enjoyed the greatest freedom in its history. Because in order to portray itself as the champion of freedom beside a growingly authoritarian USSR, it had granted citizens certain civil liberties which later got stripped away after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Today, the October Revolution is seen with mixed feelings, particularly by Russians. While promising great benefits and freedom for the ordinary man and woman, like so many other movements, in reality, it had failed to deliver. However, some still believe that a great vision inspired the Revolution, and that vision, although never truly materialised, is nevertheless a vision worthy of pursuit.

Whether that is indeed the case is something that may always be debated among historians and other circles. But one thing is for sure, the October Revolution had changed the world, like very few revolutions in the history of the world has managed to do, until this very day.

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