How popular was the February Revolution?

In February 1917, a wave of popular unrest swept Tsar Nicholas II from office and the Romanov dynasty to oblivion. By the time Nicholas abdicated, it was clear that support for him had almost universally collapsed and there were few people left who wanted to see him or his family continuing to run the country.

The main push came from the workers in the cities, whose pent-up frustration exploded after the hard, cold winter of 1916. Shortages of food, fuel and other materials - caused by the war - had driven up prices. Strikes and lock-outs had created high levels of tension in the capital, Petrograd.

Workers who had been laid off wandered the streets. Some women spent almost 24 hours in queues for food and other goods. When the news of the introduction of bread rationing hit the streets towards the end of February 1917, the flood gates opened. Queues and scuffles over remaining bread stocks turned into riots. Anti-government feelings in Petrograd were running high.

On Thursday 23 February, International Women's Day, the discontent became more focused. What started off as a good-humoured march in the morning - 'ladies from society; lots more peasant women; student girls' - took on a different mood in the afternoon. Women, many of them textile workers on strike, took the lead in politicising the march. They went to the factories in the Vyborg district of Petrograd and taunted the men, calling them cowards if they would not support them. Women tram drivers went on strike and overturned trams, blocking streets. Women took the initiative while men were more cautious. Local Bolshevik leaders actually told the women to go home because they were planning a big demonstration for May Day, but the women took no notice.

By the afternoon, the women had persuaded men from the highly politicised Putilov engineering works and other factories to join them. A huge crowd began to make its way towards the centre of the city. They crossed the ice of the frozen River Neva and burst on to Nevsky Prospekt, the main street in Petrograd. The protest started to gather momentum.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Date under old-style calendar</th>
<th>Date under Gregorian calendar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First revolution of 1917</td>
<td>23 February</td>
<td>8 March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second revolution of 1917</td>
<td>25 October</td>
<td>7 November</td>
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Learning trouble spot

The Russian calendar

The Isrist Russian calendar was based on the Julian calendar (introduced by Julius Caesar in 46BC). Although a new calendar had been introduced by Pope Gregory in 1582 and gradually adopted throughout Europe - Britain had changed to the Gregorian calendar in 1752 - Russia had kept the old Julian calendar. By 1918, there was a difference between the two calendars of thirteen days. The Bolshevik government adopted the Gregorian calendar on 1 January 1918; the next day was declared to be 14 February.

Some books (including this one) use the old-style calendar, which was in use in Russia at the time, to date the events of 1917. Others use the Gregorian calendar, which was used in the rest of Europe.
The protest grows
Over the next three days, the demonstrations grew and took on a more political nature. Demands for bread were accompanied by demands for an end to the war and an end to the Tsar. Observers reported that there was almost a holiday atmosphere in the city as all classes of people—students, teachers, shopkeepers, even well-dressed ladies—joined the ranks of the workers marching towards the centre of the city. There seemed to be no general organisation of events. Certainly no political party was in charge: all the main leaders of the revolutionary parties were abroad or in exile. But socialist cells, particularly from the Bolshevik revolutionary party, were active in spreading protest and getting the workers out on the streets with their red flags and banners. By Saturday, there was virtually a general strike as most of the major factories shut down and many shops and restaurants closed their doors.

The weekend of 25 and 26 February was the testing time. There had been demonstrations in the past and these had been dealt with effectively by the Cossacks (see page 7) and other troops. The difference this time was that the soldiers joined the demonstrators. The NCOs in the army, like the sergeant in Source 2.2 on page 27, played a key role in this. These men had a more direct relationship with the soldiers than their senior officers did and it seems that the NCOs had decided that the time had come when they would no longer fire on the crowds. Also, many of the soldiers in the Petrograd garrison were young reservists, some fresh from the villages, who identified more easily with the people on the streets. They were desperate not to be sent to the front line where the Russian army was suffering huge losses, and they shared the dissatisfaction with the way the war was being conducted and the impact it was having on the living conditions of ordinary Russians in the cities.

Revolution!
It was, paradoxically, Tsar Nicholas himself who initiated the mutiny of his own soldiers. Hearing about the trouble in Petrograd, he ordered that troops put down the disorders. On Sunday 26 February, some regiments opened fire on the crowds, killing a number of demonstrators. This tipped the scales. The crowds became hostile and the soldiers now had to decide which side they were on: were they going to join the people or fire on them? One by one, regiments moved over to the side of the people. There was some fighting between the soldiers in different regiments and a number of officers were killed, but this was largely over by 27 February. As Orlando Figes puts it, 'The mutiny of the Petrograd garrison turned the disorders of the last four days into a full-scale revolution.'

The main struggle now took place between the soldiers and the police. The police had taken the main role in attacking demonstrators and had a habit of putting snipers on rooftops to fire down on the crowds. Soldiers rooted them out, throwing them off the roofs on to the streets to the cheers of the crowds below. Police stations were attacked and police records destroyed. The prisons were thrown open and the prisoners released.

The revolution of February 1917 was not a bloodless revolution. Some estimates put the death toll at around 1600 with several thousands wounded. Also, by 28 February the situation in the capital was starting to get out of control. Although in many ways the people showed remarkable self-restraint, crime was beginning to grow (partly because of all the criminals released) and there was increasing violence. Armed gangs looted shops, and private houses of the well-to-do were broken into (see Source 2.4). Somebody had to take control of the situation. Most people looked to the Duma, the Russian parliament, although the socialists were already forming their own organisation to represent the interests of the workers—the Soviet.
The end of the Romanovs

When Tsar Nicholas had finally realised that the situation in Petrograd was spiralling out of control, he had ordered loyal troops to march on the capital to restore order. He had also suspended the Duma when its chairman had suggested that he give more power to the people’s representatives (i.e. make the first moves towards a constitutional monarchy). But Duma members remained in the Tauride Palace, where they normally met, and held informal meetings. Meanwhile crowds of people milled around outside demanding that the Duma take control of the situation.

On Monday 27 February, the Duma formed a special committee made up of representatives of the main political parties. It soon became clear to the committee that the revolution in Petrograd had gone too far for the Tsar to be involved in any form of government. Luckily for them, the Russian Army High Command had come to the same conclusion; they now placed their hopes in the Duma committee and ordered the troops advancing on Petrograd to halt. When the generals told the Tsar that they would not support him, he knew the time had come to go. On 2 March he abdicated for himself and his sick son in favour of his brother Michael; but Michael, realising the extent of antimonarchical feeling, refused and the Romanov dynasty came to a swift end. The Duma committee set about forming a new government.

I told them that it would be better to die with honour than to obey any further orders to shoot the crowds: ‘Our fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, and brides are begging for food,’ I said. ‘Are we going to kill them? Did you see the blood on the streets today? I say we don’t take up positions tomorrow. I myself refuse to go.’ And as one, the soldiers cried out: ‘We shall stay with you!’

SOURCE 2.3  B. Williams, The Russian Revolution 1917–21, 1987, pp. 8–9

The fall of the Russian monarchy was accomplished over a ten-day period from 23 February to 4 March 1917. Ten days of popular demonstrations, political manoeuvring and army mutiny developed imperceptibly into a revolution which no one expected, planned or controlled … Moreover, there was no doubt that the initiators of the revolution were the workers and the reserve troops in the capital … All the major leaders of the revolutionary movement were in Siberia or abroad when the movement started, and certainly no political party organized the revolution.

SOURCE 2.4  B. Moynahan, The Russian Century, 1994, p. 81

Countess Kleinmikhel was dining with the Prince and Princess Kurakin. They had started the first course when servants burst into the dining room. ‘Run! Run!’ they cried. Bandits had broken into the building, wounding two doormen, and were making their way through the rooms. The countess led her guests out into the night to refuge in the house opposite. From there they watched, fascinated as a group of soldiers and sailors were served their meal on silver plate and ordered up dozens of bottles of wine from the countess’s cellar.

SOURCE 2.5  A quotation attributed to Trotsky

To the question ‘Who led the February uprising?’ we can answer definitely enough: conscious and tempered workers educated in the main by the party of Lenin.


The collapse of the Russian autocracy … was one of the most leaderless, spontaneous, anonymous revolutions of all time.

ACTIVITY

1 To what extent do you think the February Revolution was both a spontaneous and a popular revolution? Use the evidence you collected in the Focus Route on page 26 to answer this question.

2 How do Trotsky (Source 2.5) and Chamberlain (Source 2.6) disagree about the question of who led the revolution? Is one right and the other wrong? Or could both be true in certain ways?

3 What do you think were the main reasons why the revolution was successful?