

PART 6.

THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND THE FEBRUARY REVOLUTION

(Study guide series on key events and questions in Russia from 1914 to March 1917)



PRISM Editors' Note: We are issuing this as Part 6 in a series of study guides on events and theoretical and tactical questions leading to the Great October Socialist Revolution, and the revolution's impact on the world's proletariat and peoples throughout the next 100 years. This is part of the effort to mark the October Revolution centenary in a manner that reaches the broad public while remaining consistent with the basic principles of Marxism-Leninism. The text is mostly a condensed version of Chapter Six of the *History of the CPSU (Bolsheviks)*, with notes on related information or links to related material as needed.

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1. OUTBREAK AND CAUSES OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR

On July 14 (27, N.S.), 1914, the tsarist government proclaimed a general mobilization. On July 19 (August 1, N.S.), Germany declared war on Russia. Russia entered the war.

Causes of the war

Long before the war's actual outbreak, the Bolsheviks headed by Lenin had already foreseen its inevitability. At international Socialist congresses, Lenin had proposed steps to define a revolutionary line of conduct for the Socialists in case of war. He had pointed out that war is an inevitable concomitant of monopoly capitalism, in which the imperialist powers fight each other for the redivision of the world. (See separate discussion guide 1-06c on Lenin's *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*.)

World War I was a war for the redivision of the world and of spheres of influence among imperialists, who had long been preparing for it. War preparations were made in particular by Germany and Austria (supported by Bulgaria and Turkey), on the one hand, and by the Triple Entente, an alliance of France, Great Britain and Russia, on the other. Italy, which aligned with Germany and Austria-Hungary at first, left the alliance when war broke out in 1914; it later joined the Entente.

This rapacious war affected the interests of all the imperialist countries. As a result, Japan, the U.S. and a number of other countries were subsequently drawn into it. The war became a world war, and soon enveloped huge parts of the world directly or indirectly.

(See separate [discussion guide 1-06a](#) on the concrete inter-imperialist conflicting interests and alignments that underlay World War I.)

The bourgeoisie kept their war preparations secret from their people. When the war broke out, each imperialist government continued to deceive the people, concealing the war's real annexationist character and insisting that it was merely defending its country against attacks by neighbouring rivals.

The opportunists of the Second International helped the bourgeoisie to deceive the people and to wreck the international solidarity of the proletariat. Their plea of defending the fatherland incited the workers and peasants of the belligerent countries against each other.

(See separate [discussion guide 1-06b](#) on the positions of the various parties of the Second International about the war.)

The attitude of Russia's various classes to the war

Russia entered the war on the side of the Entente (with France and Great Britain) due to many common interests. Tsardom was chained to British and French imperialism, with Russia converted into a tributary, a semi-colony of these two powers.

The Russian bourgeoisie went to war to improve its position. But Tsarist Russia was not ready for war. Its industry was far behind that of other capitalist countries. Its agriculture could not provide a solid economic base for a prolonged war.

The chief mainstay of the tsar was the feudal landlords, especially the Black-Hundred big landlords in alliance with the big capitalists. The Russian imperialist bourgeoisie placed its hopes in the autocracy as its mailed fist to achieve its imperialist ambitions and to crush the revolutionary movement.

The party of the liberal bourgeoisie (the Constitutional-Democratic Party, or Cadets) made a show of opposition, but unreservedly supported tsardom's foreign policy.

Only the Bolshevik Party remained faithful to revolutionary internationalism and firmly adhered to the Marxist position of a resolute struggle against tsarism, against the landlords and capitalists, and against the imperialist war. The working class supported the Bolsheviks.

True, the bourgeois jingoism displayed by the intelligentsia and the kulaks infected a certain section of the workers—chiefly members of the ruffian “League of the Russian People” and some workers under SR and Menshevik influence. But they did not reflect the sentiments of the majority of workers.

2. 2ND INTERNATIONAL BREAKUP INTO SOCIAL-CHAUVINIST PARTIES

Lenin had repeatedly warned against the Second International's opportunism and its leaders' wavering attitude.

In 1910, the Second International's Copenhagen Congress had decided that Socialists in parliament should vote against war credits. At the time of the Balkan War of 1912, its Basle World Congress declared that the workers of all countries considered it a crime to shoot one another for capitalist profit.

But when the war broke out, the leaders of the Second International became supporters of the war. This was the case in Germany, France, Great Britain, Belgium and other countries. The Second International ceased to exist, breaking up into separate social-chauvinist parties which warred against each other.

Only an insignificant minority of the Second International kept to the internationalist position and went against the current; even if not so confidently and definitely enough.

Only the Bolshevik Party immediately and unhesitatingly raised the banner of determined struggle against the imperialist war.

The parties of the Second International had already been infected by opportunism before the war, preaching the theory of the “peaceful growing of capitalism into Socialism.” The Second International, not wanting to combat opportunism, eventually became opportunist itself.

When the war broke out, the opportunists and their followers rejected revolution and became the most zealous defenders of their own bourgeoisies, of their own imperialist governments. The opportunists became social-chauvinists. Many among them became ministers of the imperialist governments of their countries.

There were also the covert social-chauvinists or so-called Centrists (such as Kautsky, Trotsky, Martov and others). They justified and defended the avowed social-chauvinists. They too supported the war, but masked their treachery by deceptive “Leftist” talk against the war.

From the war's very outbreak, Lenin began to move for the creation of a new International, the Third International. In September 1915, the first conference of internationalists was held in Zimmerwald, a small village in Switzerland. Lenin formed the Zimmerwald Left group, among which only the Bolshevik Party took a correct and thoroughly consistent stand against the war.

In 1916, the internationalists reflected great advances and convened a second conference, also known as the Second Zimmerwald Conference. (It was held in Kiental, another Swiss village.) The Kiental manifesto was an advance on the Zimmerwald manifesto although it did not accept the basic principles of the Bolshevik policy, namely, the conversion of the imperialist war into a civil war, the defeat of one's own imperialist government in the war, and the formation of the Third International.

(See separate [discussion guide 1-06b](#) on the positions of the various parties of the Second International about the war.)

3. BOLSHEVIK THEORY AND TACTICS ON WAR, PEACE AND REVOLUTION

The Bolsheviks were not mere pacifists who sighed for peace and confined themselves to the propaganda of peace, as the majority of the Left Social-Democrats did.

Turn the imperialist war into a war of liberation

Rather, the Bolsheviks advocated an active revolutionary struggle for peace, to the point of overthrowing the rule of the war-loving imperialist bourgeoisie. They linked up the cause of peace with the cause of the victory of the proletarian revolution. They asserted that the surest way of ending the war and securing a just peace (peace without annexations and indemnities) was to overthrow imperialist bourgeois rule.

The Mensheviks and SR's had renounced revolution with their treacherous slogan of preserving “civil peace” in time of war. In opposition, the Bolsheviks advanced the slogan of “converting the imperialist war into a civil war.”

This slogan meant that the labouring people, including the soldiers who were mostly workers and peasants drafted into the imperialist armies, were to turn their weapons against their own bourgeoisie and overthrow its rule if they wanted to put an end to the war and achieve a just peace.

The Menshevik and SR policy was to defend the bourgeois fatherland. In opposition, the Bolsheviks called for “the defeat of one's own government in the imperialist war.” This meant voting against war credits, forming illegal revolutionary organizations in the armed forces, supporting fraternization among the soldiers at the front, organizing revolutionary actions of the workers and peasants against

the war, and turning these actions into an uprising against one's own imperialist government.

The Bolsheviks maintained that the lesser evil for the people would be tsarist military defeat in the imperialist war, for this would pave the way for the people to win over tsardom, and for the working class to win the struggle against capitalist slavery and imperialist wars. Lenin held that the policy of working for the defeat of one's own imperialist government must be pursued not only by the Russian revolutionaries, but by the revolutionary parties of the working class in all the belligerent countries.

The Bolsheviks held that there are two kinds of war:

- a) Just wars, which are wars of liberation, waged to defend the people from foreign attack and from attempts to enslave them, or to liberate the people from capitalist slavery, or to liberate colonies and dependent countries from the yoke of imperialism; and
- b) Unjust wars, which are wars of conquest, waged to conquer and enslave foreign countries and foreign nations.

The Bolsheviks supported just wars of liberation, and opposed wars of conquest, imperialist wars. They called for a resolute struggle against imperialist wars to the point of waging revolution to overthrow one's own imperialist government.

Imperialism as the eve of proletarian socialist revolution

Of great importance to the working class of the world was Lenin's theoretical work during the war. In the spring of 1916 Lenin, wrote a book entitled *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. In this book he showed that imperialism is the highest stage of capitalism, the stage where capitalism has become parasitic, decaying, and moribund. (See separate [discussion guide 1-06c](#) on Lenin's said theoretical work on imperialism.)

This did not mean that capitalism would die of itself and just rot on the stalk. Lenin, who always stressed the need for a working-class revolution to overthrow capitalism, showed that "imperialism is the eve of the social revolution of the proletariat."

He showed that, in this era, the elements of a war of liberation from imperialism accumulate both in capitalist countries and in the colonial and dependent countries.

Lenin showed that the unevenness of development and the contradictions of capitalism had grown particularly acute, which made inevitable periodic imperialist wars to redivide the world. Such wars undermined the strength of imperialism and made it possible for the proletariat to break the imperialist front at its weakest points—in one place or in several places.

Victory for socialism in one country or several countries

In other words, Lenin propounded a new theory of socialist revolution, in which the simultaneous victory of Socialism in all countries was impossible due to the uneven development of capitalism. Socialism would be victorious first in one country or in several countries, while the others would remain bourgeois countries for some time longer.

The dominant view among Marxists in the previous period of pre-imperialist capitalism was that the victory of Socialism in one separate country was impossible, and that it would take place simultaneously in all the civilized countries.

Lenin's theory of socialist revolution opened up a revolutionary perspective for the proletarians of separate countries. It released their initiative in waging struggle against their own bourgeoisie, taught them to take advantage of a war situation to organize this onslaught, and strengthened their faith in the victory of the proletarian revolution.

Practical Bolshevik work in Russia during the war

On such a basis, the Bolsheviks carried on their practical work in Russia during the war. (See separate [discussion guide 1-06d](#) on the details of practical Bolshevik work in the State Duma and in the armed forces.)

From the war's onset, the Bolshevik members of the Duma campaigned for the Bolshevik stand on the war and revolution. In November 1914, the Bolshevik deputies were arrested for "high treason", stripped of their civil rights, and banished to Siberia.

The Bolsheviks also developed extensive activities in the army and navy. They explained to the soldiers and sailors who was to blame for the war's unparalleled horrors and the people's sufferings; they explained why revolution provides the people their only way out from the imperialist shambles. The Bolsheviks formed nuclei in the army and navy, at the front and in the rear, and agitated against the war. At the front, the Party agitated for fraternization between the soldiers of the warring armies.

World War I profoundly changed the life of the working class and the peoples of the world. The fates of states and nations, and of the Socialist movement itself, were at stake. The war was therefore a touchstone for all parties claiming to be Socialist. Would they remain true to the principles of Socialism and internationalism, or would they choose to betray the working class and surrender to their national bourgeoisie?

The course of the war showed that the parties of the Second International had failed the test, while only the Bolshevik Party had passed it with flying colours.

4. MILITARY DEFEAT, ECONOMIC DISRUPTION, AND CRISIS OF TSARDOM

The war had already been in progress for three years, with millions of people killed on the battlefield, from injuries, or by epidemics caused by war conditions. While the bourgeoisie and landlords greatly profited from the war, the workers and peasants were suffering increasing hardship and privation. The population and the soldiers at the front went hungry, barefoot and naked. The war was undermining Russia's economic life and eating up its resources.

With a demoralized and outgunned tsarist army led by generals and ministers with dubious German ties (including the rascal Rasputin), Russia suffered defeat after defeat. By 1916 the Germans had seized Poland and part of the Baltic provinces.

All this aroused hatred and anger against the tsarist government among the workers, peasants, soldiers and intellectuals. It fostered and intensified the revolutionary mass movement against the war and against tsardom throughout Russia.

Dissatisfaction began to spread to the Russian imperialist bourgeoisie, which increasingly feared that

the tsarist government was incapable of winning the war and might even conclude a separate peace with Germany.

The Russian bourgeoisie therefore decided to engineer a palace coup, with the aim of replacing Tsar Nicholas II with his brother, Michael Romanov. The bourgeoisie wanted to kill two birds with one stone: first, to get into power itself and pursue the war effort, and, secondly, to preempt a big popular revolution, which was then welling up.

Britain and France supported the palace coup plot, for fear that the tsar might end the war through a separate peace with Germany and lead Russia away from the British-French alliance.

The tsar was thus isolated. Meanwhile, economic disruption grew more and more acute. In January and February 1917, the large-scale and acute disorganization of the food, raw material and fuel supply reached a climax. Factories closed and many workers became jobless. Increasing numbers of the people were convinced that the only way out of the intolerable situation was to overthrow the tsarist autocracy.

Tsardom was in the throes of a mortal crisis. The bourgeoisie thought of solving the crisis by a palace coup. But the people solved it in their own way.

(See separate [discussion guide 1-06e](#) on the key events of the last 12 months leading up to the February 1917 Revolution.)

5. FEBRUARY REVOLUTION, TSARDOM'S FALL, AND DUAL POWER

Blow-by-blow account of the February (March) revolution

The year 1917 began with the January 9 strike, with demonstrations held in Petrograd, Moscow, Baku and Nizhni-Novgorod.

The Mensheviks and SR's tried to divert this incipient revolutionary movement to liberal-bourgeois parliamentary channels. But the working-class masses followed the Bolsheviks, and went, not to the Duma, but to a demonstration.

On February 18, 1917, a strike broke out at the Petrograd Putilov Works. On February 22 the workers of most of the big factories were on strike. On International Women's Day, February 23 (March 8), Petrograd Bolsheviks mobilized the working women to demonstrate against starvation, war and tsardom. This was supported by a city-wide strike movement. The political strike began to grow into a general political demonstration against the tsarist system.

On February 24 (March 9), the demonstration was resumed with even greater vigour. About 200,000 workers were already on strike.

On February 25 (March 10) the whole of working-class Petrograd had joined the revolutionary movement, with red banners floating everywhere with the slogans: "Down with the tsar!" "Down with the war!" "We want bread!". The political strikes in the districts merged into a general political strike of the whole city. Demonstrations and clashes with the police took place everywhere.

On the morning of February 26 (March 11) the political strike and demonstration began to assume the character of an uprising. The workers disarmed police and gendarmes and armed themselves. Clashes with the police ended with the shooting down of a demonstration on Znamenskaya Square.

General Khabalov, Commander of the Petrograd Military Area, ordered all Petrograd workers to return to work by February 28 (March 13), otherwise they would be sent to the front. But the revolution was already unstoppable.

On February 26 (March 11) a company of the Pavlovsky Regiment opened fire, not on the workers, but on squads of mounted police skirmishing with the workers. The workers conducted a most energetic and persistent drive to win over the troops. The working women addressed themselves directly to the soldiers, fraternized with them and called upon them to help the people to overthrow the hated tsarist autocracy.

On the same day, the Bolshevik Party's Bureau of the Central Committee (based in Petrograd) issued a manifesto calling for the continuation of the armed struggle against tsardom and the formation of a Provisional Revolutionary Government.

On February 27 (March 12), the Petrograd troops refused to fire on the workers and began to line up with the people in revolt. The number of soldiers who had joined the revolt by the morning of February 27 was still no more than 10,000, but by the evening it already exceeded 60,000.

The workers and soldiers who had risen in revolt began to arrest tsarist ministers and generals and to free revolutionaries from jail. The released political prisoners joined the revolutionary struggle.

In the streets, shots were still being exchanged with police and gendarmes posted with machine guns in the attics of houses. But the troops rapidly went over to the side of the workers, and this decided the fate of the tsarist autocracy.

When the news of the victory of the revolution in Petrograd spread to other towns and to the front, the workers and soldiers everywhere began to depose the tsarist officials.

The February bourgeois-democratic revolution had won, with the working class (tempered by the 1905 revolution) as its vanguard. The working class led millions of peasants clad in soldiers' uniform demanding "peace, bread and liberty."

The role of the workers' and soldiers' Soviets

The victorious revolution rested on the support of the Soviets of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, which were created from the very first days by the workers and soldiers who rose in revolt.

The Revolution of 1905 had shown that the Soviets were organs of armed uprising and at the same time the embryo of a new, revolutionary power. The idea of Soviets lived in the minds of the working-class masses, and they put it into effect as soon as tsardom was overthrown. The soldier deputies on the Soviet were mostly peasants who had been mobilized for the war.

While the Bolsheviks were directly leading the struggle of the masses in the streets, the parties of compromise (Mensheviks and SR's) were seizing the seats in the Soviets and building up a majority there. As a result, the Soviets and their Executive Committees (in Petrograd, Moscow and a number of

other cities) were headed by Menshevik and SR representatives. Only in a few other places did the Bolsheviks have a majority in the Soviets from the very outset.

The armed people—the workers and soldiers—sent their representatives to the Soviet as an organ of power of the people. They believed that the Soviet would carry out all the demands of the revolutionary people, and that the war would end.

But the SR's and Mensheviks did not intend to end the war and secure peace, but rather to take advantage of the popular revolution to continue the war. They considered the revolution over, and that the Soviets' task now was to pass to a “normal” constitutional existence side by side with the bourgeoisie.

On February 27 (March 12), 1917, the liberal members of the Fourth State Duma (with the collusion of SR and Menshevik leaders) set up a Provisional Committee of the State Duma, headed by a landlord and monarchist.

A few days later, this Provisional Committee agreed with the SR and Menshevik leaders of the Petrograd Soviet's EC to form a new government of Russia—a bourgeois Provisional Government headed by Prince Lvov (a former Tsar loyalist), the heads of the Cadets and Octobrists, other prominent representatives of the bourgeoisie, and the SR representative Kerensky.

The SR and Menshevik leaders of the Soviet's EC thereby surrendered their power to the bourgeoisie. Yet the Soviet majority formally approved of their action despite the protest of the Bolshevik deputies.

A situation of dual power

Thus a new state power arose in Russia, consisting of representatives of the bourgeoisie (including “landlords who had become bourgeois,” in the words of Lenin).

But alongside the bourgeois government existed another power—the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. The Soviet was an organ of the alliance of workers and peasants against the tsarist regime; at the same time, it was an organ of their power, of the dictatorship of the working class and the peasantry.

The result was a peculiar interlocking of two powers, of two dictatorships: the dictatorship of the bourgeoisie, represented by the Provisional Government, and the dictatorship of the proletariat and peasantry, represented by the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies. It was a situation of dual power.

How could it be that the majority in the Soviets at first consisted of Mensheviks and SR's, and that the victorious workers and peasants voluntarily surrendered the power to the representatives of the bourgeoisie?

Lenin explained it by pointing out that millions of people, inexperienced in politics, had awakened and pressed forward to political activity. These were mostly small owners, peasants, workers who had recently been peasants, people who stood midway between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In Lenin's words, “a gigantic petty-bourgeois wave has swept over everything and overwhelmed the class-conscious proletariat, not only by force of numbers but also ideologically; that is, it has infected and imbued very wide circles of workers with the petty-bourgeois political outlook.”

It was this wave that swept the petty-bourgeois Menshevik and SR parties to the fore.

Lenin pointed out that another reason was the change in the composition of the proletariat that had taken place during the war and the inadequate class-consciousness and organization of the proletariat at the beginning of the revolution. During the war, some 40% of the regular workers had been drafted into the army, while many non-proletarian small owners, artisans and shopkeepers had gone to the factories in order to evade mobilization.

These petty-bourgeois sections formed the soil which nourished the petty-bourgeois (Menshevik and SR) politicians.

Large numbers of the people in the early months were inexperienced in politics, sucked into the petty-bourgeois wave, and drunk with the revolution's first successes. They easily fell under the Menshevik-SR sway and agreed to surrender the power to the bourgeoisie. They naively believed that a bourgeois power would not hinder the Soviets in their work.

The Bolsheviks, by patient work of explanation, had yet to open the eyes of the masses to the imperialist character of the Provisional Government, to expose the SR-Menshevik betrayal, and to show that peace could not be secured unless the Provisional Government were replaced by a government of Soviets.

(See separate [discussion guide 1-06f](#) on the key events of the February 1917 Revolution and the state of dual power.)

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