

FYS 525, Topic 2: The Russian Revolution

Background: The Russian Revolution occurred in two dates in 1917. The first overthrew Tsar Nicholas II who would later be executed. The second, the October Revolution, marks one of the most abrupt economic shifts in history as the new Bolshevik government launched a disastrous shift to a planned, communistic economy.

Core Concepts:

1. Planned versus market based economies. In a planned economy, policy makers, rather than markets, decide what is produced. The most famous example is communism which seeks to eliminate private property. In a market based economy, the cumulative decisions of buyers and sellers determine what is produced.
2. Inequality versus poverty. Many observers are bothered by high levels of economic inequality in the United States. This is different, however, than poverty. Poorer people in a wealthy, but unequal, economy may be better off than the wealthiest people in a poor, but equal, economy.
3. Incentives. If we change the benefits or costs of an action, we should expect to change people's choices to change. This may seem obvious. But neglecting incentives is a common cause of policy errors.

Questions:

1. What political and economic factors contributed to the Russian revolution?
2. What were the economic consequences of collectivization?
3. How might the economic and political systems of the early Soviet government be interconnected?
4. What were the shortcomings of the original five year plan?

Assignment: For this assignment, you have two choices:

A. You may write another argument. The subject is as follows: The Russian Revolution is widely considered a failure in that it failed to achieve its goals of economic prosperity and equality and instead devolved into another politically and socially repressive state. Was this failure inevitable? In other words, could the new Russian government of 1917 have made different choices that would have led to better political, economic, or social outcome? Or were the revolution's failures unavoidable? Note that I have deliberately not specified which 1917 revolution I am asking about. Alternatively, you may argue that the Russian Revolution did not fail.

B. You may write a policy memo to a Russian government of 1916 or 1917 advising it of which political, social, and economic policies it should pursue. You may, for example advise Tsar Nicholas II on how to obtain a more successful family portrait. Or you may advise the provisional government of 1917 on how not to get overthrown by the Communists. Finally, you may advise the Bolshevik government on how not to pursue a path that ends with millions dead.

Your piece will be graded based on clarity of ideas and presentation. The guidelines are:

- i. A maximum length of 1200 words, excluding references.
- ii. At least three sources with proper citations.
- iii. You are welcome to use AI to find sources but do not use it for editing or writing in the draft stage. Include a footnote if you do use AI to find sources.
- iv. Include your name and a title. Make your title useful, it should make the reader want to continue with the rest of the essay.
- v. Submit your first draft as a pdf via email by 5 PM on Wednesday, September 27.