

Socialism in Europe and the Russian Revolution

COMPLETE CBSE CLASS 9 HISTORY NOTES

Chapter Overview

The nineteenth century witnessed the rise of new political ideas in Europe as a response to the massive structural inequalities created by rapid industrialisation. Socialism emerged as a powerful ideology that directly challenged the concepts of capitalism and absolute private property. The Russian Revolution of 1917 stood as a watershed moment in world history where socialists successfully seized state power, abolished monarchy, and established the world's very first socialist nation. This chapter explores the intellectual development of socialist ideas, the volatile socio-economic conditions in Tsarist Russia, and the historic revolutions that transformed global politics forever.

Learning Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Analyze and compare the political ideologies of liberals, radicals, and conservatives.
- Explain the historical rise and structural expansion of socialism across continental Europe.
- Analyze the severe economic, political, and social conditions in Russia under Tsar Nicholas II.
- Trace the sequence of historical events defining both the February and October Revolutions of 1917.
- Describe the sweeping state transformations and social changes introduced by the ruling Bolsheviks.
- Evaluate the long-term global impact of the Russian Revolution on anti-colonial movements.

The Age of Social Change

Following the monumental French Revolution, the foundational ideas of basic individual liberties and systemic redistribution of social power began to be debated intensely across Europe. Concurrently, rapid colonial development reshaped ideas of geo-political governance, pushing socialism to become one of the most transformative political frameworks of the twentieth century.

Ideological Perspectives: Liberals, Radicals, and Conservatives

During this transformative period, European political thinkers split into three distinct, competing camps:

- **Liberals:** Envisioned a tolerant nation that respected all religious paths equally. They strongly opposed the unchecked, divine rule of dynastic monarchs and argued for an elected parliamentary government backed by an independent judiciary. However, **they were not true democrats**; they firmly believed voting rights should belong exclusively to men of property and entirely rejected universal adult franchise.
- **Radicals:** Demanded a government completely elected by the genuine majority of a country's population. They aggressively supported women's voting rights (the suffragette movement) and opposed the structural

privileges enjoyed by hereditary landowners and wealthy industrial factory elites. While they did not oppose the fundamental existence of private property, they deeply disliked its extreme concentration in a few wealthy hands.

- **Conservatives:** Initially rejected any concepts of revolutionary socio-political change. However, by the dawn of the nineteenth century, they accepted that some societal modification was inevitable. Crucially, they insisted that this transition must be a slow, gradual evolution that preserved respect for traditional history, customs, and ancestral pasts.

Industrial Society and Social Challenges

The industrial revolution brought swift economic advancement, but it also resulted in severe human exploitation: long, unsafe working hours (often 12–16 hours a day), low wages, hazardous child labor, cyclical unemployment, and severely overcrowded, unsanitary cities. Liberals and radicals, who were often factory owners themselves, believed that society could prosper if individual enterprise was left free, capital was productively utilized, and the working classes could labor without restrictive dynastic monopolies. This friction led revolutionaries in France, Italy, Germany, and Russia to plot the downfall of absolute monarchs.

Socialism in Europe

The Coming of Socialist Ideology

Socialists were fundamentally opposed to the institution of private property. They regarded private ownership as the root cause of all contemporary social ills, explaining that while individual factory owners made massive profits from labor, they cared little for the well-being of the actual workers. They argued that collective, state-wide control of property would serve broader social interests infinitely better.

Several progressive visionaries proposed different paths to achieving this socialist ideal:

- **Robert Owen (1771–1858):** A prominent English manufacturer who believed in voluntary cooperative efforts. He established a famous cooperative community named **New Harmony** in Indiana, USA.
- **Louis Blanc (1813–1882):** A French thinker who argued that individual community initiatives were insufficient. He demanded that governments actively build, fund, and encourage industrial cooperatives to systematically replace capitalist enterprises.
- **Karl Marx (1818–1883) & Friedrich Engels:** Formulated the concept of "Scientific Socialism". Marx famously argued that industrial society was fundamentally capitalist, where factory owners accumulated massive fortunes by expropriating the surplus value produced by workers. Marx predicted that workers had to violently overthrow capitalism, dismantle private property, and establish a classless, egalitarian **Communist Society**.

The Transnational Spread of Socialism

By the 1870s, socialist ideas had fully spread across Europe. To coordinate their transnational efforts, socialists established an international body known as the **Second International**. Workers in England and Germany began forming dense trade unions and mutual aid associations to fight for better wages, reduced

hours, and legal voting rights. By 1905, these movements solidified into formal electoral parties, notably the **Labour Party** in Britain and the **Socialist Party** in France.

The Russian Empire Before 1917

Socio-Economic Landscape

Russia's socio-economic structure differed significantly from Western Europe. **About 85% of the Russian populace** derived their livelihood from agriculture. Cultivators produced grain for their own subsistence as well as large quantities for international export. While the landed nobility, the imperial crown, and the Russian Orthodox Church owned vast tracts of fertile estates, the peasantry suffered from severe land shortages, leading to a deep desire for radical land redistribution.

Industrial development was highly localized, concentrated primarily in major manufacturing pockets around **St. Petersburg** and **Moscow**. In the 1890s, the Russian railway network expanded rapidly, attracting immense foreign capital investments. Although government inspectors theoretically supervised large factories to ensure minimum wages and humane hours, safety regulations were routinely violated by owners.

The industrial workforce was highly fragmented by skill and background. For instance, metalworkers considered themselves the "aristocrats" of labor because their jobs required intense training. By 1914, women made up **31% of the factory labor force** but were paid fractions of what men earned. Despite these intense divisions, workers repeatedly staged massive, united factory strikes whenever a worker was unfairly dismissed.

The Fragmentation of Socialism in Russia

All political parties were completely illegal in autocratic Russia before 1914. Despite this restriction, underground groups flourished:

- **Russian Social Democratic Workers Party (1898):** Founded by Marxist intellectuals who looked to factory workers as the primary engine of revolution. In 1903, internal strategic differences split this party into two distinct groups:
 1. **Bolsheviks:** Led by the radical strategist **Vladimir Lenin**, who argued for a highly disciplined, elite, centralized party that strictly controlled the quality and commitment of its members.
 2. **Mensheviks:** Represented a faction that believed the party should be broad-based and open to all members, similar to political parties in Germany or France.
- **Socialist Revolutionary Party (1900):** Focused on rural peasants rather than urban factory workers. They argued that because Russian peasants naturally pooled land via traditional village communes (**Mir**), they were inherently socialist. This group demanded the immediate seizure of aristocratic lands for peasant use.

The 1905 Revolution ("Bloody Sunday")

In 1904, economic conditions worsened dramatically as prices of essential goods surged while real wages dropped by 20%. The crisis exploded on **22 January 1905**. A peaceful procession of workers, led by Father Gapon, marched toward the Tsar's Winter Palace to deliver a petition for better working conditions and

political freedom. Imperial troops and Cossacks opened fire on the unarmed crowd, killing over 100 people and wounding 300. This tragedy, known as **Bloody Sunday**, sparked a massive nationwide wave of strikes, university shutdowns, and student protests.

To pacify the populace, Tsar Nicholas II conceded to the creation of an elected consultative parliament called the **Duma**. However, once order was restored, the Tsar subverted democracy by dismissing the first Duma within 75 days, packing subsequent assemblies with conservative loyalists to safeguard his absolute authority.

The Catalyst of the First World War

Russia entered World War I in 1914 against Germany and Austria. The conflict proved catastrophic for the empire. Between 1914 and 1916, Russian armies suffered humiliating defeats, resulting in over **7 million casualties**. The economic impact was devastating: railways broke down, industries lost raw materials, and massive quantities of grain were requisitioned to feed the army, causing severe food shortages and bread riots in major cities.

The Revolutions of 1917

1. The February Revolution (March 1917)

The collapse of the Tsarist monarchy began in the capital city of Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg) during a freezing winter:

- **22 February:** A sudden lockout at a major factory on the right bank of the Neva River left thousands of workers unemployed.
- **23 February (International Women's Day):** Women workers led mass strikes across 50 factories, demonstrating for food and rights.
- **25 February:** The Tsar suspended the Duma, provoking widespread political fury.
- **27 February:** Striking workers and soldiers, who refused to fire on the crowds, joined forces to ransack government buildings and formed the **Petrograd Soviet** (Council of Workers and Soldiers).
- **2 March 1917:** Striking military generals advised the Tsar to abdicate. Nicholas II signed his abdication, ending centuries of Romanov rule. A moderate **Provisional Government** was formed by Duma leaders to run the country.

The In-Between Period: Lenin's April Theses

In April 1917, Vladimir Lenin returned to Russia from political exile. He immediately issued a radical political manifesto known as the **April Theses**, which put forward three clear demands:

1. Bring an immediate, unconditional end to World War I.
2. Transfer all agricultural lands directly to the peasantry.
3. Nationalise all commercial banking institutions.

As the Provisional Government insisted on continuing the war, public dissatisfaction grew, and the Bolsheviks gained massive support within factory and military soviets.

2. The October Revolution (November 1917)

By autumn, Lenin feared the Provisional Government would establish a military dictatorship. He organized a swift, armed socialist coup:

- **16 October:** Lenin persuaded the Petrograd Soviet to form a secret **Military Revolutionary Committee** under the leadership of Leon Trotsky to plan the overthrow.
- **24 October:** The armed uprising began. Pro-government forces attempted to shut down Bolshevik newspapers, but the Military Revolutionary Committee responded rapidly, seizing government buildings and communication hubs.
- The naval warship **Aurora** shelled the Winter Palace, and by nightfall, the Provisional Government ministers surrendered completely. By December 1917, the Bolsheviks held complete control of the Moscow-Petrograd zone.

Flowchart: The 1917 Revolutionary Transition



Post-Revolutionary Transformation and Civil War

The Russian Civil War (1918–1920)

The radical Bolshevik land decrees caused the Russian imperial army to break apart as peasant soldiers deserted to return home for land redistribution. Non-Bolshevik socialists, liberals, and supporters of the autocracy organized resistance against the new regime. This triggered a brutal triangular Civil War:

Faction	Popular Identity	Composition & Support
The Reds	Bolsheviks	Radical Marxists, urban workers, and military soviets. Controlled the strategic central Russian core.
The Greens	Socialist Revolutionaries	Peasant-backed forces primarily interested in local agrarian land rights.
The Whites	Pro-Tsarist Monarchists	Landed aristocrats, liberals, and high-ranking military officers. Heavily backed by French, British, American, and Japanese troops who feared the global spread of communism.

By 1920, through centralized control and the ruthless military leadership of Leon Trotsky, the Bolsheviks defeated the Whites and Greens to establish the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

Building a Socialist Society

With the civil war won, the Bolshevik government introduced a series of radical socio-economic policies:

- **Centralised Economic Planning:** Introduced the system of **Five-Year Plans**. The state fixed all prices to stimulate industrial growth, leading to massive increases in coal, iron, steel, and oil production.
- **Social Welfare Infrastructure:** The state developed an extensive schooling system, created universities for working-class citizens, set up cheap public healthcare clinics, and established factory crèches to support women workers.

Stalinism and the Collectivisation Crisis

Following Lenin's death, Joseph Stalin assumed leadership. In 1929, facing severe urban grain shortages, Stalin launched a brutal, mandatory **Collectivisation Programme**. He argued that small, individual peasant holdings prevented the modernization of agriculture. Peasants were forced to surrender their private fields and work on massive state-controlled collective farms called **Kolkhoz**.

Peasants who resisted were deported or executed, and wealthier farmers, known as **Kulaks**, were systematically eliminated as a class. The policy caused massive disruption to agricultural cycles, culminating in a devastating famine between 1930 and 1933 that caused the deaths of over **4 million people**.

Global Impact of the Russian Revolution

The Russian Revolution permanently altered the twentieth-century political landscape:

- It demonstrated that a socialist alternative to industrial capitalism was practically achievable.
- It inspired the formation of communist parties globally, including the **Communist Party of India** in the mid-1920s.
- It energized global anti-colonial movements, as colonized populations realized they could overthrow imperial rulers.

- Prominent Indian intellectuals, including Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru, traveled to the USSR and wrote admiringly of its educational advancements and egalitarian social experiments.

Important Historical Personalities

Personality	Historical Role	Core Contribution
Karl Marx	German Philosopher	Co-author of *The Communist Manifesto*; established the theoretical framework of scientific socialism and historical materialism.
Tsar Nicholas II	Last Emperor of Russia	His rigid adherence to autocracy and catastrophic management of WWI caused the total collapse of the monarchy.
Vladimir Lenin	Bolshevik Supreme Leader	Architect of the October Revolution; authored the April Theses and successfully established the world's first socialist state.
Leon Trotsky	Military Strategist	Headed the Military Revolutionary Committee during the October coup and organized the Red Army to victory during the Civil War.
Joseph Stalin	General Secretary of the USSR	Succeeded Lenin; instituted centralized Five-Year Plans and forced agricultural collectivisation.

Chronological Timeline of Key Events

Year	Historical Event
1898	The underground Russian Social Democratic Workers Party is founded by Marxist scholars.
1903	The Social Democratic Party splits into two distinct factions: Bolsheviks and Mensheviks.
22 Jan 1905	Bloody Sunday occurs in Petrograd, triggering the 1905 Revolution and the creation of the Duma.
1914	Russia enters the First World War, initiating sharp economic and military collapse.
March 1917	The February Revolution breaks out; Tsar Nicholas II is forced to abdicate.
April 1917	Lenin returns from exile and announces the revolutionary April Theses.
November 1917	The October Revolution takes place; Bolsheviks seize state power from the Provisional Government.
1918–1920	The Russian Civil War rages between the Reds, Whites, and Greens.
1929	Joseph Stalin initiates the rapid industrial Five-Year Plans and forced farm collectivisation.

Important NCERT Textbook Questions with Model Answers

Q1: In what ways was the working population in Russia different from other European countries before 1917?

The working population in Russia differed from Western Europe in two primary ways:

- 1. Dominance of Agriculture:** About 85% of the Russian population depended directly on agriculture for their livelihood, compared to only 40–50% in countries like France and Germany.
- 2. Peasant Property Views:** Unlike Western European peasants who generally respected private property, Russian peasants had no respect for the nobility's land rights. They frequently refused to pay rent and pool their agricultural land into a village commune (**Mir**) to divide it periodically based on individual family needs.

Q2: Why did the Tsarist autocracy collapse in Russia during the February Revolution of 1917?

The collapse was the result of severe economic and military crises:

- **World War I Hardships:** Over 7 million Russian soldiers died, destroying public confidence in the Tsar's military leadership.
- **Economic Collapse:** Railways broke down, leading to massive food shortages in major industrial hubs. By winter 1917, bread riots were common in Petrograd.
- **Loss of Military Support:** When the Tsar ordered troops to fire on striking workers on February 27, the soldiers mutinied, joined the protests, and helped form the Petrograd Soviet. Left with no institutional or military support, the Tsar was forced to abdicate.

Q3: What were the main changes introduced by the Bolsheviks immediately after taking power in the October Revolution?

Immediately after seizing power, the Bolsheviks introduced several far-reaching measures:

1. **Nationalisation:** All commercial banking institutions and large industrial factories were brought under direct state ownership and control.
2. **Land Redistribution:** Private land ownership was abolished. All land was declared social property, and peasants were legally permitted to seize the estates of the nobility.
3. **Abolition of Titles:** The use of old aristocratic and monarchical titles was strictly banned to assert social equality.
4. **Peace Treaty:** Russia officially withdrew from World War I by signing a peace treaty with Germany at Brest-Litovsk.