

## Why the October Revolution Really Happened in November

The year 1917 was a busy one for Russians. They went through two revolutions. The first occurred when the czar abdicated. It's known as the February Revolution. Later that year came the October Revolution. That's when the Bolsheviks took over. But wait, you may say. The text I've just read says that the czar abdicated in March and the Bolsheviks took over in November. Here's the explanation: Russia was still following the Julian calendar in 1917. Not until 1919 did the Soviet Union (as it was by then) switch to the Gregorian calendar, which was widely in use in the West. To "catch up" with the Gregorian calendar, the Russians had to add extra days. This pushed the February Revolution into March, and the October Revolution into November.

## The Economic and Political Impacts of World War II and the Cold War on Russia

The Communists came to power with some big ideas about how to run a country. But their execution was often faulty. Trial and error is one of the themes of this period from the Bolshevik Revolution into World War II. During the 1918–21 civil war, the Soviet government tried to centralize the national economy, in accord with **Marxism**—*the political and economic theories of Karl Marx, a founder of socialism and communism*. This theory didn't work well for the Soviets, however. And so during the 1920s the government allowed some private businesses to coexist alongside state-owned industry. After Lenin's death in 1924, potential successors jockeyed for power among themselves. The economy was one of the issues Soviet leaders used to make a name for themselves.

### The Rise of Stalin

The most successful of these successors to Lenin was Joseph V. Stalin. He gradually consolidated his influence and isolated his rivals within the party. By the end of the 1920s, he was the sole leader of the Soviet Union.

In 1928 he introduced the First Five-Year Plan for building a socialist economy. The state took control of all factories. The state also took over all farms, by force if necessary, to establish collective farms. A **collective farm** is *a farm or a group of farms organized as a unit and managed and worked cooperatively by a group of laborers under state supervision*. Stalin's plan produced endless misery, however. Tens of millions of peasants starved to death. The government killed many who resisted forced collectivization.

## The Effects of Stalin's Repression and World War II on the Russian People

Later on in the 1930s, after the collectivization disaster, Stalin began a purge of the Communist Party. This set in motion a campaign of terror. He ordered the execution or imprisonment of untold millions from all walks of life.

Then as World War II loomed, Stalin tried to avoid conflict with other countries. He signed a nonaggression pact with Germany in 1939. That didn't keep Hitler from invading the Soviet Union, however, in 1941. Stalin and his forces fought back. They stopped the Nazi offensive at Stalingrad in 1943 and pushed back through Eastern Europe, all the way to Berlin before Germany surrendered in 1945. World War II ravaged the Soviet Union. Its death toll is still uncertain more than half a century later, but the estimate is that more than 26 million perished. Even so, the Soviet Union emerged from the conflict an undisputed world power.

By the time Stalin died in 1953, he had been the Soviet dictator for a quarter century. On his watch, the country had gone from a backward agricultural society to a powerful industrial state. But he had been responsible for the deaths of tens of millions of people. Repression was part of the system he created. Indeed, when he died he was thought to be planning a new wave of terror. Even his inner circle secretly rejoiced to learn he was dead.

For years after his death, a vital question for Soviet leaders would be, How many changes can we, or should we, make? Nikita S. Khrushchev took a while to emerge as Stalin's successor. But he signaled a sharp break with the past.

## Khrushchev and Other Leaders After Stalin

Stalin had named no political heir, and none of his associates dared claim to be his successor. So in the first years after his death, his associates tried to rule collectively. Eventually Khrushchev emerged as the most powerful figure in the Soviet Union. His tenure (1953–1964) brought about a relative liberalization, or opening up, in Soviet life.

In February 1956, in a dramatic speech at the Twentieth Party Congress, he denounced Stalin's crimes. He revealed that Stalin had killed thousands of party members and military leaders. This had hurt the Soviet Union militarily during World War II, he said. Stalin had also encouraged a **cult of personality**, he said—*an unhealthy intense personal focus on a leader*.

Khrushchev also proved more tolerant of arts and culture, in contrast with the repression of the arts under Stalin. And he did not use the secret police as an instrument of repression, as Stalin had done.

Khrushchev tried reforms in both domestic and foreign policy, with mixed results. During his tenure, world politics became much more complex. The insecurities of the Cold War persisted; he almost got into a nuclear war with the United States over Soviet missiles in Cuba. The Khrushchev era came to an end after a combination of failed policy innovations in agriculture, party politics, and industry undid him.



*A vendor sells traditional nesting dolls at a market in Moscow.*

*Photo by Melanie Stetson Freeman / © 1999 The Christian Science Monitor*

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The Politburo, or chief executive committee of the Communist Party, removed him in 1964. This opened the way for another period of collective rule.

### Brezhnev Takes Power

In place of Khrushchev, Leonid I. Brezhnev ruled at first with Alexei Kosygin and Nikolai Podgorny, but eventually emerged as the only leader. The Brezhnev era was more conservative; that is, more authoritarian and less liberal. Stalinism did not reappear, but de-Stalinization largely ended. Brezhnev didn't allow much room for individual expression the way Khrushchev had tried to do. Relations with the West were subject to wild swings. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 was a major setback in relations with the West.

But the Soviet leadership was basically stable—maybe too stable, analysts began to say. The age of the average Politburo member rose from 55 in 1966 to 68 in 1982. By the late 1970s Brezhnev's health was in decline. He refused to leave office, though, even after suffering two strokes. He died in November 1982. The two leaders who followed him ruled for only a year or two each. For real change, and real leadership, the Soviet Union would have to await Mikhail S. Gorbachev.

### The Gorbachev Era

When Gorbachev's turn came, it came quickly. At the death of Konstantin U. Chernenko, a former Brezhnev aide, the Politburo acted within hours to name Gorbachev his successor. Gorbachev was a unanimous choice. He moved swiftly to put his allies in key positions. But he gave little hint at first of how radical his leadership would become.

Soon, though, he was promoting “new thinking.” By this he meant foreign policy based on shared moral and ethical principles rather than Marxist-Leninist concepts of unending conflict with capitalism. Rather than flaunt Soviet military power, he sought to exercise political influence instead. He was a dealmaker. He pulled Soviet troops out of Afghanistan. He and US President Ronald Reagan agreed that they would remove their short- and mid-range nuclear missiles from Europe. And in a July 1989 speech, Gorbachev insisted on “the sovereign right of each people to choose their own social system.”

For years, the Soviet Union had held to the Brezhnev Doctrine—that “socialist” (communist) states needed to stay socialist. With his speech, Gorbachev came within a whisker of rejecting that doctrine.

### **The General Pattern of Economic Growth Following World War II**

Once Gorbachev came to power, he became such an international celebrity that everyone learned at least a few words of Russian. One of them was **glasnost**. It’s hard to find an English equivalent, but it means something like *open public discussion of problems*.

This was a wholly new concept in the Soviet Union. Had the Russians had it in the years following World War II, they might have understood their own economy better. The Soviet Union had developed a powerful industrial economy, despite the turmoil of the early Stalin years. After World War II, the country first rebuilt and then expanded its economy. The economic growth rates of the Soviet Union between the early 1950s and 1975 were impressive. They averaged 5 percent per year. This outpaced the United States and kept pace with growth in many Western European economies.

But those numbers were misleading—they hid a lot of inefficiency. The Soviet Union hit impressive growth rates by making “extensive investments.” That is, the Soviets put lots of labor, capital, and resources into their system. But prices set by the state did not reflect actual costs of these investments. This led to misallocation of resources—putting money in the wrong place. Government interference with business decisions kept industries from adapting to new opportunities. It also hindered productivity growth.

The quality of Soviet goods and services wasn’t very good, either. That was another unhappy truth the growth figures hid.

### **The Soviet Union’s Slow Economic Decline**

The Soviet Union paid a high price for the stability it had under Brezhnev. He and his team avoided tough political and economic change. And that doomed the country to the decline it experienced during the 1980s. This deterioration was a sharp contrast to the energy that marked the early days of the Soviet experiment.