

The Russian Revolution



THE **CHOICES** PROGRAM

Explore the Past... Shape the Future

History and Current Issues for the Classroom

WATSON INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
BROWN UNIVERSITY WWW.CHOICES.EDU

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The Choices for the 21st Century Education Program develops curricula on current and historical international issues and offers workshops, institutes, and in-service programs for high school teachers. Course materials place special emphasis on the importance of educating students in their participatory role as citizens.

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Thomas J. Biersteker
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Introduction: Before the Revolution

In 1861, the Russian Empire extended seven thousand miles from east to west and encompassed one-sixth of the surface of the globe. Stretching from the Arctic Ocean to the Black Sea, from Prussia to the Pacific, Russia was the world's largest country. An empire as diverse as it was large, Russia held seventy-four million people who spoke more than one hundred different languages, came from over one hundred distinct ethnicities, and practiced most major and many minor religions. Trying to hold together the huge and diverse empire created enormous problems for Russia's rulers.

How was Russia governed?

Though Russia was unrivaled in size, it was considered by many Western Europeans to be an extremely backward country. The Renaissance and Reformation, with their emphasis on the importance of the individual, had hardly touched Russia.

Since 1613, Russia had been governed by the tsar (emperor) who possessed complete authority. Though the state bureaucracy assisted the tsar in the operation of his government, no political parties were permitted. Below the tsar and his bureaucracy were privileged nobles who owned much of the country's land. Below them was the majority of the population, millions of serfs (peasant farmers) who worked the land in virtual slavery.

Tsarist Russia had no legislature and no constitution. Russian subjects were not entitled to freedom of speech, assembly, or worship. Any public dissent or opposition was stifled or stamped out by the tsar's secret police. The government carefully censored all publications. Though the power of the tsar was absolute and life was filled with hardships, many Russians regarded the tsar as a representative of God and a force for good.

What were the political groups struggling for the future of Russia?

The tsars had the loyalty of much of the gentry (land-owning nobility) and the masses. But generations of repression by the government, and the suffering of millions had generated political movements among intellectuals seeking change in Russia. There were also numerous non-Russian minorities (including Poles, Jews, Finns, and Ukrainians), seeking to free themselves from the tsar's rule. Although there were many different groups, by the early twentieth century they could be divided into two basic categories: socialists and liberal reformers.

Socialists: There were many socialist groups with differing goals and plans. The socialists hoped to create a classless society that would end the exploitation and suffering of the peasants and workers. This included dismantling the capitalist economic system by taking the "means of production" (land, factories, etc.) from the owners and placing them in the hands of the state. The socialists knew that they would have to rally peasants and workers to their side.

Liberal Reformers: Liberalism was a political ideology based on the ideas of the Enlightenment. Liberal reformers believed that they could put in place western constitutional practices and the rule of law to solve Russia's problems and correct the injustices of the past.

The readings in this unit will take you back to a time when Russia's future hung in the balance and will help you to explore the competing visions for Russia. The first reading explores the events from the emancipation of the serfs to the Revolution of 1905. Part II covers the period from 1905 to the eve of the Revolution in early spring 1917. You will then be asked to address the questions Russians debated at that time. An epilogue explores the aftermath of the Russian Revolution and its impact on the twentieth century.

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Peasant Life

Objectives:

Students will: Identify characteristics of peasant life in Russia.

Explore and analyze the differing portrayals of peasants in Russian art and by historians.

Speculate about how conditions of peasant life may have contributed to social unrest in Russia.

Explore interdisciplinary approaches to historical issues.

Required Reading:

Before beginning the lesson, students should have read the Introduction and Part I of the background reading (pages 1-12) and completed the “Study Guide—Part I” in the Teacher Resource Book (TRB 4-5) or the “Advanced Study Guide—Part I” (TRB-6).

Handouts:

“Peasant Proverbs” (TRB-7)

“Peasant Life by the Numbers” (TRB-8)

“Peasants in Literature” (TRB-9)

“The Volga Barge Haulers” (TRB-10)

In the Classroom:

1. Focus Question—Write the question “What was it like to be a Russian peasant?” on the board.

2. Thinking about Peasant Life—Tell students that at the dawn of the twentieth century 80 percent of the population of the Russian Empire were peasants. Ask students to recall

information from their reading about peasant life.

3. Examining Peasant Life—Divide the class into four groups and distribute a different handout to each group. If class size requires, create eight groups. Ask students to read their directions and answer the questions provided.

4. Group Responses—After small groups have completed the questions, have everyone come together in a large group. Call on small groups to share their responses to the questions. Ask students to comment on similarities. Are there recurring themes and ideas that appear?

Ask the students if they feel they have enough information to offer hypotheses about life as a peasant in Russia. Why or why not? If yes, what might they be? Add some of them to the board. Ask students if they believe the portrayals of peasants in literature and art are useful to their understanding. What pitfalls might there be in relying on literature or art?

Ask students if they have changed their ideas or assumptions about peasant life. Have the reports from different groups raised any new questions about peasant life? Where do students think they might find answers to these new questions? Do students find any single approach to the question of peasant life most valuable?

Homework:

Students should read Part II of the background reading (pages 13-22) and complete the “Study Guide—Part II” (TRB 19-20) or the “Advanced Study Guide—Part II” (TRB-21).

Peasant Proverbs

Instructions: Below is a selection of peasants' proverbs and a song. Proverbs are concise sayings that are used to convey the values and beliefs of a culture. Proverbs often use symbolism or language from one aspect of life to give advice that can be applied more generally. Read the proverbs and the song below and answer the questions that follow. Be prepared to report back to your classmates.

Proverbs

- "If you hurry you will make people laugh."
- "Go slowly, you will go farther."
- "No one knows how the poor dine."
- "Bread and water, that is our food."
- "In the forest the trees are unequal and in the world so are men."
- "We all look at the same sun, but we don't eat the same dinner."
- "If the pocket is empty, the judge is deaf."
- "What one man can't bear, the village can."
- "No man is greater than the village."
- "Hit your wife with the butt of the axe, get down and see if she's breathing. If she is, she's faking and wants some more."
- "The more you beat the old woman, the tastier the soup will be."
- "Beat your wife like a fur coat, then there'll be less noise."
- "A wife is nice twice: when she's brought into the house and when she's carried out of it to her grave."
- "Oh it's a jolly life, only there's no one to beat."

***Khorovod*, a traditional song sung by peasant girls before marriage**

They are making me marry a lout
With no small family.
Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh dear me!
With a father, and a mother
And four brothers
And sisters three.
Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh dear me!
Says my father-in-law,
'Here comes a bear!'
Says my mother-in-law,
'Here comes a slut!'
My sisters-in-law cry,
'Here comes a do-nothing!'
My brothers-in-law cry,
'Here comes a mischief-maker!
Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh dear me!

Questions

1. Make at least four generalizations about the values and beliefs expressed in these proverbs.
2. Which three proverbs stand out the most to you? Why?
3. What ideas do the proverbs express about the peasants' relationships to each other and society?
4. What is the central idea of the song? Is it different or similar to the ideas expressed in the proverbs? Explain your answer.

Peasant Life by the Numbers

Instructions: Below are a selection of statistics about peasant life between 1850 and 1914. Read the statistics and answer the questions that follow. Be prepared to report back to your classmates.

Statistics

The birth rate for peasants from 1850-1900 was fifty per thousand (twice the European average).

In 1900, one in four peasant babies died before the age of one.

The peasant population grew from fifty to seventy-nine million between 1861-1897. This resulted in a growing shortage of land.

Sixty-five percent of the rural population was under age thirty in 1897.

The rate of partitions of land within households rose from 82,000 per year in 1861 and 140,000 per year in 1884.

In 1900, 7 percent of the households had no land at all.

Until 1906, peasants did not have the right to own their allotments of land.

The Russian urban population increased from 7 to 28 million in the latter half of the nine-

teenth century. Most of this can be attributed to peasants looking for work.

Two out of three households were unable to feed themselves without going in to debt.

In 1900, only one in three peasant households had a horse.

In 1914, three out of four living in St. Petersburg were peasants by birth.

In 1890, 60 percent of peasant draftees were rejected for army service for medical and physical reasons.

The literacy rate in Russia rose from 21 percent in 1897 to 40 percent in 1914.

The number of primary schools went from 25,000 to 100,000 between 1878 and 1911.

By 1911, more than half of all peasant children were attending primary school.

By 1904, nine out of ten peasant recruits into the army from the provinces around Moscow and St. Petersburg were considered literate.

Questions

1. Suggest a likely consequence for each of the statistics. Be prepared to share at least five of these with your classmates.

2. List four general trends suggested by all of the statistics.

3. Which two statistics do you think are the most significant? Explain your answer.

Peasants in Literature

Instructions: Below are two short excerpts from two of the great writers of Russian literature: Anton Chekov and Leo Tolstoy. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Russian artists and intellectuals struggled to understand and portray the role of the peasant in Russia. Read the two excerpts carefully and answer the questions that follow. Be prepared to report back to your classmates.

From *The Death of Ivan Ilych*

by **Leo Tolstoy, 1886** [In these excerpts from Tolstoy's short story, Ivan Ilych is a terminally ill judge who is being cared for by his servant, a peasant named Gerasim.]

"But just through this most unpleasant matter, Ivan Ilych obtained comfort. Gerasim, the butler's young assistant, always came in to carry things out. Gerasim was a clean, fresh peasant lad, grown stout on town food and always cheerful and bright....

"Gerasim with a firm light tread, his heavy boots emitting a pleasant smell of tar and fresh winter air, came in wearing a clean Hessian apron, the sleeves of his print shirt tucked up over his strong bare young arms; and refraining from looking at his sick master out of consideration for his feelings, and restraining the joy of life that beamed from his face....

"Gerasim did it all easily, willingly, simply and with a good nature that touched Ivan Ilych. Health, strength, and vitality in other people were offensive to him, but Gerasim's strength and vitality did not mortify but soothed him....

"And in Gerasim's attitude toward him there was something akin to what he wished for, and so that attitude comforted him....

"His mental sufferings were due to the fact that at night, as he looked at Gerasim's sleepy, good-natured face with its prominent cheek-bones, the question suddenly occurred to him: 'What if my whole life has really been wrong?'"

From *Peasants*

by **Anton Chekov, 1897**

"In the course of the summer and winter there had been hours and days when it had seemed that these people live worse than cattle, when it had been terrible to live with them; they were coarse, not honest; filthy, not sober; they lived in discord, quarreling constantly, because they did not respect but feared and suspected one another. Who keeps the tavern and makes the people drunkards? A peasant. Who embezzles and drinks up the communal school and church funds? A peasant. Who has stolen from his neighbor, committed arson, given false testimony in court for a bottle of vodka? Who at *zemstvo* and other meetings is the first to declaim against the peasants? A peasant. Yes, to live with them was terrible, yet all the same they were people; they suffered and wept as people do; and in their lives there was nothing for which excuses might not be found."

Questions

1. List five characteristics that Tolstoy uses to describe the peasant Gerasim.
2. List five characteristics that Chekov uses to describe peasants.
3. What conclusions (if any) can you make about peasants after reading these two excerpts from Russian literature?

The Volga Barge Haulers

Instructions: Below is Ilya Repin's painting *The Volga Barge Haulers* (1873), and a contemporary reaction to it published in the *St. Petersburg Gazette*. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Russian artists and intellectuals struggled to understand and portray Russian life. Examine the painting (it can be seen in color at <http://www.choices.edu/RussianRevolution.cfm>) and the excerpts from the reaction carefully. Answer the questions below. Be prepared to report back to your classmates.

1. What are the most notable details of the painting? Explain.
2. What details does Vladimir Stasov note?
3. Why does Stasov think the painting is important?



Excerpt from a letter to the *St. Petersburg Gazette*, by Vladimir Stasov, 1873

“Merely glance at Mr. Repin’s ‘Barge-Haulers,’ and you will immediately be obliged to admit that no one in Russia has ever dared to take on such a subject, that you have never before seen such a profoundly staggering picture of Russian life, although this subject and this task have stood for so long before us and our artists. But is this not the most essential characteristic of a powerful talent: the ability to perceive, and to instill in his work, that which is true and simple, and which hundreds and thousands of people pass by without remark?

“In Mr. Repin’s painting there lies the Volga [River], endlessly spreading out before us as if swooning and falling asleep beneath the scorching July sun. Somewhere in the distance we glimpse a smoky steamship, closer to, the quietly swelling sail of a humble little

vessel gives off a golden hue, while in the foreground, a gang of barge haulers tread heavily along the sandbanks, leaving imprints of their bast [fiber] shoes in the damp sand. Harnessed in their straps, and hauling on tow ropes, these eleven men march in step, a living haulage machine, bending their bodies forward and swaying in time inside their yoke. What a docile herd this is, what humble, unconscious strength, and, at the same time, what poverty, what destitution. There is not a single whole shirt on these shoulders which have been burnt by the sun, not a single intact hat or cap: everywhere there are holes and tatters; they are all in rags, with cloth foot bindings....

“Mr. Repin did not paint his picture in order to stir citizens to pity and wring sighs from them: rather, the types and characters he saw astonished him, he felt keenly the necessity of depicting Russia’s remote, unknown life, and he created in his painting such a scene...”