



BACKGROUND GUIDE

WAMUNC XXIV

Russian Duma, 1917

COMMITTEE OVERVIEW

As a specialized body, the Russian Duma committee will combine some factors of both general assembly and crisis committees to create a unique and exciting environment for its members.

The Duma members will convene almost immediately after the abdication of the Czar and the fall of the Russian monarchy. This means that there is no universally recognized government in Russia, except for the transitional government and Petrograd Soviet, neither of which were stable enough to govern the country effectively or have recognition. The first task of the committee will be to form a new government and governing body, balancing the interests of the different political parties and stakeholders of Russia at the time. This will likely be the most time-consuming part of the committee and will require delegates to determine how the new government will operate by a majority vote of the Duma members.

After a new government has been formed, delegates will begin to address the issues plaguing Russia at the time, such as the ongoing war effort and food shortages, in faster-paced crisis-style directives. Although there will be no backroom operation or private directives or note system, the chair may issue regular 'crisis-style' updates as the committee sessions go on.

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Historical Background

At the turn of the twentieth century, the Russian Empire was politically, technologically, socially, and economically lagging behind most of its European counterparts. The Russian czars wielded near absolute power over their citizens and used that power to enforce an archaic form of serfdom. Meanwhile most of the other great powers of Europe had begun to allow for some forms of free expression and democratic representation, whether that be in the form of republics or constitutional monarchies. Russian technological and scientific progress had also drifted behind other powers. While much of Europe saw mass industrialization and the adoption of technology like the steam engine in the mid-nineteenth century, Russia had not started its buildup of manufacturing and infrastructure until the late 1800s and early 1900s.

In November 1894, Nicholas II was crowned as Russia after his father, who was famous for his conservative policies and apprehension towards reform, died after a short illness. Czar Nicholas was regarded as a relatively young and inexperienced ruler who modelled much of his early reign on the policies of his father. Early in his reign, Czar Nicholas publicly committed to upholding absolutist governance in Russia and seemed hesitant to introduce widespread changes to the functions of the Russian state. His inexperience with governing and organization was highlighted on Czar Nicholas's coronation day in the so-called 'Khodynka Tragedy' where thousands of Russians were killed in a stampede after police forces failed to contain a crowd of nearly 500,000 people collecting free food and gifts during the coronation celebrations. This early incident garnered Czar Nicholas the title 'Nicholas the Bloody,' painting a grim picture of the young monarch's reign.

Public disapproval of Czar Nicholas worsened during the 1904-1905 Russo-Japanese War, in which the Russian Empire suffered a devastating defeat to the Japanese military, marking the first time in history in which a European power lost to a non-Western country in a major conflict. Russia not only had to make military and diplomatic concessions to Japan as a result of the loss but also saw most of its Baltic Fleet, the mainstay of Russian military power in Europe, destroyed by the Japanese navy. Although Russians had initially supported the conflict, the military defeat and national embarrassment that the war caused only furthered Czar Nicholas's unpopularity.

Social and political tensions peaked in 1905's 'Bloody Sunday' when a group of demonstrators marched to the Imperial Winter Palace in Saint Petersburg, asking the czar to improve working conditions and curb some state officials' powers. In the confusion of the protests, a group of imperial soldiers opened fire on the protestors, causing a panic in which hundreds of civilians were killed, injured, or arrested. Although Czar Nicholas had already fled the palace by the time the group arrived and had not given any combat orders to the troops in the city, he received most of the public blame for the incident.

The Bloody Sunday incident sparked a wave of industrial strikes and public protests across the Russian Empire known as the 1905 Revolution, or the First Russian Revolution. The protests and labor shortages forced Czar Nicholas to concede and implement some reforms and changes to Russia. Namely, the czar agreed to sign the October Manifesto, promising civil rights, and an elected parliament, or Duma, that would have to approve all laws before being implemented. The creation of the Duma was finalized in the 1906 constitution, which created a bicameral legislature, in which the upper house members were selected by the czar, and the lower house members were indirectly elected through complex class-based elections. Despite the establishment of a Duma, Czar Nicholas was often able to ignore lawmakers' decisions and continue his absolute rule.

In 1914 Russia entered the First World War on the side of Serbia, France, and the United Kingdom. The war saw Russia fighting both the German Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire on its western border and the Ottoman Empire in the Caucasus and Black Sea. Although the Russians had some early success in the fighting, the early months of the war saw Russia quickly lose territory to their enemies, massive food and supply shortages across the empire, and a flailing economy. Russians found even more reason to personally blame Czar Nicholas after he took personal command of the war effort and left most internal affairs in the hands of the German-born czarina and the incredibly unpopular Grigori Rasputin, a Siberian-born monk who the Imperial family hired to treat the czarevitch's hemophilia.

On International Women's Day on 22 February 1917, a group of mostly female protestors took to the streets of Saint Petersburg, demanding food concessions and labor rights in the face of crippling food shortages. The demonstrations were quickly joined by thousands more members of the public and began to bring the capital to a halt. To quell the protests, Czar Nicholas dispatched a group of ill-trained troops to Saint Petersburg. However, due to ongoing abuse from their commanding officers and their hesitancy to use violence towards fellow Russians, most of the military force in the city either deserted or defected to the protestors.

Czar Nicholas also prorogued the Imperial Duma, temporarily taking away its governing authority. In response, centrist and liberal Duma members formed a temporary government to maintain stability in Saint Petersburg, while a group of socialist members formed the Petrograd Soviet, which sought to represent workers' interests during the ongoing protests.

Facing the loss of his capital and a possible threat to the Imperial family, Czar Nicholas boarded a train bound for Saint Petersburg. However, a group of revolutionaries commandeered a train track on the route, stopping his travel. With Saint Petersburg in the hands of the revolutionaries, discontent in the army, and the Imperial family under siege in the capital, Czar Nicholas formally abdicated the throne on 2 March 1917 in his name and his son's, who was believed to be too sick to take the throne. After Nicholas's brother refused to accept the crown, the Russian Czarism dissolved and left the country in a state of chaos.

Current Situation

With no Czar at the helm of state to lead Russia and no functioning form of government to solve the many ongoing crisis that led the Russian Empire to doom, it comes to the members of the now-defunct Russian Imperial Duma to determine Russia's future. With two competing groups, the temporary government led by the liberals and the Petrograd Soviet led by the socialist parties, vying for power, the leading members of state find which one, if either, will prevail and how Russia will move forward.

This committee will convene right after the abdication of Czar Nicholas II, but before the Duma was formally dissolved in October 1917, leaving delegates to face a number of growing issues dominating the minds of the Russian people.

Bringing Bread and Government

While the Czar's abdication satisfied many protestors and has lessened some of the chaos in the streets, without a functioning government, the people of Russia are still facing severe food and supply shortages and need aid from the government.

With much of the military defecting to the anti-Czarist protests, there are still large groups of former soldiers and armed demonstrators in the streets without real direction or orders.

With so many different political parties competing for power between the centrist and liberal bloc and the socialist bloc, what will Russia's new government look like? Will there be new elections? Will the Duma be dissolved and a new government put in its place? How will the new government balance between the extremist tendencies of the socialists and the moderate reforms of the liberals? How will the new government deal with organized labor and workers?

The Great War

Although the government that brought Russia into the First World War has now fallen, the country remains in the war and both the German Empire and Austria-Hungary are making quick advances into Russian territory. Taking advantage of the chaos in Russia and the fall of the Imperial military command, enemy troops have occupied large swathes of Russian land and will be unlikely to make any peace unless Russia makes large concessions or is able to turn the tide of the war.

With the military completely unorganized and the frontline crumbling, what will be the new Russian military and foreign policy? Will Russia withdraw from the war and make an unequal peace with the Central Powers? Can the government rebuild the military command and turn reverse the tide of the war? Where do former Imperial military officers fit into the new Russian military and will they be allowed to continue to serve? Do we stand by our allies or will we try to make a quiet end to the war?

The Imperial Legacy

Although no longer in power, Czar Nicholas, now simply Nicholas Romanov, has remained in Russia with his immediate family. Nicholas seems to want to quietly retire from public life, but his presence always invited the possibility of a counter revolution forming to reinstall him as Czar at some point in the future. Many Russians also feel like Nicholas has committed crimes against the Russian people and should face justice.

With the mere presence of Nicholas causing so much political and social upheaval in Russia, how will the new government decide to deal with the former czar. Should Nicholas face trial for the crimes committed under his rule? How do his family and the remaining Romanovs play a role in all of this?

Primary Political Groups and Parties

Kadets

The Constitutional Democratic Party, whose members are nicknamed 'Kadets,' is one of the largest liberal parties active in Russian politics at this time. Their members made up much of the liberal temporary government established during the February Revolution. In general, the Kadets support a transition to a liberal democracy and want to give laborers rights to strike and to shorter working days. The Kadets eventually either absorbed or entered into coalitions with other centrist and liberal parties, such as the center-left Progressive Party. Much of the Kadet's leadership and membership is comprised of Russian academics and intellectuals, meaning that they sometimes operate as more of an early think-tank than a completely cohesive political party.

Social Revolutionaries

One of the largest political groups in the post-Czarist era, the Social Revolutionaries represent the mainstay of radical peasant socialism and the redistribution of private land. However, the social revolutionaries suffer from a lack of organization and clear leadership. By the time of the February Revolution, the Social Revolutionaries had several different sub-groups and leaders trying to garner influence, and eventually permanently fractured the group. The Social Revolutionaries also saw a lack of political cohesion, with members ranging from across the political spectrum. Although Social Revolutionaries were usually left-wing socialists, the exact policies and nature of their beliefs varied somewhat over time and depending on what sub-group you belonged to.

Mensheviks and Bolsheviks

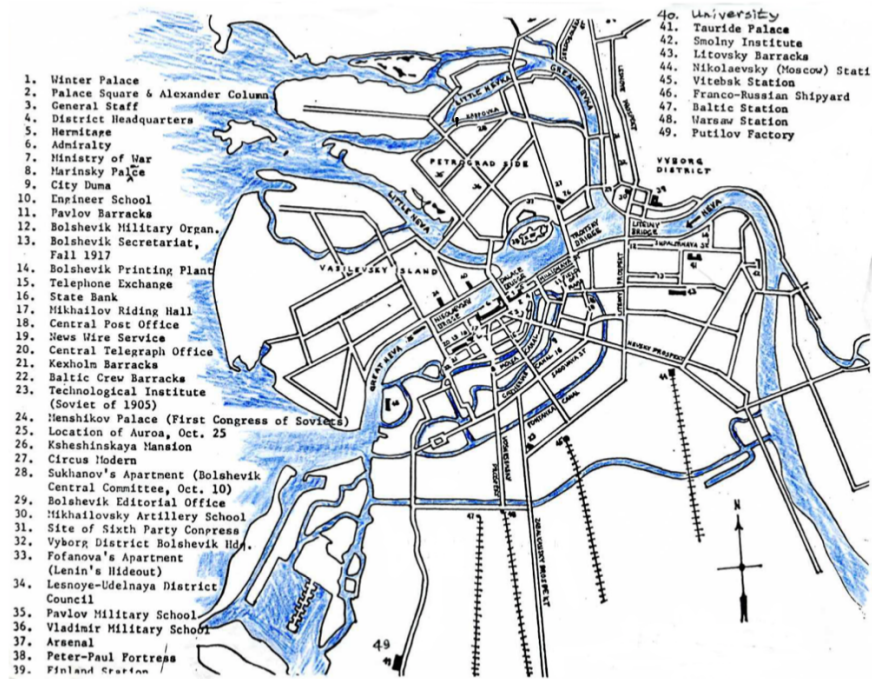
Although originally part of the same Social Democratic Labor Party, the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks became two distinct political groups in 1903. Although both groups supported socialist and Marxist policies, the Mensheviks tended to be more moderate and supported liberal change, while the Bolsheviks, being led by controversial politicians Vladimir Lenin and Leon Trotsky, were seen as far-left extremists and supported the idea of a proletariat revolution in Russia.

Former Monarchists and Conservatives

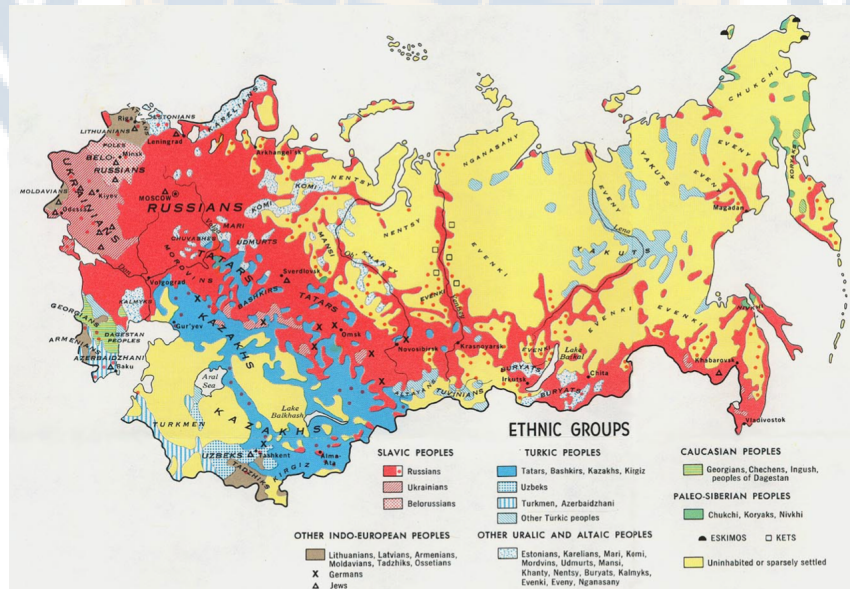
Many former members of the Imperial administration and right-wing parties are also still active in the Russian government after the fall of the Czarism. These figures had to figure out whether they would support moderate liberal parties, call of radical change with the various socialist parties, or even form their own political groups. Although their former power has been shaken, the old guard of the Russian government will be crucial in determining Russia's next steps.



Map showing the Russian frontlines in 1917.
(Image Credit: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc.)



Map of Saint Petersburg in 1917.
 (Image Credit: Alpha History)



Map showing different ethnic groups of the Russian Empire.
 (Image Credit: Alpha History)

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