

# The Jewish Role in the Bolshevik Revolution and Soviet Regime



**In the night of July 16-17, 1918, a squad of Bolshevik secret police murdered Russia's last emperor, Tsar Nicholas II, along with his wife, Tsaritsa Alexandra, their 14-year-old son, Tsarevich Alexis, and their four daughters.**

They were cut down in a hail of gunfire in a room of the house in Ekaterinburg, a city in the Ural mountain region, where they were being held prisoner.

The daughters were finished off with bayonets. To prevent a cult for the dead Tsar, the bodies were carted away to the countryside and hastily buried in a secret grave. Bolshevik authorities at first reported that the Romanov emperor had been shot after the discovery of a plot to liberate him.

For some time the deaths of the Empress and the children were kept secret. Soviet historians claimed for many years that local Bolsheviks had acted on their own in carrying out the killings, and that Lenin, founder of the Soviet state, had nothing to do with the crime.



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In 1990, Moscow playwright and historian Edvard Radzinsky announced the result of his detailed investigation into the murders. He unearthed the reminiscences of Lenin's bodyguard, Alexei Akimov, who recounted how he personally delivered Lenin's execution order to the telegraph office. The telegram was also signed by Soviet government chief Yakov Sverdlov. Akimov had saved the original telegraph tape as a record of the secret order.

Radzinsky's research confirmed what earlier evidence had already indicated. Leon Trotsky -- one of Lenin's closest colleagues -- had revealed years earlier that Lenin and Sverdlov had together made the decision to put the Tsar and his family to death. Recalling a conversation in 1918, Trotsky wrote.

My next visit to Moscow took place after the [temporary] fall of Ekaterinburg [to anti-Communist forces]. Speaking with Sverdlov, I asked in passing:

**"Oh yes, and where is the Tsar?"**

**"Finished," he replied. "He has been shot."**

**"And where is the family?"**

**"The family along with him."**

**"All of them?,"** I asked, apparently with a trace of surprise.

**"All of them,"** replied Sverdlov. **"What about it?"** He was waiting to see my reaction. I made no reply.



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**"And who made the decision?,"** I asked.

**"We decided it here. Ilyich [Lenin] believed that we shouldn't leave the Whites a live banner to rally around, especially under the present difficult circumstances."**

I asked no further questions and considered the matter closed.

Recent research and investigation by Radzinsky and others also corroborates the account provided years earlier by Robert Wilton, correspondent of the London Times in Russia for 17 years. His account, *The Last Days of the Romanovs* - originally published in 1920, and reissued in 1993 by the Institute for Historical Review -- is based in large part on the findings of a detailed investigation carried out in 1919 by Nikolai Sokolov under the authority of "White" (anti-Communist) leader Alexander Kolchak. Wilton's book remains one of the most accurate and complete accounts of the murder of Russia's imperial family.

A solid understanding of history has long been the best guide to comprehending the present and anticipating the future.

Accordingly, people are most interested in historical questions during times of crisis, when the future seems most uncertain. With the collapse of Communist rule in the Soviet Union, 1989-1991, and as Russians struggle to build a new order on the ruins of the old, historical issues have become very topical. For example, many ask: How did the Bolsheviks, a small movement guided by the teachings of German-Jewish social philosopher Karl Marx, succeed in taking control of Russia and imposing a cruel and despotic regime on its people?



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In recent years, Jews around the world have been voicing anxious concern over the specter of anti-Semitism in the lands of the former Soviet Union. In this new and uncertain era, we are told, suppressed feelings of hatred and rage against Jews are once again being expressed. According to one public opinion survey conducted in 1991, for example, most Russians wanted all Jews to leave the country. But precisely why is anti-Jewish sentiment so widespread among the peoples of the former Soviet Union? Why do so many Russians, Ukrainians, Lithuanians and others blame "the Jews" for so much misfortune?

## A Taboo Subject

Although officially Jews have never made up more than five percent of the country's total population, they played a highly disproportionate and probably decisive role in the infant Bolshevik regime, effectively dominating the Soviet government during its early years. Soviet historians, along with most of their colleagues in the West, for decades preferred to ignore this subject. The facts, though, cannot be denied.

With the notable exception of Lenin (Vladimir Ulyanov), most of the leading Communists who took control of Russia in 1917-20 were Jews. Leon Trotsky (Lev Bronstein) headed the Red Army and, for a time, was chief of Soviet foreign affairs. Yakov Sverdlov (Solomon) was both the Bolshevik party's executive secretary and -- as chairman of the Central Executive Committee -- head of the Soviet government. Grigori Zinoviev (Radomyslsky) headed the Communist International (Comintern), the central agency for spreading revolution in foreign countries. Other prominent Jews included press commissar Karl Radek (Sobelsohn), foreign affairs



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commissar Maxim Litvinov (Wallach), Lev Kamenev (Rosenfeld) and Moisei Uritsky.

Lenin himself was of mostly Russian and Kalmuck ancestry, but he was also one-quarter Jewish. His maternal grandfather, Israel (Alexander) Blank, was a Ukrainian Jew who was later baptized into the Russian Orthodox Church.

A thorough-going internationalist, Lenin viewed ethnic or cultural loyalties with contempt. He had little regard for his own countrymen. "An intelligent Russian," he once remarked, "is almost always a Jew or someone with Jewish blood in his veins."

## Critical Meetings

In the Communist seizure of power in Russia, the Jewish role was probably critical.

Two weeks prior to the Bolshevik "October Revolution" of 1917, Lenin convened a top secret meeting in St. Petersburg (Petrograd) at which the key leaders of the Bolshevik party's Central Committee made the fateful decision to seize power in a violent takeover. Of the twelve persons who took part in this decisive gathering, there were four Russians (including Lenin), one Georgian (Stalin), one Pole (Dzerzhinsky), and six Jews.

To direct the takeover, a seven-man "Political Bureau" was chosen. It consisted of two Russians (Lenin and Bubnov), one Georgian (Stalin), and four Jews (Trotsky, Sokolnikov, Zinoviev, and Kamenev). Meanwhile, the Petersburg (Petrograd) Soviet -- whose chairman was Trotsky -- established an 18-member "Military Revolutionary Committee" to actually carry out the seizure of power. It included eight (or nine) Russians, one Ukrainian, one Pole, one Caucasian, and



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six Jews. Finally, to supervise the organization of the uprising, the Bolshevik Central Committee established a five-man "Revolutionary Military Center" as the Party's operations command. It consisted of one Russian (Bubnov), one Georgian (Stalin), one Pole (Dzerzhinsky), and two Jews (Sverdlov and Uritsky).

## Contemporary Voices of Warning

Well-informed observers, both inside and outside of Russia, took note at the time of the crucial Jewish role in Bolshevism. Winston Churchill, for one, warned in an article published in the February 8, 1920, issue of the London Illustrated Sunday Herald that Bolshevism is a "worldwide conspiracy for the overthrow of civilization and for the reconstitution of society on the basis of arrested development, of envious malevolence, and impossible equality." The eminent British political leader and historian went on to write.

**“There is no need to exaggerate the part played in the creation of Bolshevism and in the actual bringing about of the Russian Revolution by these international and for the most part atheistical Jews. It is certainly a very great one; it probably outweighs all others. With the notable exception of Lenin, the majority of the leading figures are Jews. Moreover, the principal inspiration and driving power comes from the Jewish leaders. Thus Tchitcherin, a pure Russian, is eclipsed by his nominal subordinate, Litvinoff, and the influence of Russians like Bukharin or Lunacharski cannot be compared with the power of Trotsky, or of Zinovieff, the Dictator of the Red Citadel (Petrograd), or of Krassin or Radek -- all Jews. In the Soviet institutions the predominance of Jews is even more astonishing. And the prominent, if not indeed the principal, part in the system of terrorism applied by the**



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**Extraordinary Commissions for Combatting Counter-Revolution [the Cheka] has been taken by Jews, and in some notable cases by Jewesses”.**

Needless to say, the most intense passions of revenge have been excited in the breasts of the Russian people.

David R. Francis, United States ambassador in Russia, warned in a January 1918 dispatch to Washington: **"The Bolshevik leaders here, most of whom are Jews and 90 percent of whom are returned exiles, care little for Russia or any other country but are internationalists and they are trying to start a worldwide social revolution."**

The Netherlands' ambassador in Russia, Oudendyke, made much the same point a few months later: **"Unless Bolshevism is nipped in the bud immediately, it is bound to spread in one form or another over Europe and the whole world as it is organized and worked by Jews who have no nationality, and whose one object is to destroy for their own ends the existing order of things."**

**"The Bolshevik Revolution,"** declared a leading American Jewish community paper in 1920, **"was largely the product of Jewish thinking, Jewish discontent, Jewish effort to reconstruct."**

As an expression of its radically anti-nationalist character, the fledgling Soviet government issued a decree a few months after taking power that made anti-Semitism a crime in Russia. The new Communist regime thus became the first in the world to severely punish all expressions of anti-Jewish sentiment. Soviet officials apparently regarded such measures as indispensable. Based on careful observation during a lengthy stay in Russia, American-Jewish



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scholar Frank Golder reported in 1925 that **"because so many of the Soviet leaders are Jews anti-Semitism is gaining [in Russia], particularly in the army [and] among the old and new intelligentsia who are being crowded for positions by the sons of Israel."**

## Historians' Views

Summing up the situation at that time, Israeli historian Louis Rapoport writes.

**"Immediately after the [Bolshevik] Revolution, many Jews were euphoric over their high representation in the new government. Lenin's first Politburo was dominated by men of Jewish origins."**

Under Lenin, Jews became involved in all aspects of the Revolution, including its dirtiest work. Despite the Communists' vows to eradicate anti-Semitism, it spread rapidly after the Revolution -- partly because of the prominence of so many Jews in the Soviet administration, as well as in the traumatic, inhuman Sovietization drives that followed. Historian Salo Baron has noted that an immensely disproportionate number of Jews joined the new Bolshevik secret police, the Cheka And many of those who fell afoul of the Cheka would be shot by Jewish investigators.

The collective leadership that emerged in Lenin's dying days was headed by the Jew Zinoviev, a loquacious, mean-spirited, curly-haired Adonis whose vanity knew no bounds.

**"Anyone who had the misfortune to fall into the hands of the Cheka,"** wrote Jewish historian Leonard Schapiro, **"stood a very good chance of finding himself confronted with, and possibly shot by, a Jewish investigator."** In Ukraine, **"Jews made up nearly 80**



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**percent of the rank-and-file Cheka agents,"** reports W. Bruce Lincoln, an American professor of Russian history.<sup>21</sup> (Beginning as the Cheka, or Vecheke) the Soviet secret police was later known as the GPU, OGPU, NKVD, MVD and KGB.)

In light of all this, it should not be surprising that Yakov M. Yurovsky, the leader of the Bolshevik squad that carried out the murder of the Tsar and his family, was Jewish, as was Sverdlov, the Soviet chief who co-signed Lenin's execution order.

Igor Shafarevich, a Russian mathematician of world stature, has sharply criticized the Jewish role in bringing down the Romanov monarchy and establishing Communist rule in his country. Shafarevich was a leading dissident during the final decades of Soviet rule. A prominent human rights activist, he was a founding member of the Committee on the Defense of Human Rights in the USSR.

In *Russophobia*, a book written ten years before the collapse of Communist rule, he noted that Jews were "amazingly" numerous among the personnel of the Bolshevik secret police. The characteristic Jewishness of the Bolshevik executioners, Shafarevich went on, is most conspicuous in the execution of Nicholas II.

**"This ritual action symbolized the end of centuries of Russian history, so that it can be compared only to the execution of Charles I in England or Louis XVI in France. It would seem that representatives of an insignificant ethnic minority should keep as far as possible from this painful action, which would reverberate in all history. Yet what names do we meet? The execution was personally overseen by Yakov Yurovsky who shot the Tsar; the president of the local Soviet was Beloborodov (Vaisbart); the**



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person responsible for the general administration in Ekaterinburg was Shaya Goloshchekin. To round out the picture, on the wall of the room where the execution took place was a distich from a poem by Heine (written in German) about King Balthazar, who offended Jehovah and was killed for the offense."

In his 1920 book, British veteran journalist Robert Wilton offered a similarly harsh assessment.

**"The whole record of Bolshevism in Russia is indelibly impressed with the stamp of alien invasion. The murder of the Tsar, deliberately planned by the Jew Sverdlov (who came to Russia as a paid agent of Germany) and carried out by the Jews Goloshchekin, Syromolotov, Safarov, Voikov and Yurovsky, is the act not of the Russian people, but of this hostile invader."**

In the struggle for power that followed Lenin's death in 1924, Stalin emerged victorious over his rivals, eventually succeeding in putting to death nearly every one of the most prominent early Bolsheviks leaders - including Trotsky, Zinoviev, Radek, and Kamenev. With the passage of time, and particularly after 1928, the Jewish role in the top leadership of the Soviet state and its Communist party diminished markedly.

## Put To Death Without Trial

For a few months after taking power, Bolshevik leaders considered bringing "Nicholas Romanov" before a "Revolutionary Tribunal" that would publicize his "crimes against the people" before sentencing him to death. Historical precedent existed for this. Two European monarchs had lost their lives as a consequence of revolutionary



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upheaval: England's Charles I was beheaded in 1649, and France's Louis XVI was guillotined in 1793.

In these cases, the king was put to death after a lengthy public trial, during which he was allowed to present arguments in his defense. Nicholas II, though, was neither charged nor tried. He was secretly put to death - along with his family and staff -- in the dead of night, in an act that resembled more a gangster-style massacre than a formal execution.

Why did Lenin and Sverdlov abandon plans for a show trial of the former Tsar? In Wilton's view, Nicholas and his family were murdered because the Bolshevik rulers knew quite well that they lacked genuine popular support, and rightly feared that the Russian people would never approve killing the Tsar, regardless of pretexts and legalistic formalities.

For his part, Trotsky defended the massacre as a useful and even necessary measure. He wrote.

**“The decision [to kill the imperial family] was not only expedient but necessary. The severity of this punishment showed everyone that we would continue to fight on mercilessly, stopping at nothing. The execution of the Tsar's family was needed not only in order to frighten, horrify, and instill a sense of hopelessness in the enemy but also to shake up our own ranks, to show that there was no turning back, that ahead lay either total victory or total doom. This Lenin sensed well.”**

## Historical Context

In the years leading up to the 1917 revolution, Jews were disproportionately represented in all of Russia's subversive leftist



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parties. Jewish hatred of the Tsarist regime had a basis in objective conditions. Of the leading European powers of the day, imperial Russia was the most institutionally conservative and anti-Jewish. For example, Jews were normally not permitted to reside outside a large area in the west of the Empire known as the "Pale of Settlement."

However understandable, and perhaps even defensible, Jewish hostility toward the imperial regime may have been, the remarkable Jewish role in the vastly more despotic Soviet regime is less easy to justify. In a recently published book about the Jews in Russia during the 20th century, Russian-born Jewish writer Sonya Margolina goes so far as to call the Jewish role in supporting the Bolshevik regime the "historic sin of the Jews." She points, for example, to the prominent role of Jews as commandants of Soviet Gulag concentration and labor camps, and the role of Jewish Communists in the systematic destruction of Russian churches. Moreover, she goes on, "The Jews of the entire world supported Soviet power, and remained silent in the face of any criticism from the opposition." In light of this record, Margolina offers a grim prediction.

**The exaggeratedly enthusiastic participation of the Jewish Bolsheviks in the subjugation and destruction of Russia is a sin that will be avenged Soviet power will be equated with Jewish power, and the furious hatred against the Bolsheviks will become hatred against Jews.**

If the past is any indication, it is unlikely that many Russians will seek the revenge that Margolina prophesies. Anyway, to blame "the Jews" for the horrors of Communism seems no more justifiable than



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to blame "white people" for Negro slavery, or "the Germans" for the Second World War or "the Holocaust."

## Words of Grim Portent

Nicholas and his family are only the best known of countless victims of a regime that openly proclaimed its ruthless purpose. A few weeks after the Ekaterinburg massacre, the newspaper of the fledgling Red Army declared.

**"Without mercy, without sparing, we will kill our enemies by the scores of hundreds, let them be thousands, let them drown themselves in their own blood. For the blood of Lenin and Uritskii let there be floods of blood of the bourgeoisie -- more blood, as much as possible."**

Grigori Zinoviev, speaking at a meeting of Communists in September 1918, effectively pronounced a death sentence on ten million human beings: "We must carry along with us 90 million out of the 100 million of Soviet Russia's inhabitants. As for the rest, we have nothing to say to them. They must be annihilated."

## 'The Twenty Million'

As it turned out, the Soviet toll in human lives and suffering proved to be much higher than Zinoviev's murderous rhetoric suggested. Rarely, if ever, has a regime taken the lives of so many of its own people.

Citing newly-available Soviet KGB documents, historian Dmitri Volkogonov, head of a special Russian parliamentary commission, recently concluded that **"from 1929 to 1952 21.5 million [Soviet]**



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**people were repressed. Of these a third were shot, the rest sentenced to imprisonment, where many also died."**

Olga Shatunovskaya, a member of the Soviet Commission of Party Control, and head of a special commission during the 1960s appointed by premier Khrushchev, has similarly concluded: **"From January 1, 1935 to June 22, 1941, 19,840,000 enemies of the people were arrested. Of these, seven million were shot in prison, and a majority of the others died in camp."** These figures were also found in the papers of Politburo member Anastas Mikoyan.

Robert Conquest, the distinguished specialist of Soviet history, recently summed up the grim record of Soviet "repression" of its own people.

**"It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the post-1934 death toll was well over ten million. To this should be added the victims of the 1930-1933 famine, the kulak deportations, and other anti-peasant campaigns, amounting to another ten million plus. The total is thus in the range of what the Russians now refer to as 'The Twenty Million'."**

A few other scholars have given significantly higher estimates.

## The Tsarist Era in Retrospect

With the dramatic collapse of Soviet rule, many Russians are taking a new and more respectful look at their country's pre-Communist history, including the era of the last Romanov emperor. While the Soviets -- along with many in the West -- have stereotypically portrayed this era as little more than an age of arbitrary despotism, cruel suppression and mass poverty, the reality is rather different. While it is true that the power of the Tsar was absolute, that only a



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small minority had any significant political voice, and that the mass of the empire's citizens were peasants, **it is worth noting that Russians during the reign of Nicholas II had freedom of press, religion, assembly and association, protection of private property, and free labor unions.** Sworn enemies of the regime, such as Lenin, were treated with remarkable leniency.

During the decades prior to the outbreak of the First World War, the Russian economy was booming. In fact, between 1890 and 1913, it was the fastest growing in the world. New rail lines were opened at an annual rate double that of the Soviet years. Between 1900 and 1913, iron production increased by 58 percent, while coal production more than doubled. Exported Russian grain fed all of Europe. Finally, the last decades of Tsarist Russia witnessed a magnificent flowering of cultural life.

Everything changed with the First World War, a catastrophe not only for Russia, but for the entire West.

## **Monarchist Sentiment**

In spite of (or perhaps because of) the relentless official campaign during the entire Soviet era to stamp out every uncritical memory of the Romanovs and imperial Russia, a virtual cult of popular veneration for Nicholas II has been sweeping Russia in recent years.

People have been eagerly paying the equivalent of several hours' wages to purchase portraits of Nicholas from street vendors in Moscow, St. Petersburg and other Russian cities. His portrait now hangs in countless Russian homes and apartments. In late 1990, all 200,000 copies of a first printing of a 30-page pamphlet on the Romanovs quickly sold out. Said one street vendor: "**I personally**



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**sold four thousand copies in no time at all. It's like a nuclear explosion. People really want to know about their Tsar and his family."** Grass roots pro-Tsarist and monarchist organizations have sprung up in many cities.

A public opinion poll conducted in 1990 found that three out of four Soviet citizens surveyed regard the killing of the Tsar and his family as a despicable crime. Many Russian Orthodox believers regard Nicholas as a martyr. The independent "Orthodox Church Abroad" canonized the imperial family in 1981, and the Moscow-based Russian Orthodox Church has been under popular pressure to take the same step, in spite of its long-standing reluctance to touch this official taboo. The Russian Orthodox Archbishop of Ekaterinburg announced plans in 1990 to build a grand church at the site of the killings. **"The people loved Emperor Nicholas,"** he said. **"His memory lives with the people, not as a saint but as someone executed without court verdict, unjustly, as a sufferer for his faith and for orthodoxy."**

On the 75th anniversary of the massacre (in July 1993), Russians recalled the life, death and legacy of their last Emperor. In Ekaterinburg, where a large white cross festooned with flowers now marks the spot where the family was killed, mourners wept as hymns were sung and prayers were said for the victims.

Reflecting both popular sentiment and new social-political realities, the white, blue and red horizontal tricolor flag of Tsarist Russia was officially adopted in 1991, replacing the red Soviet banner. And in 1993, the imperial two-headed eagle was restored as the nation's official emblem, replacing the Soviet hammer and sickle. Cities that had been re-named to honor Communist figures -- such as



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Leningrad, Kuibyshev, Frunze, Kalinin, and Gorky -- have re-acquired their Tsarist-era names. Ekaterinburg, which had been named Sverdlovsk by the Soviets in 1924 in honor of the Soviet-Jewish chief, in September 1991 restored its pre-Communist name, which honors Empress Catherine I.

## Symbolic Meaning

In view of the millions that would be put to death by the Soviet rulers in the years to follow, the murder of the Romanov family might not seem of extraordinary importance. And yet, the event has deep symbolic meaning. In the apt words of Harvard University historian Richard Pipes:

**“The manner in which the massacre was prepared and carried out, at first denied and then justified, has something uniquely odious about it, something that radically distinguishes it from previous acts of regicide and brands it as a prelude to twentieth-century mass murder.”**

Another historian, Ivor Benson, characterized the killing of the Romanov family as symbolic of the tragic fate of Russia and, indeed, of the entire West, in this century of unprecedented agony and conflict.

The murder of the Tsar and his family is all the more deplorable because, whatever his failings as a monarch, Nicholas II was, by all accounts, a personally decent, generous, humane and honorable man.



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## The Massacre's Place in History

The mass slaughter and chaos of the First World War, and the revolutionary upheavals that swept Europe in 1917-1918, brought an end not only to the ancient Romanov dynasty in Russia, but to an entire continental social order. Swept away as well was the Hohenzollern dynasty in Germany, with its stable constitutional monarchy, and the ancient Habsburg dynasty of Austria-Hungary with its multinational central European empire. Europe's leading states shared not only the same Christian and Western cultural foundations, but most of the continent's reigning monarchs were related by blood. England's King George was, through his mother, a first cousin of Tsar Nicholas, and, through his father, a first cousin of Empress Alexandra. Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm was a first cousin of the German-born Alexandra, and a distant cousin of Nicholas.

More than was the case with the monarchies of Western Europe, Russia's Tsar personally symbolized his land and nation. Thus, the murder of the last emperor of a dynasty that had ruled Russia for three centuries not only symbolically presaged the Communist mass slaughter that would claim so many Russian lives in the decades that followed, but was symbolic of the Communist effort to kill the soul and spirit of Russia itself.

