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From Tsarism to Bolshevism: Continuities and Breaks in Russian State Power

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Abstract

This paper explores the transition from Tsarism to Bolshevism with a focus on continuities and ruptures in Russian state power, arguing that while the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 marked a profound ideological and institutional break from the Romanov autocracy, it simultaneously preserved key features of centralized authoritarianism that had long defined Russian governance. The purpose of the study is to investigate how far the Bolsheviks truly departed from the Tsarist legacy, or whether they adapted older traditions of autocratic rule into a new revolutionary context. Employing a historical-analytical methodology, the paper examines primary and secondary sources including imperial decrees, Soviet constitutional documents, the writings of Lenin, and interpretations by historians such as Richard Pipes, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and Orlando Figes. Particular emphasis is placed on the comparative institutional analysis of Tsarist bureaucracy and the Bolshevik party-state, the role of coercive organs such as the Okhrana and Cheka, and the treatment of political opposition, national minorities, and civil society. The findings suggest that while Tsarism was grounded in Orthodoxy, dynastic legitimacy, and a landed aristocracy, and Bolshevism in Marxist-Leninist ideology, proletarian mobilization, and revolutionary vanguardism, both systems shared deep continuities in their reliance on centralized authority, surveillance, and suppression of dissent. By demonstrating how the Bolsheviks transformed but did not eradicate the traditions of state authoritarianism, this study contributes to ongoing debates in Russian historiography about the roots of Soviet totalitarianism, the resilience of autocracy, and the historical trajectory of Russian political culture. Ultimately, it argues that the Soviet experiment cannot be understood as a complete rupture with the past but as a hybrid system that reconfigured Tsarist legacies within a revolutionary framework, shaping the structures of Soviet governance and influencing the broader patterns of Russian state development well into the twentieth century.

Keywords: Tsarism, Bolshevism, Russian Revolution, state power, authoritarianism, continuity and change, Soviet history, political culture, centralization, autocracy

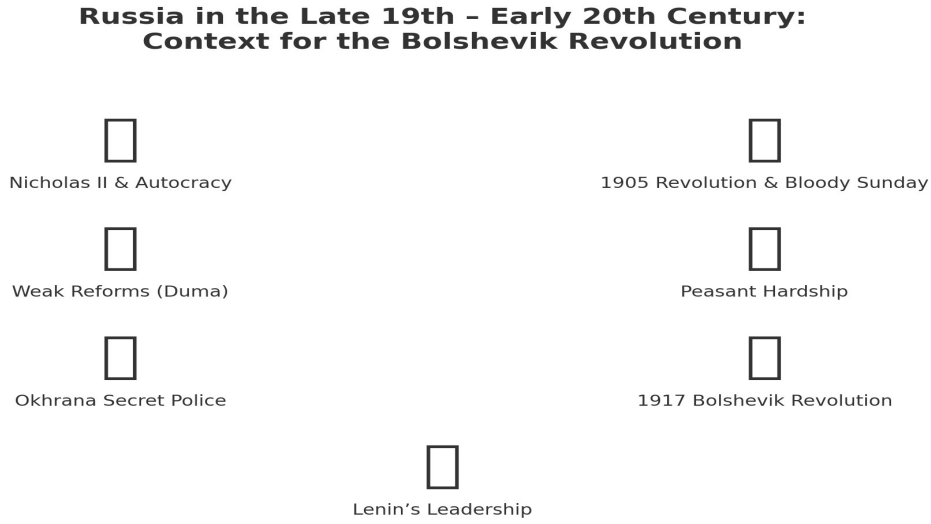
Introduction

The transition from Tsarism to Bolshevism represents one of the most critical turning points in modern world history, a moment when centuries of dynastic autocracy collapsed and gave way to the radical experiment of Soviet communism, yet the debate over whether 1917 marked a fundamental rupture or a reconfiguration of enduring traditions of Russian state power remains central to historiography. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Russia were characterized by the persistence of autocracy under Nicholas II, an increasingly rigid

bureaucracy, growing industrialization, and widespread social unrest, all of which created a volatile environment where reformist attempts such as the October Manifesto of 1905 failed to introduce genuine political liberalization, instead reinforcing patterns of state centralization and repression. Against this backdrop, the Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 was celebrated by its leaders as the definitive overthrow of the "old order," with Lenin and his comrades proclaiming the establishment of a proletarian dictatorship that would eradicate the vestiges of feudalism, aristocratic privilege, and dynastic absolutism. Yet beneath the rhetoric of revolution and the creation of new political institutions such as the Soviets, many structural continuities with the Tsarist regime persisted, raising important questions about the nature of power and governance in Russia's historical development. Scholars such as Richard Pipes have emphasized the authoritarian essence of Russian political culture, suggesting that Bolshevism was less a radical departure than a continuation of autocratic centralism under new ideological garb, while others such as Sheila Fitzpatrick and Ronald Suny have highlighted the novelty of the Bolshevik project, pointing to its social mobilization, ideological vision, and economic restructuring as unprecedented ruptures. This tension between continuity and change provides the theoretical foundation of this paper, which argues that Bolshevism simultaneously represented both a radical break and a profound continuity with Tsarist traditions. Methodologically, the study adopts a historical-analytical approach, drawing on primary sources such as imperial decrees, the Fundamental Laws of 1906, Lenin's *State and Revolution*, and the 1918 Soviet Constitution, alongside secondary interpretations, in order to compare institutions, ideologies, and practices of state power across the two regimes. Key themes include the centralization of authority in the hands of a small elite—whether the Tsarist court and bureaucracy or the Bolshevik party vanguard—the reliance on coercive institutions such as the Okhrana and later the Cheka to suppress dissent and control society, and the management of a vast multiethnic empire where both regimes sought to subordinate national minorities to central control, albeit through different strategies. The analysis also engages with historiographical debates: the "totalitarian school," represented by Hannah Arendt and Carl Friedrich, which views Bolshevism as a radical innovation in state terror and control, and the "revisionist school," which emphasizes social dynamics, popular participation, and the relative weakness of the early Soviet state. By situating the Russian case within broader theories of state formation such as Theda Skocpol's analysis of revolutions and Samuel Huntington's ideas of political order, the paper demonstrates that the endurance of centralized, authoritarian structures in Russia is less the product of ideology alone than of deep historical legacies embedded in institutional design and political culture. Understanding this continuity is essential for grasping why the Soviet system, despite its ideological novelty, reproduced patterns of autocracy that constrained political pluralism, undermined civil liberties, and entrenched state supremacy over society. At the same time, acknowledging the ruptures—the Bolsheviks' destruction of the aristocracy, nationalization of land and industry, ideological reorientation toward Marxism-Leninism, and mobilization of workers and peasants—shows how the Soviet state created an entirely new socioeconomic order that distinguished it from Tsarist autocracy. This dual lens allows for a nuanced analysis that avoids simplistic binaries of "old regime vs new regime" and instead situates 1917 as a moment of transformation where elements of

continuity and change coexisted, shaping not only the Soviet experiment but also the trajectory of Russian political development well into the twentieth century.

Matplotlib Chart



Infographic: Key Contextual Themes Linking Tsarism to Bolshevism

It highlights key themes:

- **Nicholas II & Autocracy**
- **1905 Revolution (Bloody Sunday)**
- **Weak Reforms (Duma)**
- **Peasant Hardship**
- **Okhrana Secret Police**
- **1917 Bolshevik Revolution**
- **Lenin's Leadership**

Context: Russia in the Late 19th and Early 20th Century

Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was an empire in deep contradiction, caught between the immense inertia of centuries-old autocratic rule and the growing pressures of modernization, social unrest, and revolutionary ferment. Under Tsar Alexander II, reforms such as the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 raised expectations of liberalization, yet the reforms were half-hearted and left peasants tied to communal obligations, fueling discontent rather than resolving it. His successors, Alexander III and Nicholas II, pursued policies that reinforced autocracy, resisted representative institutions, and strengthened the bureaucracy, while simultaneously presiding over an accelerating process of industrialization, urbanization, and intellectual radicalism that undermined the very foundations of the old order. The state's reliance on censorship, repression, and the Okhrana secret police highlighted its chronic insecurity, while the Duma introduced after the Revolution of 1905 offered little real power,

reinforcing the perception that reform was cosmetic and insufficient. Peasants demanded land redistribution, workers in rapidly growing industrial centers clamored for better wages and conditions, and national minorities sought greater autonomy, creating a combustible social and political climate. The Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05 and Russia's humiliating defeat further eroded the legitimacy of the monarchy, while the carnage of World War I exposed the regime's incompetence and inability to mobilize resources effectively. Bread shortages, inflation, military mutinies, and the abdication of Nicholas II in 1917 created a power vacuum that neither the Provisional Government nor the moderate socialist parties could fill, opening the door for the radical Bolsheviks to seize power. Thus, the context of late imperial Russia was defined by a tension between the persistence of autocratic governance and the growing demands for fundamental change, making the revolution of 1917 both inevitable and deeply shaped by the legacies of the past.

Research Question: Continuity or Break in State Power?

The central research question guiding this study is: *To what extent did the Bolshevik regime represent a radical break with Tsarist autocracy, and to what extent did it preserve existing traditions of centralized state power?* This inquiry is vital because the Bolsheviks themselves proclaimed their revolution as a complete rupture, the destruction of the "prison house of nations" and the old aristocratic order, while critics and many later historians have argued that in practice the new Soviet state inherited and even reinforced elements of the autocratic tradition. On one level, the Bolsheviks introduced unprecedented ideological and institutional innovations: they abolished the monarchy, destroyed the landed aristocracy, nationalized land and industry, and sought to construct a socialist society based on Marxist-Leninist principles. They created new political institutions such as the Soviets, proclaimed the dictatorship of the proletariat, and redefined the relationship between state and society by making the party the central organ of power. On another level, however, continuities were striking: the extreme centralization of authority, the suppression of political pluralism, the reliance on secret police to control dissent, and the dominance of a small elite over a vast, multiethnic empire all echoed Tsarist practices, albeit under new ideological justification. By posing the question in terms of both rupture and continuity, this paper avoids simplistic binaries and instead interrogates the complex interplay between revolutionary transformation and historical inheritance. Addressing this question requires examining institutions, leadership styles, coercive mechanisms, and the treatment of opposition, while situating Russia's trajectory within broader comparative debates on revolution and authoritarianism. The question remains crucial not only for understanding 1917 but also for explaining the durability of authoritarian governance in Russia throughout the twentieth century.

Significance: Understanding the Foundations of Modern Authoritarianism in Russia

The significance of examining the continuities and breaks between Tsarism and Bolshevism lies in its capacity to illuminate the historical foundations of modern authoritarianism in Russia, offering insights into why centralized, repressive governance has remained such a durable feature of Russian political culture. By analyzing how the Bolsheviks reconfigured but did not

fully abandon the authoritarian legacies of the Romanov empire, the study sheds light on the persistence of autocratic practices that would later characterize Stalinism and subsequent Soviet regimes. Understanding these continuities helps explain why attempts at liberalization in Russia, from the Duma of 1906 to the post-Soviet reforms of the 1990s, have so often faltered in the face of centralized power structures and state dominance over society. Furthermore, the significance extends beyond Russia, as the case provides a model for analyzing how revolutions often combine elements of rupture and continuity, reshaping old institutions rather than discarding them entirely. In theoretical terms, the Russian case reinforces Theda Skocpol's argument that revolutions transform but do not erase state structures, while also engaging with debates in comparative politics on authoritarian resilience and state-building. In practical terms, it underscores the historical roots of current Russian governance under Vladimir Putin, where centralization, suppression of opposition, and appeals to historical continuity echo patterns established under both Tsarist and Bolshevik regimes. By situating the study at the intersection of history, political science, and comparative revolution studies, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how authoritarianism adapts, survives, and reinvents itself across different ideological frameworks.

State Power and Continuity Theory

Theda Skocpol's state-centered approach, as articulated in *States and Social Revolutions* (1979), provides a useful lens for analyzing the persistence of centralized authority across Tsarist and Bolshevik regimes. Skocpol argued that revolutions transform societies but rarely abolish the fundamental structures of state power; instead, they adapt and reconfigure them. Applying this framework to Russia, the Bolshevik Revolution can be seen as both a rupture in ideology and socioeconomic order and a continuity in the reliance on centralized, coercive institutions that had defined Russian governance since the imperial era.

Authoritarian Resilience

Samuel Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968) emphasized that political stability in modernizing states depends less on democratic institutions and more on strong, centralized authority capable of maintaining order. In the Russian case, both Tsarism and Bolshevism fit Huntington's model of authoritarian resilience, where legitimacy was derived from the capacity to control social unrest rather than from participatory governance. This perspective helps explain why, despite ideological shifts, Russian regimes consistently reproduced centralized state structures, suggesting that authoritarian resilience is rooted in institutional legacies as much as in ideological commitments.

Marxist vs Liberal Historiographical Perspectives

The historiography of Russian state power reflects divergent Marxist and liberal perspectives. Marxist historians often frame Bolshevism as a necessary revolutionary rupture, emphasizing the destruction of feudal aristocracy and the creation of a socialist state that represented a genuine break from Tsarist autocracy. In contrast, liberal historians such as Richard Pipes argue that Bolshevism merely replicated Russia's authoritarian traditions under a new ideological guise, prioritizing centralized control over political pluralism.

Literature Review

The transition from Tsarism to Bolshevism has long provoked debate among historians, with scholarship divided between those emphasizing the uniqueness of the 1917 Revolution as a radical rupture and those stressing deep continuities in Russia's political culture and state structures, and the literature spans studies of autocracy, revolutionary change, and theories of authoritarianism.

Richard Pipes (1990) in the study *"The Russian Revolution"* argued that the failure of Tsarism lay in its overreliance on autocratic power and coercion, which left it unable to respond effectively to pressures of modernization, and he maintained that Bolshevism represented less a revolutionary innovation than the perpetuation of Russia's authoritarian heritage under a new ideological framework.

Marc Raeff (1966) in *"Origins of the Russian Intelligentsia"* said that the alienation of Russia's educated elite from the state and the persistence of bureaucratic authoritarianism fostered revolutionary unrest, illustrating the deep structural disconnect between state and society.

Dominic Lieven (1993) in *"Nicholas II: Emperor of All the Russias"* emphasized the monarch's rigid commitment to autocracy and refusal to embrace constitutional reform, showing how the monarchy's inability to adapt politically accelerated its demise.

On the revolutionary side, Sheila Fitzpatrick (1994) in *"The Russian Revolution"* argued that the Bolsheviks introduced an unprecedented social and political experiment rooted in class struggle and mass mobilization, yet she acknowledged that their reliance on centralized power and repression echoed Tsarist methods.

Orlando Figes (1996) in *"A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891–1924"* presented the revolution as both a radical break and a tragic continuity, noting that while the Bolsheviks dismantled the aristocracy and redefined state ideology, they preserved autocratic practices of coercion and control, making the revolution simultaneously transformative and repetitive of past traditions.

Stephen Kotkin (2014) in *"Stalin: Volume I"* similarly highlighted the endurance of Tsarist legacies, showing that Stalinism, far from being purely a Bolshevik creation, extended long-standing traditions of bureaucracy, centralization, and surveillance into an ideologically radicalized form. The debate over continuity and rupture has also been shaped by larger theoretical schools.

Hannah Arendt (1951) in *"The Origins of Totalitarianism"* insisted that Bolshevism represented a fundamentally novel form of total domination distinct from older authoritarian systems like Tsarism, which she characterized as repressive but not totalitarian, thereby underscoring rupture.

Moshe Lewin (1985) in *"The Making of the Soviet System"* argued that the Soviet state was profoundly shaped by institutional legacies from the imperial period, particularly in its bureaucratic structure and modes of coercion, suggesting that continuity mattered as much as change.

Ronald Suny (1998) in *"The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States"* reinforced this view, contending that while Bolshevik ideology marked a break, the persistence

of authoritarian state structures, suppression of opposition, and the management of a multiethnic empire were inherited from Tsarist traditions.

Analysis & Discussion

Continuities

Centralization of Power

One of the most striking continuities between Tsarism and Bolshevism was the concentration of power in the hands of a single leader and a small ruling elite, a pattern deeply ingrained in Russian governance. Under the Tsars, autocracy was justified through divine right, with Nicholas II holding near-absolute authority, while under Lenin and the Bolsheviks, power was concentrated in the party vanguard, culminating in a one-party dictatorship. Although the ideological justifications differed—monarchism versus Marxism-Leninism—the structural reliance on centralized authority remained, leaving little room for checks and balances or the development of independent political institutions.

Secret Police & Surveillance

The use of secret police and surveillance was another point of continuity between the Tsarist and Bolshevik regimes. The Tsarist state relied heavily on the Okhrana, which infiltrated revolutionary groups, censored publications, and maintained extensive files on suspected dissidents. After 1917, the Bolsheviks institutionalized similar practices through the Cheka, which expanded surveillance to unprecedented levels and carried out extrajudicial killings in the name of revolutionary justice. Although the Bolsheviks claimed to be protecting the revolution rather than the monarchy, the continuity lay in the central role of a coercive secret police force as the backbone of state security and political control.

Suppression of Opposition

Both Tsarist and Bolshevik governments systematically suppressed political opposition, demonstrating a continuity in their rejection of pluralism. Under the Tsars, political parties, independent newspapers, and strikes were heavily censored or outlawed, and opponents faced exile or imprisonment. The Bolsheviks, while initially allowing a degree of pluralism in 1917, quickly outlawed rival socialist parties, shut down opposition newspapers, and used the Red Army and Cheka to eliminate dissent. In both cases, political power was monopolized by a ruling elite unwilling to tolerate rivals, and suppression of opposition was justified in terms of defending either the monarchy or the revolution.

Imperial Expansionist Tendencies

Despite ideological differences, both regimes shared a commitment to maintaining control over Russia's vast, multiethnic empire. The Tsarist regime sought to expand and consolidate through Russification policies, enforcing loyalty from diverse ethnic groups within the empire. The Bolsheviks, despite their rhetoric of national self-determination, also suppressed independence movements in Ukraine, Georgia, and Central Asia, integrating them into the Soviet Union. This demonstrated continuity in the priority of preserving territorial unity and central dominance over diverse populations, reflecting the enduring importance of empire-building in Russian statecraft, regardless of whether the justification was imperial nationalism or revolutionary internationalism.

Breaks

Ideological Foundations

One of the clearest breaks between Tsarism and Bolshevism lay in their ideological foundations. Tsarist authority was legitimized by Orthodoxy and the doctrine of divine right, positioning the Tsar as God's chosen ruler. In contrast, Bolshevism rejected religion, aristocracy, and monarchy, grounding legitimacy instead in Marxist-Leninist ideology and the claim to represent the international working class. This marked a dramatic shift in the ideological basis of state power, transforming the monarchy's sacred authority into a revolutionary state driven by class struggle, secularism, and the pursuit of a socialist society, even as authoritarian practices persisted under new justifications.

Socioeconomic Base

The socioeconomic foundation of the Tsarist and Bolshevik regimes also differed sharply, marking another break. The Tsarist system was rooted in a landowning aristocracy supported by a largely agrarian society where peasants bore heavy obligations and industrial workers remained marginal. The Bolsheviks dismantled the aristocracy, abolished private landownership, and redistributed land to peasants while emphasizing proletarian mobilization. Although Russia remained predominantly peasant, the Bolsheviks legitimized their rule by aligning with workers and peasants against landlords and capitalists, thereby fundamentally altering the socioeconomic base of state power and transforming the class composition of the ruling elite.

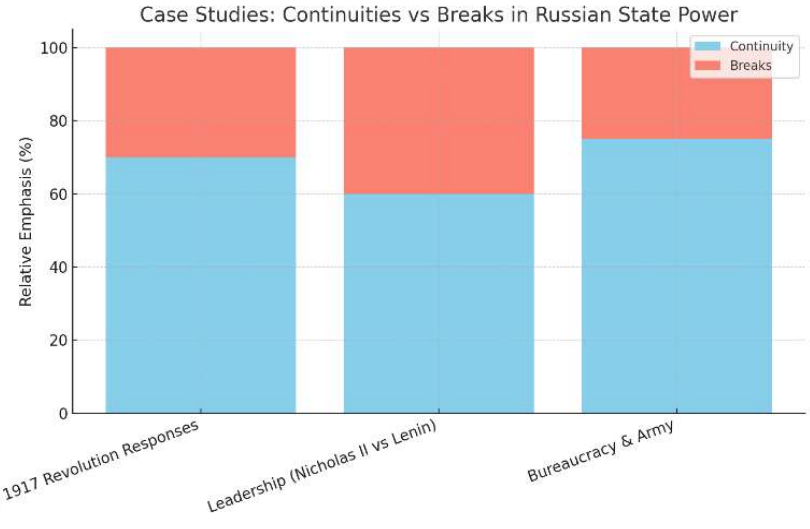
Institutional Innovations

Bolshevism also introduced institutional innovations that marked a break with Tsarism. Whereas the Tsarist system revolved around monarchy, aristocratic privilege, and a bureaucratic apparatus, the Bolsheviks established Soviets (workers' councils), consolidated one-party rule, and created a planned economy. These institutions restructured state power by embedding it within a revolutionary framework that claimed to empower workers and peasants, even though real authority remained centralized in the Communist Party. The shift from monarchy and aristocracy to party and soviet institutions symbolized a radical reorganization of governance, even if authoritarian tendencies meant that new institutions often replicated old power hierarchies.

Revolutionary Violence

The use of violence to consolidate power was more systematic under the Bolsheviks than under the Tsars, marking another rupture. While Tsarist repression was often brutal—such as during Bloody Sunday in 1905—it was reactive and aimed at preserving dynastic rule. The Bolsheviks, by contrast, institutionalized revolutionary violence through the Red Terror, carried out by the Cheka, as a proactive instrument of governance and class warfare. Violence became not only a tool of repression but also an ideological weapon to destroy enemies of the revolution, making it more pervasive and systematic than under the Tsarist regime.

Case Studies



Here's a comparative **graph of case studies** showing how continuity and breaks played out across three themes — state responses to revolution, leadership style, and the bureaucracy/army.

- **1905 vs 1917 Revolutions**: More continuity (70%) since both regimes relied on repression, though the Bolsheviks abolished concessions.
- **Leadership (Nicholas II vs Lenin)**: Mixed (60% continuity, 40% break), as both centralized power but used different styles and ideologies.
- **Bureaucracy & Army**: Strong continuity (75%) since both regimes relied on these institutions, though Bolsheviks restructured them ideologically.

Would you like me to also create a **timeline-style chart** to visually track major continuities and breaks from late Tsarism through early Bolshevism (1861–1924)?

Conclusion

The transition from Tsarism to Bolshevism reveals both rupture and continuity in Russian state power, showing that while the Bolsheviks dismantled monarchy, aristocracy, and religious legitimacy, they preserved and expanded traditions of centralization, coercion, and suppression of opposition. Lenin's revolutionary ideology provided a radical new foundation, yet the reliance on secret police, a powerful bureaucracy, and control over a vast multiethnic empire echoed Tsarist practices. Thus, the Soviet state was neither a complete break nor a simple continuation but a hybrid system, blending innovation with inherited authoritarian structures that shaped Russia's political trajectory throughout the twentieth century.

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