

BACKGROUND: THE COSSACK WINKED

The Russian Revolution

The Russian Revolution was one of the most important events in world history. It changed Russia forever in terms of its form of government, industrial power, and international relationships. The revolution was really a movement with several parts.

The March Revolution of 1917

The revolution from March 8th to the 12th began as a protest by women textile workers' against the shortages of food and the high cost of bread. The protest quickly swelled with more workers, students, and soldiers. The crowds grew so large by the third day that virtually all shops, factories, offices, and services were closed. An unpopular and losing war effort, incompetent and ruthless rule by the monarchy, and food shortages fed the rebellion.



The police were overrun by the protesters. Many policemen shed their uniforms and vanished. Police stations were burned and weapons taken. Soldiers ordered to put down the rebellion joined their fellow soldiers in the streets. In desperation, the government ordered the Cossacks to reestablish order. These professional cavalymen from southern Russia had been the monarchy's enforcers and personal army for hundreds of years. This time, however, the Cossacks did not attack the people. One workman reported that a Cossack had winked at him. This news spread rapidly among the marchers. The Cossacks were with the people this time.

An Unfinished Revolution

On March 15, 1917, just a week after the marches started, Tsar Nicholas II abdicated his throne and a group of labor leaders, Social Revolutionaries, and Communists established a provisional government under the leadership of Alexander Kerensky. This government was unsuccessful in solving Russia's problems. In November of 1917, a revolution by the Bolsheviks, Communists led by Lenin, took control of the government. The Bolsheviks became involved in a five-year-long civil war and a war against other nations to retain control of the nation. By 1922, the Bolsheviks defeated their enemies.

Under Stalin, they established a very autocratic Communist government that was as ruthless in its treatment of its citizens as the old Russian monarchy had been. Russia would go on to become a world power, control many of its neighbors, and eventually have another revolution in the 1990s that brought in some democratic reforms.



SCRIPT SUMMARY: THE COSSACK WINKED

The narrator explains that this script is set at the end of the four days in March of 1917 when the Russian people, especially in the capital, Petrograd, took to the streets to protest food shortages and the war. The correspondent interviews individuals from the marches. The factory worker and the woman marcher explain how severe shortages of bread, the skyrocketing cost of food, and low wages led to marches on March 8th by women textile workers and men in other factories.

The soldier describes the total chaos of war against Austria and Germany and how the inefficient Russian government left men unclothed, barely fed, and inadequately armed to fight much better equipped and organized armies from Europe. He describes how the soldiers joined the workers in their march because there were so many casualties and failures in leadership by the monarchy and its generals. The witnesses tell how the marches were joined by students and other soldiers who were called out to put down the rebellion. They explain why the police had been so hated. Police stations were raided for guns and often burned. The climax came when the tsar's private army of Cossacks, cavalrymen from Southern Russia, are called out and don't attack the people. One workman saw a Cossack wink at him as a sign of support. The word spread that the Cossacks would not attack the people. The monarchy was finished.

Assignment

Read the readers' theater script "The Cossack Winked." Prepare for the performances and share your interpretations of the scripts with the class.

Extension: Writing

Write a script based on one of the events listed below or another one related to the Russian Revolution. Use the background section, textbooks, and Internet sources for additional facts and ideas.

Life on the eastern front for a Russian soldier in World War I

A peasant's life before the revolution

A scene from any of the years of revolution 1917 to 1922

Life in Russia under the Tsar



SCRIPT: THE COSSACK WINKED *(cont.)*

Factory Worker: The bosses are cruel and impossible. We want trade unions to protect the rights of the workers, a minimum wage that could not be cut by the owners, a shorter workday, and fair treatment by supervisors. The workers should be the bosses and run the factories themselves.

Woman Marcher: We wanted the government to change. I carried a banner reading: "The Monarchy must go." The people must take charge of the nation, or we will all die of war and starvation. My fellow marchers carried signs reading: "We want bread!" and "Down with the War!"

Student: We students joined the marches held on the 9th and 10th. In other revolts, the authorities beat down workers or peasants and kept us isolated. This time we came together in this city and the nation joined us. The marches and strikes were much larger on the 9th and 10th. This time, we will not be stopped.

Correspondent: Why is the Tsar hated?

Student: The Romanov monarchy has always been brutal and incompetent, but this tsar is especially dense. He went to the front to be with his armies, although he knows nothing of war, and left his German-born wife to run the government. She is both stubborn and not too smart. She picked old, weak, and incompetent ministers who could not fix the problems caused by war and starvation. They didn't even pretend to have answers. The Russian people have always suffered. They have always endured. The monarchy expected the same.

SCRIPT: THE COSSACK WINKED (cont.)

- Woman Marcher:** She let this madman, Rasputin, make decisions about the people she chose and the conduct of the war. This bearded lunatic had convinced the royal couple that he could cure their son of a disease, hemophilia, which means he could bleed to death from even a small cut. Rasputin controlled their minds. Finally, a prince assassinated him, but the damage he did to public confidence could not be repaired.
- Correspondent:** How did the war affect this revolution?
- Soldier:** Tsar Nicholas and his advisors went to war without any serious planning. They never seemed to realize that Russia is a very backward nation of peasant farmers fighting against modern, industrialized nations. I was sent to the front when we went to war against Austria.
- Correspondent:** What were conditions like there?
- Soldier:** We were a bit lucky with the Austrians. It was still awful. There was very little food because supplies didn't get transported to the front. Farms that the soldiers marched through were stripped bare of every edible thing. We froze because there were not enough coats or warm clothes for the troops. Many soldiers had no boots, and some went into battle barefoot. We lost more troops to hunger, cold, disease, and infections than to the enemy—but the Austrians weren't much better equipped.
- Correspondent:** How did that change?
- Soldier:** When the Germans brought their troops to the eastern front, it changed things totally. They were well equipped and had modern vehicles and the military organization to move four divisions into a battle while we struggled with one. Our leaders were poorly organized, and our armies were commanded by officers who were political hacks and incompetent aristocrats. They knew nothing of modern warfare. The Germans were professionals, and they were well equipped and well armed.



SCRIPT: THE COSSACK WINKED *(cont.)*

Correspondent: Didn't you have weapons?

Soldier: Newly arrived soldiers had to share guns, and many soldiers only had a few bullets for each day. We didn't even have machine guns and the enemy did. The battles sometimes lasted for days. Many of our soldiers died uselessly. One third of our men, especially new recruits, had no guns. They waited until a soldier died to get his weapon. We lost millions of dead, wounded, and captured soldiers due to the incompetence of the generals. Tsar Nicholas went to the front to oversee the war effort. What does he know of war?

Correspondent: Why did the soldiers join the marches in the capital city?

Soldier: We were so overcome by the enemy and our own lack of food, clothes, and supplies that tens of thousands of soldiers simply deserted. Hundreds were shot or whipped for desertion, but it didn't make a difference. We had nothing to lose. My entire battalion simply deserted one night. The roads back to our home in Petrograd and other cities were clogged with wounded soldiers, deserters, starving men, and roving bands of thugs. Russia had become a nation of horrors. I joined the workers and other soldiers because the war must end.

Student: The war actually caused this revolution, I think, so maybe it was a good thing. They took the able-bodied peasant men from the farms and factories to fight the Germans. This left the farms without enough men to harvest the crops in the summer or plant new crops in the spring. The government thought they were going to win the war with their massive numbers. Human bodies are no match for artillery and machine guns.



SCRIPT: THE COSSACK WINKED *(cont.)*

- Factory Worker:** The farmers couldn't grow or harvest enough food. The soldiers starved. The workers in the cities couldn't afford to buy food at the inflated prices. The only people eating well or not really affected by the war were the nobility who could afford to live as they always had, on the backs of the poor.
- Correspondent:** Did this revolution have a leader?
- Woman Marcher:** No. On March 8th, workers marched along with some soldiers who had deserted from the war. The army was called out and told to fire into the crowds to end the march. Some soldiers did as their officers told them, but many just refused to fire.
- Soldier:** We called out to our brother soldiers, and many of them simply joined us with their weapons. We broke open some barracks and got other arms.
- Correspondent:** What about the police?
- Woman Marcher:** On the second day of the uprising, the police had been ordered to end the rebellion. The police are the most hated people in any Russian city. They beat and kill people without any restraints. They are not going to be punished, and their orders are to break up any marches or rallies immediately using whatever force they need; but this time they had a problem.
- Soldier:** Many of our men had seen death and terrible things at the front. We had some guns, too. Even though the police killed several of our marchers, the people simply overran and raided the police stations and jails. We released the poor wretches being imprisoned there and took all the weapons we could find. We burned the police stations, too.



SCRIPT: THE COSSACK WINKED (cont.)

- Correspondent:** What happened with the Cossacks, the tsar's private army?
- Factory Worker:** The Cossacks have been the protectors of the tsars forever. They are brutal warriors from southern Russia who have ridden their horses over the people in every uprising in Russian history.
- Student:** The Cossacks have always had special privileges and earned them by beating down rebellions under every tsar. They are cavalymen who use sabers, pistols, and heavy clubs called "knouts" to whip the peasants and the workers whenever there has been a revolt against the monarchy.
- Soldier:** On the second day of the marches, the Cossacks were given the order to attack, and they rode their huge horses into the crowd. But they didn't attack the people this time. They held their weapons at the ready, but only a few people were actually hit.
- Factory Worker:** Then a miracle happened. A mounted Cossack winked at one of our men as he rode his horse down the street. The word spread like wildfire across the crowds on the second day of the strike that the Cossacks would not fight.
- Student:** Then the Cossacks drove off some policemen who were attacking the crowd. The word spread that the Cossacks were favoring the workers. This was the true moment the monarchy was over. Without the Cossacks, the entire ruling class was defenseless against the people.
- Narrator:** The marches continued for four days. The groups of labor unions, social revolutionaries, and communist organizations, which had been planning for a revolution in the future, found themselves in charge of a caretaker government. Tsar Nicholas II abdicated on March 15, 1917. Later in November 1917, one group of Communists, the Bolsheviks, would gain control of the government and eventually control Russia by 1922.



READER'S RESPONSE: THE COSSACK WINKED

Directions

- These discussion activities and questions may be used in small groups or with the entire class. They may also be used by the actors as a part of their preparation for the reading.
- Refer to the script “The Cossack Winked” when responding to all questions. You may also find useful facts in the background section, textbooks, and Internet sources.
- Make notes on the lines provided below each question before your group discussion.

General Discussion

1. List the causes of the Russian Revolution in March of 1917.

2. What do you think was the most important reason the Russian people rebelled against their tsar? Explain your answer.

3. The Cossacks had always defended the tsars and attacked any opponents of the monarchy. Why did they support the people this time? Explain your answer.



READER'S RESPONSE: THE COSSACK WINKED *(cont.)*

4. Would the revolution have succeeded if the soldiers had not joined the marchers? Explain your answer.

Making It Personal

How was the Russian Revolution different from the American Revolution? Explain your answer.

Describe what your feelings would be if you had been a Russian soldier, worker, or peasant during the marches.
