

Chapter 17: The Russian Revolution and the Soviet Union

91. Backgrounds

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A. Introduction: Comparison of Russian and French Revolutions

1. Similarities: Both were movements of liberation, against feudalism and despotism or against capitalism and imperialism. Both claimed international implications and attracted followers from other nations. Both roused strong negative reactions. Both began in unity in overthrowing the old regime, but came into conflict over the founding of the new society--with a small, determined minority suppressing opposition and taking control. In both the most intensely revolutionary leaders were themselves executed or suppressed.

2. Differences: Russia was backward, France advanced; the French Revolution was mainly from the middle class, while the Russian soon radicalized to appeal to workers and peasants. The French revolution "happened," while the Russian was the work of pro revolutionaries. The French was followed by a century of uneasy compromise, while the Russian wiped out its opposition. The repercussions of the Russian Rev were more far-reaching: it reinforced European objections to capitalism; it aroused the interests of submerged peoples of other continents by denouncing imperialism. It represented social revolution (stimulating the rise of fascism), and adding to the worldwide rebellion against European supremacy.

B. Russia after 1881 : Reaction and Progress

1. The assassination of Alex II in 1881 brought the repressive rule of Alex III. Revolutionaries and terrorists were driven into exile; **pogroms** were carried out against the Jews; and systematic Russification was begun by Pobiedonostsev, procurator of the Holy Synod. He attacked Western rationalism and liberalism, emphasizing the special character of the Slavs and dreamed of turning Holy Russia into a kind of churchly community.

2. At the same time the Russian literati were producing great European works, with Tolstoy, Turgenev, Tchaikovsky, plus great achievements in math and science. European capital was beginning to change Russia, with \$4B going to railroads, factories, mines. In the generation before 1914, railway lines doubled, telegraph lines 5X, exports 4X, and imports 5X. Both the bourgeoisie and proletariat were growing; conditions were poor for workers, with no strikes or unions allowed. Factories were concentrated, with one-half the proletariats in factories of over 500 workers. Many factories were foreign or operated by the government. The business/professional class created a political party, the liberal Constitutional Democrats (KDs) who wanted a constitution and parliament and were less interested in the workers.

3. Yet Russia remained predominately agricultural, with 4/5 of the workers on the land, in **mirs**--paying high taxes plus redemption fees for their land. The farm population bore a disproportionate share of the cost of industrializing Russia. The peasants wanted land--especially the enterprising **kulaks**, who hired landless laborers and were intensely disliked. Yet the mirs flourished.

C. The Emergence of Revolutionary Parties

1. Peasants, long a source of revolution, were quiescent, 1870-1900. The intelligentsia was a second source; revolutionary intellectuals yearned for violence, but always were countered by czarist agents; at one Bolshevik party congress 5 of 22 delegates were government spies. A major debate was where to find the army of revolution--from peasants or the new working class. Were peasants potentially proletarian or merely petit bourgeois? Did Russia have to go through the capitalist stage before revolution? Most rev. intellectuals were **populists**, with a mystic faith in terror and the power of the inchoate rural masses; they saw the mir as a commune. They admired Marx, but saw the peasant as the key to revolution and the ability to skip the capitalist stage of development. This group crystallized in 1901 as the Social Revolutionary Party.

2. Two populists, Plekhanov and Axelrod, converted to Marxism and began what would become the Russian Social Democratic Party. Young converts included Lenin (1870-1924), Trotsky (1879-1940), and Stalin (1879-1953), and Lenin's future wife, Krupskaya. Lenin was of upper middle class origins; his brother's involvement in a plot against Alex III ended Lenin's legal career and made him a pro revolutionary. Arrested, he served a three year term in Siberian exile, after which he spent the years from 1900-1917 in Western Europe. Most of the new S.D. Party were western-oriented, drawing inspiration from the German SDs. They believed Russia must first be capitalistic and develop a proletariat; they despised the peasant and disapproved of sporadic terrorism and anarchism. The police clearly preferred them to the SRs!

D. The Split in the Social Democrats: Bolsheviks and Mensheviks

1. The Social Democratic Party Congress in 1903 (Brussels-London) was organized to unify Russian Marxists, but Lenin brought a split with his group as the Bolshevik, or "majority"--a separate party in 1912. The Bolsheviks wanted a small revolutionary elite, strongly centralized with power to a leader and a "party line" set by a central committee. Mensheviks ("minority") desired a larger, open party with democratic decision-making and bridging over all but the most

fundamental disagreements. Mensheviks favored cooperation with liberals, while Bolsheviks regarded such cooperation as purely tactical.

2. What did Lenin add? Lenin's only new contribution was the idea that imperialism grew from monopoly capitalism: the export of surplus capital inevitably led to competition and wars--which would bring the colonial struggle for independence and provide new revolutionary opportunities to the proletariat. He opposed all "revisionism" aimed at Marxist dogmas. His greatest work was as an activist, a supreme agitator, polemicist, and politician--as his idea of the promotion of revolution by a small vanguard of pro revolutionaries. He scorned trade unionism with its search for immediate rewards--"opportunism." He provided a blend of Marxism with Russian experience and necessity.

92. The Revolution of 1905

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A. Background and Revolutionary Events

1. Mounting discontent was shown by the new parties of 1900: KDs, SDs, SRs. All three had mainly leaders, propagandists; all were underground. Peasant insurrections and proletarian strikes occurred, but unconnected. The government refused to make concessions. Nicholas II, tutored in his youth by Pobiedonostsev, was narrow, autocratic, slavophilic; he saw all ideas questioning autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Great Russian nationalism as "un Russian." Plehve, his chief minister, looked to start a short war with Japan as a means to ease pressures, but it had the reverse impact.

2. Father Gapon had organized St. Petersburg workers as a counter to revolutionary agitation. He drew up a petition based on worker grievances for the "Little Father," to be carried by 200,000 marchers to the Winter Palace. In the absence of the Tsar, nervous officials called out the army, which violently dispersed the demonstration "**Bloody Sunday**." The result was a wave of political strikes, with leadership provided by Mensheviks. Soviets of workers were formed in Moscow and St. Petersburg; peasant violence broke out, joined by the SRs and KDs; demands were made for more democratic representation. The Tsar moved slowly, until the Mensheviks called a great October general strike III St. Pete- in the October Manifesto promising a constitution, civil liberties, and a Duma. The Mai divided the opposition, with radicals wanting more and seeing the Manifesto as a deception. Members of the Petrograd Soviet were arrested, peace with Japan was concluded, and reliable army units returned to restore order in the capital.

B. The Results of 1905: The Duma

Russia was now a constitutional monarchy, but the Duma had no power over foreign policy, the budget, or government personnel. The Right organized "Black Hundreds" to terrorize the peasants and urged a boycott of the Duma; the Left refused to recognize the Duma. The First Duma (1906) was elected by indirect and unequal voting and with both SDs and SRs boycotting. The KDs won a majority; they urged urns and were immediately dismissed. A second Duma was elected in 1907, with socialist members- it failed after the arrest of 50 members. A third (1907-12) and fourth (1912-16) barely kept the idea alive.

C. The Stolypin Reforms

Peter **Stolypin's** plan was to make reforms and thereby weaken the revolutionaries. Prime minister from 1906-1911, he broadened the powers of zemstvos, abolished redemption payments, allowed the sale of land (favoring kulaks), and encouraging the poor to move to the cities as a mobile labor force. The gentry remained in control; poverty and land-hunger continued to dominate rural Russia. Stolypin's ideas were opposed by the Tsar, reactionaries—and the SRs, SDs. In 1911 he was assassinated by an SR, perhaps a secret police agent. Russia was westernizing, with industry, railroads, the spread of private property, and development of a limited free press. Perhaps the desperation of the ultra-conservatives made them more willing to allow a world war to develop. Revolutionary parties declined, their leaders sent into exile.

93. The Revolution of 1917

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A. End of Tsardom: The Revolution of March, 1917:

1. The war required the willing cooperation of government and people because of its total nature; however, national minorities were disaffected, socialists were uncooperative (unlike their "brothers" in Germany and France), and ordinary working men and peasants marched off to war with little sense of conviction. The middle class cooperated but was angered by glaring government mismanagement and the military disasters of 1914 and 1915. Provincial zemstvos organized to mobilize agriculture and industry; business groups formed to get maximum production-- giving the middle class a sense of strength and making them more critical of the bureaucracy. Tsarina Alexandra was haughty and hated; she was contemptuous of Russians outside her circle, and she ran Nicholas. **Rasputin** gained influence over her because of his powers over young Nicholas, and his control of access to the royal family separated the Tsar from both the people and his own government. The Third Duma and Fourth Dumas were suspended for their critical attitude towards Rasputin and towards the conduct of the war.

2. By March of 1917 Russia was in crisis, especially in Petrograd. Food was scarce, and there were no price controls or rationing; food riots on March 8 escalated into insurrection which the army refused to suppress. A Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies was formed; it became the center of working-class upheaval. The Duma was disbanded, but it set up an executive committee; on March 14 it began a Provisional Government under Prince Lvov and supported by Alexander Kerensky, a moderate SR. Nicholas tried to return to Petrograd from the front, but the army stopped his train. He now abdicated; when the Grand Duke refused the throne, Russia became a Republic.

B. The Bolshevik Revolution: November, 1917:

1. The Provisional Government called for urns election for a Constituent Assembly. Pushed by the desperate Allies, it also attempted a war offensive in July, and was totally routed. The armies at the front deserted in mass; peasants overran rural districts; the Petrograd Soviet called for an end to the war and issued Order No. 1 calling for the command of the army by elected committees.

2. Lenin arrived in Petrograd in April and threw Bolshevik support to the Soviets. An attempted military coup failed; the Bolsheviks were blamed, and Lenin lied to Finlai Kerensky was now named head of the Provisional Gov. General Kornilov, newly appointed military commander, attempted his own coup but was defeated by socialists led by the Bolsheviks. Kerensky and the Provisional Government were blamed and lost prestige. Worsening food shortages in Petrograd, with the failure of transport plus farm turmoil, brought daily crises. Lenin concentrated on four points: Peace, the end to the war; land to the peasants who tilled it; socialist ownership of the means of production; and recognition of the Soviets as the government all under the superb tactical slogan "Peace, Land, Bread." The Bolsheviks had a majority in the Soviets; time was ripe for a their coup.

3. With the support of key army and navy units, the Bolsheviks on the night of November 6 captured telephone exchanges, railroad stations, and electric lighting plants; a warship turned its guns on the Winter Palace. The Congress of Soviets ousted the Duma and replaced it with a Council of People's Commissars, headed by Lenin and with Trotsky as commissar for foreign affairs, Stalin commissar for nationalities. Lenin announced two resolutions, calling for an end to the war, "without annexations, without indemnities" and abolishing landlord property. When the Constituent Assembly finally met, it was adjourned by armed Bolsheviks; the dictatorship of the proletariat had begun.

C. The New Regime: The Civil War, 1918-1922

1. Lenin now made the **Treaty of Brest-Litovsk** with Germany, assuming that the proletarian revolution would break out soon in Europe. Russia lost its Baltic states, plus Ukraine and Poland of which Germany already occupied. The peace gave Lenin Russia a Russia quickly immersed in civil war.

2. Resistance formed under a variety of banners- bourgeois liberals, zemstov men, KDs, Mensheviks and SRs. All obtained aid from the Allies in hopes of renewing the Eastern Front. The Bolsheviks created the **Cheka**, a political police which was the predecessor of the NKVD and KGB. Trotsky, as War Commissar, created the Red Army. Lenin played a tactical game, declaring "War Communism," a mix of expedience and principle which nationalized heavy industry and put smaller under worker committees. Food was requisitioned by city workers sent into the countryside.

3. The gentry organized armies on the Don River, under Deniken and Kornilov; the SRs organized in the Volga, backed by a Czech legion of 45,000. US and British forces took Murransk and Archangel, with the Japanese in Vladivostok. One hope was that a force could cross Siberia, join with the Czechs, break up Bolshevism, and re-open the Eastern Front. The Bolsheviks first fought the Germans in the Ukraine-- and then the French, who occupied Odessa after Germany's defeat. They reconquered the Ukraine, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan; defeated the "Whites" under Wrangel in the south, and defeated Kolchak in Siberia. In 1920 they fought the Poles, who had invaded the Ukraine and Byelorussia. And they won--because all the various anti-Bolshevik forces could not unite. Trotsky forged a disciplined Red Army under political commissars; the Bolsheviks could also appeal to peasant invaders and win support by distributing land.

4. By 1922, the Bolsheviks controlled all of the old Tsarist territory, except for the Baltic states, Bessarabia (Romania), and parts of Byelorussia (Poland). Peace had been won; the regime still stood. The cost had been heavy loss of life in the Red Terror, partly a response to civil and foreign war and partly a campaign to exterminate "bourgeois" opponents and even "leftist deviationists." The human toll was appalling, but the slate was cleared for Lenin's new society.

94. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

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A. Government: The Nationalities and Federalism

The USSR was created as a federal republic to solve the problems of 100 languages and 50 distinct nationalities. All received cultural autonomy, organized by size--districts, regions, republics within the federated soviet republics. The Constitution of 1936 created a Soviet of Nationalities, with representatives from each area. But Russia remained distinctly Slavic, with Great Russians representing half of people, three-fourths of territory; the Ukrainians (Little Russ) and

Byelorussians (White Russ) were other large parts. Real power remained in the party, and major minority grievances were left unresolved.

B. Government: Parallelism of State and Party

1. In the state, the basic unit was the council, or soviet; each town chose a soviet, which elected delegates to a provincial soviet, which elected to a Republic, which elected to a National. After 1936, all citizens had the vote, with a direct vote for delegates. The governmental structure was changed radically in 1990 by Gorbachev; it seems to have power in Russia. The key group was the Council of Ministers, headed by the Premier; it was a 95 man cabinet which supervised the economy and controlled the state bureaucracy.

2. The Party was headed by the Central Committee, which functions through a Secretariat (organizational matters) and a Politburo (policy); the Politburo was headed by the General Chairman. In theory, all officials are elected democratically; in reality, slates for all are prepared by the ruling elite and then rubber-stamped by the appropriate 'elective' body. Discipline was provided by the secret police. The Party has remained a relatively small, disciplined group (perhaps 5% of citizens are party members today.)

3. An early controversy was between the Old Bolsheviks, dating to before 1917, and the "careerists," new men seeking to join the elite. To maintain power against the latter, strict conformity to the "Party Line" was required, based on intensive study of Marx and Lenin and following of orders. The cell was the basic unit. The Party set policy; originality, boldness, or freedom of thought was strictly curtailed.

C. The New Economic Policy, 1921-1927:

War Communism antagonized the peasants; the result, combined with severe drought and breakdown of transportation, was a famine which perhaps killed 4-5 million people. Growing chaos and disillusionment forced Lenin to take "one step backward" in order to later take "two steps forward." Private trading for profit was encouraged; peasants could sell farm produce; middlemen could buy or sell farm or city products at market prices. Kulaks prospered, as did Russia; by 1928, Russia had amazingly returned to the conditions of 1914.

D. Stalin and Trotsky:

Lenin died in 1924 and quickly became the infallible source of doctrine. But who would assume leadership? Stalin had quietly gained control of the Secretariat while Trotsky and others debated the future. Trotsky attacked the NEP and developed the doctrine of "permanent revolution." He called for industrial development and collectivized of agriculture, based on a set plan. This "leftist deviationist" was soon expelled, exiled, and ultimately murdered (in Mexico).

95. Stalin: The Five-Year Plans and the Purges

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A. Economic Planning

1. In 1928 the USSR began its first Five Year Plan, with rapid industrialization and collectivization of agriculture through a centrally planned economy (Trotsky's ideas). Marx and Engels offered little advice on how to run a communist economy; Engels believed capitalistic competition was between enterprises; thus he felt the whole economy should be treated as a single factory under one unified, vigorous, far-seeing management. The planned economies of World War I offered another model. These factors, and the need to meet the chronic problems of the nation, resulted in the concept of the Five Year Plans.

2. The goals were to make the USSR self (an autarky), lay the basis for a true workers' society, and overcome Russian backwardness. The party set a policy framework, and Gosplan (planning agency) determined how much of everything should be produced. The local factory drew up estimates of needs which were passed on to Gosplan, which balanced all requests against each other and against the plan, and then made its final decisions. "The plan, in short, undertook to control, by conscious management, the flow of resources and manpower which under free capitalism was regulated by shifts in demand and supply, through changes in prices, wage levels, profits, interest rates, or rent." This complex, intricate system was subject to severe errors; it also required a vast bureaucracy to handle the paperwork.

3. The first goal was to build industry without foreign loans--requiring an intense agricultural revolution to provide capital. Great collective farms were created, with peasants pooling land, labor, and capital. The Kulaks were "liquidated" as a class, with great loss of life. The most capable farmers were lost, and their resistance brought the loss of much livestock; the resulting famine of 1932 took a minimum of 3 million lives. [Conquest calls it a genocide aimed at the Ukrainians.] Production fell, but export quotas remained high. Limited mechanization was begun. Collectives were given quotas and allowed to sell the excess. Output basically remained the same, but with state control--and 20 million farmers

were moved to the cities. The peasant was essentially returned to the mir, but the majority who survived did improve their lives.

B. Industry: European and American specialists were used and much machinery was imported. The Great Depression forced a move to self-sufficiency especially in heavy industry. From 1928 to 1938, iron and steel were increased 4X, coal over 3X; tractors and railroad engines were produced, mainly from new plants. The USSR by 1939 had the world's third greatest output. The area east of the Urals was also developed, requiring huge transport expansion. Industry was plagued by low standards, shoddy construction, low efficiency, low per capita production.

C. Social Costs and Social Effects: Moreover, heavy sacrifices were demanded of the people--including the liquidation of the kulaks, heavy use of "correctional labor," austerity in consumer goods; heavy reinvestment of capital required long hours and low wages. By 1935 the USSR had recovered to levels of 1927. Minimum standards were set, but there was heavy economic inequality. Stakhai "labor heroes," exceeded norms and received better pay; in the West, the technique was vilified as the speed-up. Factory managers had to show profit; poor m was equated with sabotage. The press was free to denounce industrial failings not to criticize the system. People did internalize the new values, as in Orwell's 1984. Statistics showing fulfilled quotas were vital; no skepticism or opposition was tolerated. Art, science, and sport became extensions of politics. Opponents in thought or deed disappeared.

D. The Purge Trials of the 1930s: The Soviet Constitution of 1936 guarantees the right to employment, leisure, and economic security, not to mention civil liberties; suffrage is complete, and racism and sexism are denigrated. But internal strains were evident in the 1930s. On the right, Bukharin favored a more gradual collectivization; on the left, Trotsky called for world revolution. The party was purged ruthlessly in 1933, with expulsion of one-third its members. Assassination of Kirov removed an enemy and provided Stalin with the excuse to launch the purge trials of the late 1930s. Numerous Old Bolshevik leaders were tried, forced to confess, and executed with Lenin's friend Bukharin. Leaders of the highest party and military rank and unknown millions of lesser figures were purged, to be executed or to disappear deep within the Gulag. The USSR was now run by "new men," products of the new order, loyal to Stalin.

96. The International Impact of Communism, 1919-1939

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A. Socialism and the First World War: material conditions following Marx' death brought revisionism and opportunism, and World War I showed the strength of nation over class, over internationalism. Lenin saw the Russian revolution as only a phase of the great world revolution. After the war, revolutionaries were divided between gradualists and extremists; mainstream Marxists increasingly moved right. Communist revolutions failed in Germany (the Spartacists) and Hungary (Bela Kun), in spite of aid from the USSR.

B. The Third International, 1919: The Second International met in Bern; divided, it was adjourned and reopened in Moscow as the Third, with representatives from 37 nations. Zinoviev was the first president, and the USSR provided funding: the Comintern. It was strongly centralized under Lenin's Twenty-One Points: Members were to be strict communists taking orders from Moscow. Their job was to infiltrate unions and the army in their native lands. Comintern trained and indoctrinated workers from throughout the world, including Chiang Kai-Shek. In the West, attacking the "red menace" became the path to success for conservatives. The suppression of Trotskyism in 1927 brought a period of inaction. The growth of fascism brought the "popular front" movement after 1935 with coalitions approved with socialists and "advanced liberals." The Comintern was abolished as a war compromise in 1943, but it was reestablished in 1946 as the Communist Information Bureau, or Comintern. Following WWII, the USSR provided a model for Third World Nations of economic planning and security for workers, and took the role as leader of world revolution. Its role has been much more difficult since 1945, for it is seen as less innovative less efficient and more imperialistic.