

Document 1: Russia Before WWI

Russia was an autocracy. The ruler of Russia was the Tsar and technically everything that happened in Russia was his responsibility which he shared with no one and was responsible only to God for his actions.

From 1894 until 1917 Nicholas II was the Tsar and autocrat of Russia. The onset of World War I exposed the weakness of Nicholas II's autocratic government. A show of national unity had accompanied Russia's entrance into the war. In the summer of 1914, the Duma expressed full support for the government's war effort. But the government's ineffectiveness soon soured much of the population. German control of the Baltic Sea and German-Ottoman control of the Black Sea cut Russia off from most of its foreign supplies and potential markets. In addition, inept Russian preparations for war and ineffective economic policies hurt the country financially and militarily. Inflation became a serious problem.

While the central government was hampered by these issues, the strain of the war began to cause popular unrest. Since 1915 high food prices and fuel shortages caused strikes in some cities. Workers started to protest and have riots. The countryside also was becoming restless. Soldiers were increasingly insubordinate.

The situation continued to deteriorate. Increasing conflict between the tsar and the Duma weakened both parts of the government. In early 1917, deteriorating rail transport caused acute food and fuel shortages, which resulted in riots and strikes. Authorities summoned troops to quell the disorders in the capital. In 1905 troops had fired on demonstrators and saved the monarchy, but in 1917 the troops turned their guns over to the angry crowds. Public support for the tsarist regime simply evaporated in 1917, ending three centuries of Romanov rule.

Document 2: Communism – What is it?

Though the term "communism" can refer to specific political parties, at its core, communism is an ideology of economic equality through the elimination of private property.

The beliefs of communism, most famously expressed by Karl Marx, center on the idea that inequality and suffering results from capitalism. Under capitalism, private businesses and corporations own all the factories, equipment and other resources. These owners can then exploit workers, who are forced, sell their labor for wages.

The working class — or "proletariat" — must rise up against the capitalist owners, or "bourgeoisie," according to the ideals of communism, and organize a new society with no private property, no economic classes and no profits.

Communism differs from socialism, though both have similarities. Both philosophies promote economic equality and state ownership of various goods and services. However, socialism usually works through the existing democratic structures of capitalist countries. Almost all capitalist countries, in fact, have some socialist characteristics, like the public schools in the United States.

In contrast, communists state that capitalist economic and political systems must be completely overthrown through revolution. Communist theory predicts that, after the proletariat revolution, special leaders must temporarily take control of the state, leading it toward an eventual "true" communist society.

Document 3: The Bolsheviks & V.I. Lenin

The Bolsheviks were born out of Russia's Social Democrat Party and led by V.I. Lenin. Lenin growing up was influenced by the works of Karl Marx. Branded a revolutionary by the Russian government he was exiled where he worked tirelessly to spread revolutionary ideas into Russia.

The Bolsheviks played a minimal part in the 1905 Revolution. Their impact and influence on the workers in that year was weak. In St Petersburg in March 1905, the Bolsheviks admitted that they could only muster 200 supporters in the whole of the city.

Lenin knew that if the Bolsheviks were to have credibility, they had to appeal to the working class in Russia. That meant not making promises that could not be kept.

Why did the Bolsheviks succeed? Probably the most important factor was Lenin himself. He was a driven man who believed that those who would lead the workers had to be the educated elite capable of doing things that an uneducated majority could not. He also developed a set of beliefs that would appeal to the working class.

The Bolsheviks did not have an ideology that stressed high ideals. They had an immediate program for the time when they would attain power but had made few plans for what to do after they had gained power. In the immediate aftermath of getting power, the Bolsheviks promised that they would take Russia out of World War One and settle for peace with the Germans, they would redistribute land to the peasants and give them power within their rural communities and work to improve the working conditions and general lifestyles of those who worked in the industrial cities. Such a mixture of beliefs was genuinely popular in both urban and rural areas and it also ensured that the Bolsheviks appealed to the two largest social groups in Russia.

To Lenin, practical issues were more important than the development of ideological theories. Whereas the masses could assist in practical issues, they almost certainly would not understand theoretical debate nor understand why time was being wasted on theory. Lenin always had one goal – to achieve his aim. To do this, Lenin did not have a set way of working and effectively, he believed that any method was acceptable as long as the aim was achieved.

Lenin's great strength was an ability to organize the party – and much of this had to be done in secret before November 1917. Though he was a ruthless man, he was also someone who recognized another's talent. Leon Trotsky became a vital member of the party. Trotsky's skills as a military leader, his devotion to the revolution, combined with Lenin's skill as an organizer who could understand the most minute detail, led to a very potent combination. Their skill infected the rest of the party with enthusiasm and vigor which was vital in November 1917 and the months that immediately followed the Bolsheviks rise to power in Russia.

The November 1917 Revolution is a classic example of how Lenin and Trotsky worked together. The planning for the revolution was done by Lenin, the actual execution of what Lenin had planned was all but carried out by Trotsky. However, none of this would have been meaningful, if what the Bolsheviks offered the people had no appeal to them. Thousands of soldiers were deserting the army and returning home – they certainly supported any party that called for an end to the war. The war had also caused much hunger in the cities and discontent in the countryside. Lenin promised land to those people. The message was clear and quickly absorbed. Lenin's message of "Peace, bread and land" found widespread acceptance.

Document 4: The March/November Revolutions

March 1917 saw major changes in Russia.

March 4th-9th: Workers in the city's largest factory went on strike. The strikers persuaded other workers to come out on strike. Demonstrations occurred throughout the city. Nicholas II was in Petrograd at this time but he left to inspect troops at the war front.

March 10th-11th: The police tried to carry out the orders of Nicholas to stop the riots but failed. The head of the Duma informed Nicholas that soldiers brought in to put down the rioters had, in fact, joined them! Nicholas then did something very foolish. He ordered that the Duma was no longer to meet. The Duma disobeyed Nicholas and met- this is usually considered the first act of the Russian Revolution. The members of the Duma decided to form a temporary government (the Provisional Government) to take the place of the tsar.

March 12th: Nicholas decided to return to Petrograd to restore law and order. The Provisional Government by this time had some degree of control and stopped the royal train outside of Petrograd. The government wanted to talk terms with Nicholas. It became clear to Nicholas that the Provisional Government did not want a tsar and he was forced to give up the throne.

Thus royalty came to an end in Russia. Following the March Revolution, in November 1917 Russia got the world's first communist government. Led by Lenin, communists took over and removed the Provisional Government from power. Lenin had already proved himself to the workers of the city with his slogans "Peace, bread and land" By October 1917, Lenin felt the time was right for a revolution. He returned in disguise from Finland and set the date for 6th/7th November.

November 6th/7th: Speeches were made by Trotsky at the Smolny Institute as to why people should support the communists. While he was giving these speeches, he knew that the Bolsheviks were actually taking over key points in the city. By the time that the speeches had finished most of the city was in the hands of the Bolsheviks - as Trotsky had planned.

The telephone and telegraph buildings were taken over, as were the power stations. Bridges were captured. So were the railway stations. There was very little bloodshed and it is probable that many people in Petrograd were unaware of what had happened when they woke up in the morning.

November 7th/8th: Now Lenin had to find the leaders of the Provisional Government and arrest them. Throughout the 7th the Red Guards occupied important buildings. By mid-afternoon, the only building not held by the Bolsheviks was the Winter Palace, the old home of the tsar. It was here that the Provisional Government met. In fact, the troops who were meant to be defending the building had gone home and only the Women's Battalion remained. The Red Guards (or Bolsheviks) attack on the Winter Palace was short lived and any opposition was easily overcome. The Provisional Government surrendered to the Red Guards.

.At 1 a.m. on November 8th, a man got to his feet and rose to speak. He took away a handkerchief from his face and was instantly recognized as Lenin. He told those in the Smolny Institute that he was forming a government of Bolsheviks and that it would contain no middle class people. The government would work to help the workers and peasants. By the end of the day the members of the Provisional Government were under arrest, the tsar and his family were also under house arrest. Lenin's statement that he would overturn the government of Russia - made after his brother had been executed - was fulfilled.

Document 5: Russian Civil War & War Communism

One side can start a war, but it takes two to end one. The Bolsheviks found that this principle applied to themselves after October, when they expected to leave quickly from World War I. Of the three points of their effective slogan—"Peace, land, and bread"—the first proved to be the most difficult to realize. After the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany, in which Russia lost a major portion of their land, only part of Russia—Moscow, Petrograd, and much of the industrial heartland—was under Bolshevik control. The countryside belonged to the Socialist Revolutionaries. Given the Bolshevik desire to dominate the whole of Russia and the rest of the former tsarist empire, civil war was inevitable.

The Red Army was formed in February 1918, and Trotsky became its leader. The Reds were opposed by the "Whites," anticommunists led by former imperial officers. The Allies (Britain, the United States) intervened on the White side and provided supplies and money. After numerous battles between the two sides by the mid-1920 the Reds had consolidated their hold on the country.

The feat of winning the Civil War and the organizational methods adopted to do so made a deep impact on Bolshevik thinking. There were political issues and economic struggles facing the new leaders. The Bolsheviks were ruthless in their pursuit of victory. The Cheka, or political police, was formed in December 1917 to protect communist power. By the end of the Civil War the Cheka had become a powerful force. Among the targets of the Cheka were Russian nationalists who objected strongly to the bolshevization of Russia.

Lenin did not favor moving toward a socialist economy after October, because the Bolsheviks lacked the necessary economic skills. He preferred state capitalism, with capitalist managers staying in place but supervised by the workforce. Others wanted a rapid transition to a socialist economy. The Civil War caused the Bolsheviks to adopt a more severe economic policy known as War Communism, characterized by government control of private businesses/industry and the demand of grain and other food products from the peasants. The Bolsheviks subsequently clashed with the labor force, which understood socialism as industrial self-management. Ever-present hunger worsened the poor labor relations, and strikes became widespread. The Bolsheviks, however, pressed ahead, using intimidation as necessary. The story was the same in the countryside. Food had to be demanded in order to feed the cities and the Red Army. The Reds informed the peasants that it was in their best interests to supply food, because if the landlords came back the peasants would lose everything.

Soviet Russia adopted its first constitution in July 1918 and fashioned treaties with other republics such as Ukraine. The latter was vital for the economic viability of Russia, and Bolshevik will was imposed. It was also imposed in the Caucasus, where Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan were tied to Bolshevik Russia by 1921. Many communists regarded Russia as acquiring imperialist ambitions. Lenin's nationality policy was based on the assumption that nations would choose to stay in a close relationship with Russia, but this proved not to be the case. Many republics wanted to be independent in order to develop their own brand of national communism. The comrade who imposed Russian dominance was, ironically, Stalin. As commissar for nationalities he sought to ensure that Moscow rule prevailed.

Document 6: Lenin's New Economic Policy

The New Economic Policy (NEP) was introduced to replace the failed policy of War Communism. The NEP advanced with almost a capitalist approach to economic growth. Under War Communism, Lenin employed the communist belief that everybody had the right to a job and people were employed regardless of whether they were actually needed or not. The NEP brought some form of economic sense back to Russia's economy.

However, the NEP did not totally solve Russia's economic problems. World War One and the problems of the civil war and War Communism had devastated the economy. Any continuous advances in the economy would take centuries. Factories, freed from the shackles of War Communism, did start to produce goods but few had the money to buy them. As workers could be dismissed, unemployment started to grow. Lenin allowed industry bosses to use foreign capital – but few countries were brave enough to invest in the fledgling communist state. Therefore, money was earned from exporting produce that could not be sold in Russia. The export of grain and coal helped to kick-start Russia's economy and by 1924-25, Russia's imports were nine times higher than the 1921-22 level. Though this would seem a major achievement in just three years, the 1921-22 figure was so small that the increase is not as spectacular as would first appear.

However, an expanding economy needed a decent transport system. The civil war had decimated Russia's rail system. In 1921, 50% of Russia's trains were off the tracks due to a lack of repairs and the skilled men needed to repair them. A huge effort was needed to build up the rail system and by the end of 1923, the rail system carried 45% more passengers and 59% more goods than two years earlier.

The NEP also needed a stable currency because their old currency, the ruble, had come worthless because of inflation and association with the old tsarist regime. Therefore, a new currency, the chervonets, was introduced. The industrial cities accepted the new currency and the state had a financial budget surplus at the end of 1925. But issues remained as in rural areas, trade was still done through bartering and they had not accepted the chervonets. Therefore, this economic imbalance was to lead to a major economic problem – the so-called 'Scissors Crisis'.

The Scissors Crisis started in October 1923 when industrial prices were three times higher than agricultural prices. The incentive to produce more food in the countryside had led to much higher production. With so much food around, prices for farm produce fell. Compared to the countryside, costs in industry were high. As farming was still based around physical labor, there was never a shortage of workers in the countryside. Equipment remained primitive and cheap. However, the farmers were producing in quantity. The government could not allow the cities to get hungry again. Therefore, the government became the principle purchaser of food but they used their position to force down the price that the farmers wanted. With less money, the farmers had less capital to buy products from the cities. The government responded to this by forcing down the prices of manufacturing produce and decrees were issued that controlled prices. Government interference in the economy was never far away.

After 1917-18, land was redistributed. The huge estates of Nicholas II's reign were now divided up. By 1927, there were 25 million peasant holdings in Russia (98.3% of all farmed land) and given decent weather, many of these holdings, post-War Communism, made a reasonable living. The extremes of poverty and riches in the countryside had diminished. Lenin tried to increase food production and stimulate industrial production in the factories. Above all else, Lenin wanted to restore agriculture to pre-war levels so that it recovered from the devastation caused by two wars. The peasants had their produce bought and the city workers were able to feed themselves.

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Document #1 (Russia Before World War I)

1. What type of government did Russia have prior to World War I? Describe how this government functioned.

2. What were some of the issues that plagued Russia during World War I due to Tsar Nicholas II?

Document #2 (What is Communism?)

3. In your own words – describe what communism is. Why would it be appealing to people of the lower classes?

Document #3 (The Bolsheviks – V.I. Lenin)

4. Why was Lenin vital as leader of the Bolsheviks? Describe his characteristics that would make them successful.

5. How did Lenin and his ideas appeal to the urban workers? The peasants? Why was it important that he appealed to these two groups?

Document #4 (The February/November Revolutions)

- 6. How did Tsar Nicholas II cause his own downfall during the February Revolution? How did Lenin and Trotsky take over the government during the November Revolution (describe the process over the course of the two days)?

Document #5 (The Civil War & War Communism)

- 7. How were the promises made to the industrial workers and peasants not followed during the Russian Civil War and subsequent War Communism period? How was life even harder for these people under Lenin/Trotsky/Stalin now rather than Tsar Nicholas II?

Document #6 (Lenin's New Economic Policy {NEP})

- 8. How did the New Economic Policy benefit Russia? (Think about it in terms of railroads, money, and food)

- 9. Why was the New Economic Policy more of capitalism (favoring the businesses) rather than Communism (which favored equality)?
