

The Soviet Union since 1917

The country that was known as Russia until 1917 is today known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or the Soviet Union or USSR for short. Its history since 1917 can be divided into three major periods: the time of Lenin, the time of Stalin, and the time of Stalin's successors. Between 1917 and 1924, the Communist party under Lenin's leadership established and solidified its political power. It eliminated all other political parties and secured its dictatorship. After a power struggle within the Party that lasted from 1924 to 1929, Joseph Stalin emerged as Lenin's successor. During the troubled period of Stalin's control, which lasted until he died in 1953, the country underwent one of the most thorough economic and social transformations in history. This process, which involved immense human suffering, established the basic institutions that govern and manage the Soviet Union today. From 1953 to the present, Stalin's successors have struggled to institute reforms to improve the life of the Soviet people and enable the Soviet Union to compete economically and militarily with the West. Any reforms undertaken, however, also had to preserve and strengthen the dictatorship of the Communist party.

THE SOVIET UNION UNDER LENIN: 1917-1924

When the czarist regime was overthrown in March 1917, it proved very difficult to establish an effective government in its place. The *Duma* formed a provisional committee, which then became the Provisional Government. (See Chapter 2, page 72.) It was dominated by liberals and moderate socialists. They were committed to establishing the rule of law and governing with the consent of the people. The Provisional Government granted civil rights and freed political prisoners. It also established an eight-hour workday. Meanwhile, the Provisional Government prepared for an election of a constituent assembly that was to provide the country with a constitution. Its commitments, however, prevented the government from acting rapidly and decisively on other

matters. The Provisional Government did not pull Russia out of World War I, which was causing large numbers of casualties and much suffering. And it refused to authorize the immediate transfer of the nobility's land to the peasantry. That was because its members believed that a transfer would be illegal unless it had the sanction of a nationally elected legislature. Furthermore, because it was reluctant to interfere with free political expression, the government was unwilling at first to crack down on groups, such as Lenin's Bolsheviks, that were clearly intent on overthrowing the new order.

Despite its democratic intentions, the Provisional Government—run by representatives of the middle and upper classes and by intellectuals—had little support among the workers and peasants. This fact is demonstrated by the existence and power of another body: the Petrograd Soviet. (St. Petersburg had been renamed Petrograd in 1914.) This body had no fixed membership. It was made up of representatives from the factories and military units of the capital and intellectuals from various socialist parties. Because of its close ties with the soldiers and workers, the Soviet—its formal name was the Soviet of Soldiers' and Workers' Deputies—had far more influence among them than did the Provisional Government. It therefore was able to issue its famous "Order #1." That order told the military units to listen only to the Soviet and to ignore the Provisional Government. Meanwhile, other soviets were springing up all over the country. None of them was listening to the Provisional Government.

The increasing confusion and hardship that developed during the summer and fall of 1917 weakened the Provisional Government. The Bolsheviks saw their chance. Probably the two key factors were the Provisional Government's disastrous military offensive of late June and its continued refusal to transfer noble-held land to the peasantry. All of the political parties associated with the new government lost influence. Only the Bolsheviks benefited. They were the only major political party that had refused to support the government. As the Provisional Government floundered, the Bolsheviks promised the people of Russia "*Land, Peace, and Bread.*" This slogan had great appeal for the land-hungry peasants, the suffering soldiers, and the hungry workers. At the very least, the Bolsheviks promised action, while the Provisional Government had become paralyzed. As the Bolsheviks' influence grew among the workers and soldiers—particularly in the key cities of Petrograd and Moscow—so did Lenin's confidence that his time had come. Late in October, while soldiers were deserting their units, the Party began to draw up its plan for seizing power. During the night of November 6–7, it acted. Armed Bolshevik units, known as the Red Guards, occupied

the key parts of Petrograd and arrested the ministers of the Provisional Government. Russia's short experiment with democracy was over.

The Establishment of the Bolshevik Dictatorship. Lenin's new government was called the **Council of People's Commissars**. In addition to its chairman, Lenin, the new government included Leon Trotsky (1879–1940). Trotsky was a brilliant revolutionary agitator and a superb organizer, who served first as Commissar for Foreign Affairs and then as Commissar of War. (The Bolsheviks used the revolutionary term *commissar* instead of the more traditional *minister*.) Another of the Bolshevik commissars—though not yet a member of Lenin's inner circle—was Joseph Stalin, who served as Commissar of Nationalities.

The new government moved immediately. On November 8, it issued a land decree that transferred all of the nation's farmland to the peasants for their use. It also issued a peace decree, which called for immediate negotiations between all involved nations to end the war. When its allies rejected the call, Russia negotiated with Germany alone. The negotiations were long and difficult. Finally, Lenin's government accepted the harsh German peace terms. These terms called for Russia to give up a large amount of territory. In March 1918, the Bolshevik government signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. In doing so, Russia signed a separate peace with Germany and left its former allies—Great Britain, France, and the United States—to fight alone.

On the political front, the Bolshevik government soon moved to eliminate its political rivals. To the surprise of almost everyone, Lenin excluded the other socialist parties from his government. Then most of the non-Bolshevik newspapers were closed down. In December 1917,

Soldiers demonstrating under the banner of "Communism" in Moscow during the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.

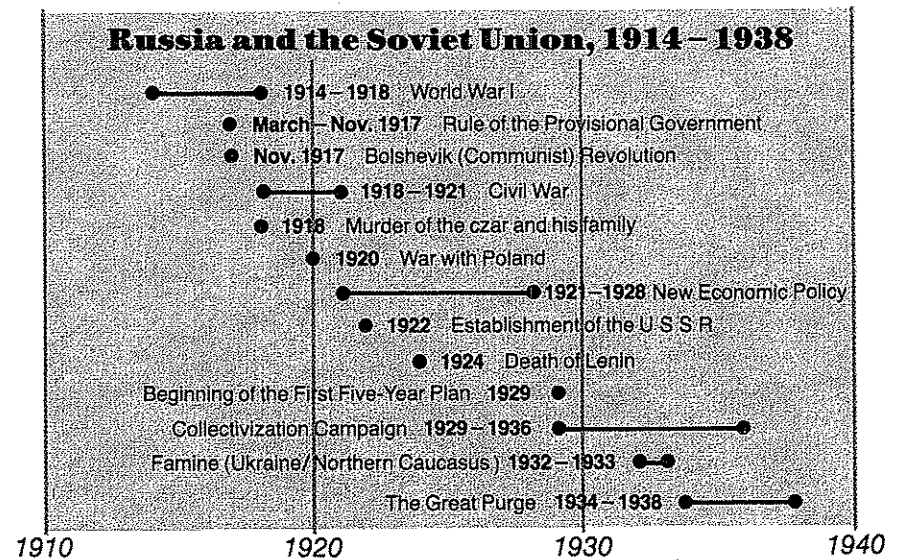


the government created its own secret police, the Cheka (chee-KHAN). It was to suppress what the Bolsheviks called *counterrevolution*, meaning all popular dissent and criticism of the government.

In January 1918, the Bolsheviks moved against another potential rival: the Constituent Assembly. This body had been selected late in 1917 through the election organized by the Provisional Government. The Bolsheviks, who were already in power, did not want the election to take place. But they were afraid to cancel it and risk angry reactions from the public. It was the first and, as it turned out, the last free election in Russia's history. Another socialist party, the Socialist Revolutionaries, won a majority of the seats. But the Constituent Assembly met for only one day. Then the Bolshevik troops closed it down by force.

Some of the Bolsheviks' policies, such as their land and peace programs, won them popular support. But their attempts to silence all criticism and their use of repression antagonized a wide variety of people. The opposition included many who had been potential supporters. Other socialist parties also turned against the government. So did many workers and soldiers. The peace treaty with Germany brought much-needed peace. But it offended many patriotic Russians who resented the sacrifices the treaty demanded. In addition, both supporters of the old czarist order and of the already ended Provisional Government rallied to the anti-Bolshevik cause. So did the United States, Great Britain, and France. British, French, and American troops took control of Arkhangelsk in northwestern Russia. (See map on page 2.) American and Japanese troops landed on the coast of eastern Siberia. At first they hoped to set up a new Russian government that would be willing to continue the fight against the Central Powers. After the Allies' victory over Germany in November 1918, they simply wanted to overthrow this dangerous new regime in Russia that was pledged to promoting Communist revolutions around the world.

The Civil War. The result of all the antagonism aroused by Lenin's regime was a terrible civil war that lasted almost three years. From the summer of 1918 until early 1921, it was a merciless fight to the death. The Bolsheviks were called the **Reds**; their opponents, the **Whites**. At first glance, the odds were against the Reds, just as the odds had been against the Provisional Government. This was the case with any government trying to function in strife-torn Russia. But the Bolsheviks did have several advantages. First, they controlled Petrograd and Moscow, and therefore the center of the country. The Whites, on the other hand, were scattered across the country and therefore found it difficult to coordinate their forces.



Second, the Bolsheviks had several superb—and ruthless—leaders and organizers. Foremost among them was Lenin, the man who held the Party together. He was ably assisted by the brilliant Trotsky and by other talented people. The Whites, in contrast, were a hodgepodge of diverse parties, factions, interests, and poorly disciplined military units—with nobody in charge.

Meanwhile, the Bolsheviks were organizing what resources they had. They used their new Red Army—hastily organized by Trotsky—to maximum advantage. To mobilize every economic resource, they took over all factories, seized food from the peasantry by force, and banned all private trade. Workers or peasants who resisted were crushed by force. These policies, which came to be known as *War Communism*, destroyed the country's economy. Nevertheless, they enabled the Bolsheviks to keep the Red Army supplied and in operation.

Finally, the Whites handled their public relations poorly, while the Bolsheviks were expert propagandists. The Whites, so divided on many issues, had no land program to present to the peasants. Nor did they have a program for the non-Russian peoples of the country, the various nationalities that the czars had added to Russia at various times. Some of these people wanted local self-government. Others wanted complete independence. For example, during 1917 and 1918 Finland, the Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan declared their independence. The Whites had no unified attitude toward these demands.



A women's Communist battalion in Petrograd (formerly St. Petersburg and now Leningrad) in 1919. How long did the civil war last?

Some White generals bluntly rejected them. The Bolsheviks, on the other hand, had promised land to the peasants and independence to all the non-Russian peoples who wanted it. The result was that when the peasants or non-Russian minorities sided with anyone, they sided with the Bolsheviks, and this helped to tip the scales.

In the end, once they got the upper hand, the Bolsheviks broke many promises and reconquered many of the people who had declared their independence. However, they were unable to conquer Poland during a short war in 1920.

In 1921, the Bolsheviks won the civil war. The Whites were not the only losers. Millions had been killed in the fighting or had died of starvation or disease. Czar Nicholas and his family had been murdered by the Bolsheviks in 1918. Millions more were homeless. When the fighting was finally over, the famine of 1921–1922 claimed additional millions of lives.

Lenin's New Economic Policy. By 1921, the Bolsheviks had passed the test of seizing power and the far more difficult test of holding on to it during the civil war. But they were still not secure. The economy was in ruin. Millions lacked food and shelter. There were strikes in the cities and riots in the countryside. Food was especially scarce. During the civil war, the peasants had responded to food seizures by growing only

what they themselves could eat. Then, in February and March 1921, a major rebellion broke out at the Kronstadt naval base near Petrograd. This event was a serious setback because Kronstadt had long been a Bolshevik stronghold. Now the sailors were demanding an end to the Bolshevik dictatorship and its replacement by a government of several socialist parties. The Bolsheviks responded to these demands by putting down the rebellion with cruelty and great loss of life.

To deal with the economic crisis, Lenin drew up a bold new program: his **New Economic Policy (NEP)**. Because it included some measures that were clearly capitalistic, this program was unpopular with many Bolsheviks. But Lenin insisted that these measures were necessary to restore food production and vital services. Unless these were restored, he warned, the regime would be in jeopardy.

The New Economic Policy put an end to the seizure of food from the peasants. Instead, the peasants turned over a certain percentage of their crops to the government and were free to sell the rest in the open market. This policy provided the peasants with an incentive to produce as much as they could. Major enterprises such as banks, railroads, mines, and large factories remained under government control. But small businesses were returned to private ownership. Thus the New Economic Policy restored a certain amount of private enterprise.

The results were impressive. Agricultural production increased quickly, and so the food crises were overcome. Industrial production recovered more slowly, but progress was considerable. Nonetheless, the Bolsheviks were unhappy with this limited return to private enterprise. The smarter peasants were outproducing their neighbors. Some were even renting more land and hiring others to work for them. These so-called **kulaks** were becoming more prosperous than other peasants and were small-scale capitalists. In the cities, too, private merchants and small manufacturers, called *Nepmen*, were spreading capitalist business methods. The Bolsheviks were also dissatisfied with the condition of major industries. Being Marxists, they believed that efficient modern industry was essential to a socialist society. They therefore believed the country's industry had to be modernized and greatly expanded. To do this, however, the government would need large sums of money, which it did not have. One reason for the lack of money was that the existing industries were too inefficient to produce large profits for the government. Another reason was that the traditional czarist method of raising funds—taxing the peasants more and more heavily—had been eliminated by Lenin's New Economic Policy. Low tax rates had been set for the peasants so that they would have the incentive to produce as much food as they possibly could.

DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

I. Distinguishing Fact from Opinion

A fact is a statement that is known or can be proven to be true. An opinion is a personal belief that has not been proven. Remember that an opinion is not necessarily false; it is simply unproven. Read the following and decide which is fact and which is opinion. Give reasons for your answers.

1. The *Communist Manifesto* was written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels.
2. Lenin ought to have followed Marx's theories more closely.
3. Robert Owen was an industrialist who established a factory village that was supposed to better the working and living conditions of workers.
4. Stalin should have used less brutal methods to achieve his goals.
5. For much of his life, Karl Marx lived in England.

ENRICHMENT AND EXPLORATION

1. To understand more about the hopes and the theories of the economic and social reformers of the 19th century, read Robert L. Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers*, New York: Simon and Schuster (paperback: Touchstone Books). Prepare an oral or written report to share with the class.
2. There were several attempts to create Utopian communities in the United States in the 1800s, among them Modern Times in New York, New Harmony in Indiana, and Amana in Iowa. In your school or public library, research the story of one of the American experiments. Make a chart showing its aims, its participants, and its success or failure.
3. In the century since Karl Marx first proclaimed the goals of the proletarian revolution, many improvements have been made in working and living conditions, particularly in the Western world. List the changes advocated by the 19th-century socialists and determine which have been achieved.
4. Select two groups of volunteers to debate the statement, "The only hope for mankind is the creation of the socialist state." One group should represent the supporters of Karl Marx. The other group should represent the ideas of Mikhail Bakunin, the anarchist. The rest of the class should judge the effectiveness of the arguments of each side.
5. Prepare on a bulletin board or the chalkboard a diagram showing the stages of the class struggle, according to Karl Marx. Label each step and explain how Marx believed one would lead to the next.

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