

## Vladimir Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia

by Mitchell Bickman and Brad Seidman

**Historical Context** (Sources include <http://www.historyalive.com/>). At the end of the 19th century, many Russians were deeply dissatisfied with the Czarist monarchy and backward social and economic conditions in their country. Some favored transforming Russia into a modern constitutional democracy similar to governments in Western Europe. Other dissidents had even more radical ideas and in 1881, one of the groups was responsible for the assassination of Czar Alexander II. His successor, Alexander III, responded by placing harsher political restrictions on the Russian people.

In this repressive climate, Russian Socialists tried to mobilize the small urban working class, what was known in Marxist ideology as the proletariat, into a revolutionary movement. However, the Socialists were divided. The Mensheviks (minority faction) believed the revolution would have to wait until the Russian working class grew in size and political awareness. Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the Bolshevik group, argued that a small, tightly controlled, revolutionary party could be the vanguard of the proletarian forces, lead the struggle for broad social change and essentially seize state power.

The fundamental weaknesses of the Czarist regime were exposed by two events in 1904-1905. Russia was humiliated in a short war with Japan. Defeat contributed to a series of protests by farmers, workers and soldiers. On a Sunday in January, 1905, workers in Petrograd (St. Petersburg) marched on the royal palace demanding reforms. The palace guard opened fire on the unarmed demonstrators, killing or wounding hundreds. In response to the massacre, a wave of strikes

forced Czar Nicholas II to agree to the formation of the Duma, Russia's first parliament. The Duma largely played a symbolic role until the outbreak of the World War I.

Russia entered the war on the side of England and France with the stated intent of protecting its "Slavic" brothers in the Balkans from Germanic oppression. However its unprepared and ill-equipped army suffered major defeats, millions of battle deaths, and the loss of territory in Poland and Ukraine. War casualties and food shortages in urban areas led to rioting by workers and students. In Petrograd, a strike by women textile workers led to a city-wide general strike in March, 1917. The Czar ordered troops to break the strike and end the riots, but the soldiers refused and joined the demonstrators. With his support evaporating, Nicholas II abdicated as czar.

Several different groups maneuvered to establish a new Russian government. A Provisional administration under the leadership of Alexander Kerensky represented educated Russians who identified with Western political freedom. This group decided to continue the war effort, which proved to be a fatal error. The Kerensky government was challenged by the powerful and well-organized Petrograd Soviet (workers council) which had played a major role in deposing the Czar. The Petrograd Soviet demanded withdrawal from the war, land for peasants and rights for workers and unions. It gradually came under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks. In November, 1917, Bolshevik forces lead by Lenin's lieutenant, Leon Trotsky, seized government buildings in Petrograd and declared themselves in control of Russia.

In many ways the November Revolution was only the start of the Russian Revolution. There was no effective army or administrative structure. In the cities people were hungry and the countryside was in chaos. Many ethnic minorities that had been part of the Czarist Empire began



**Lenin addresses workers at a meeting.**  
Source: [http://www.4to40.com/images/legends/lenin/lenin\\_at\\_meeting.jpg](http://www.4to40.com/images/legends/lenin/lenin_at_meeting.jpg)

to demand independence. There were also no clear guidelines in Marxist ideology for governing by a small party that had seized power through a military coup.

In order to rebuild Russia, the Bolsheviks decided to sign a peace treaty with Germany. However, warfare continued to plague the country. There was internal opposition to the revolutionary government and later, when the western allies were victorious over Germany, they supported Russian military forces that wanted to install an anti-Communist coalition in power. In response to internal dissent and foreign intervention, Lenin declared a “dictatorship of the proletariat” under the direction of the Bolshevik (now called Communist) Party, and used force to defeat all opposition. Among the victims were Czar Nicholas and his family, who were executed in July, 1918.

By 1920, Lenin and the Communist Party had secured control over most of the Russian Empire and began to build a socialist society. The Red Army took control over private factories and encouraged peasants to seize land from the Russian Orthodox Church and other wealthy landowners. The New Economic Policy permitted limited private ownership and the Soviet economy began to improve. In 1922, Lenin and his supporters renamed Russia the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Vladimir Lenin died in January, 1924 and after a five year battle for control over the Communist Party and the government, Josef Stalin was declared his successor. Under Stalin, there was increasing ideological and economic rigidity that injured many Russians and communism became identified with a brutal and oppressive dictatorship.

**Task: Examine the set of documents and answer the questions that accompany each document.**

When you have finished, write an essay that answers the following questions.

1. What conditions led to the Russian Revolution?
2. Why were Lenin and the Bolsheviks (Communists) successful?
3. In your opinion, did Lenin make the right judgment when he decided that it was legitimate for a small minority to seize power in order to bring about needed social change? Explain.
4. In your opinion, should historians evaluate the Russian Revolution based on events and conditions at that time or should they also take into account what happened in the future? Explain.

### **1. Russian Revolution Timeline**

1881. Alexander II is assassinated. Alexander III becomes Czar and represses dissent in Russia.

1894. Nicholas II becomes Czar

1903. Social Democrats Party splits into Menshevik and Bolshevik factions.

February, 1904. Japan attacks Russian troops at Port Arthur.

January 22, 1905. Bloody Sunday. Troops open fire on demonstrators in Petrograd.

October, 1905. October Manifesto by Czar Nicholas II provides for a Russian Parliament (Duma).

August 1, 1914. Czar Nicholas II mobilizes Russian troops on the Eastern Front for war with Germany.

March, 1917. Soldiers mutiny and food riots in the cities. The Parliament creates a new Provisional government.

March 15, 1917. Czar Nicholas II abdicates and Russia becomes a republic.

November 7, 1917. Bolsheviks seize control over Petrograd

November 8, 1917. Russian Provincial Government is replaced by Bolsheviks.

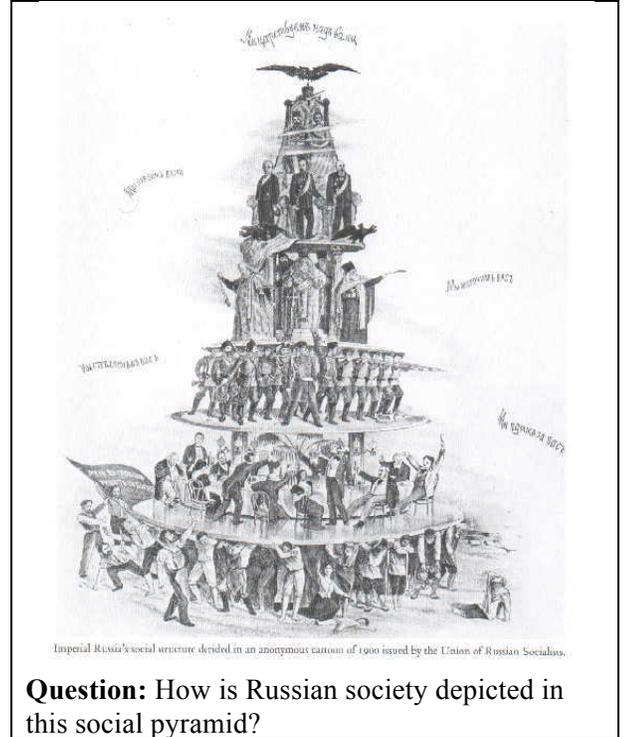
### **2. 19th Century Russian Social Pyramid**

This diagram shows agricultural workers at the bottom of the social pyramid. Just above them is the urban working class. At the top of society was a small ruling elite.

January, 1918. Lenin declares a “dictatorship of the proletariat.”  
 March, 1918. Brest-Litovsk Treaty ratified by the Congress of Soviets and Russia withdraws from World War I.

**Questions:**

1. What were the long term causes of the Russian Revolution?
2. What were the immediate causes of the Russian Revolution?



**Question:** How is Russian society depicted in this social pyramid?

**3. “Blame for ‘Bloody Sunday’”.** Source: *The New York Times*, October 13, 1905, p. 8.

“We have received . . . the results of an inquiry . . . into the terrible events of last January, when a throng of strikers, headed by Father Gapon, endeavored to march to the Winter Palace to present a petition to the Czar in person and were shot down in hundreds by the troops. . . The attack of the troops was not only unprovoked, but unexpected. . . The police gave no intimation of any kind that the procession was illegal and would not be allowed to take place. A warning issued by the authorities was explained officially to the workmen’s representatives, to be intended only for such as might be guilty of a breach of the peace by disorderly conduct. The workmen, it is contended, therefore had the right to regard their procession as authorized. . . All were unarmed . . . and women and children took their part in the great event which was to bring them into the presence of the head of the nation.”



Source: <http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/>

**Questions:**

1. What happened on Bloody Sunday, January 5, 1905?
2. In your opinion, why did these events undermine support for the Czar and the Russian government?

**4. “Hunger Causes Petrograd Riots”.** Source: *The New York Times*, March 12, 1917

“The question of the food supply of the capital of Russia has reached a crisis. Petrograd is particularly badly situated on the confines of the empire, in a region incapable of producing breadstuff, and therefore wholly dependent upon railways for the necessaries of daily life. . . . The people have cheerfully endured every manner of inconvenience throughout the long Winter in obtaining food supplies. Latterly, however, there has been witnessed the phenomenon of shortage in certain quarters of the city of the staple food of the common people, namely, the favorite

Russia black bread. . . . On Thursday a number of women and younger men of the working class made a peaceful demonstration of protest against the mismanagement of the food supplies. A similar movement was noticed in certain quarters of the city yesterday.”

**Questions:**

1. Why were food shortages a major problem in Petrograd?
2. In your opinion, how did food shortages contribute to a revolutionary movement in Russia?

**5. Abdication of Nicholas II (March 15, 1917).** Source:

<http://www.lib.byu.edu/~rdh/wwi/1917/abnick2.html>

“In these decisive days in the life of Russia, we thought it our duty of conscience to facilitate for our people the closest union possible and a consolidation of all national forces for the speedy attainment of victory. In agreement with the Imperial Duma, we have thought it well to renounce the throne of the Russian Empire and to lay down the supreme power. As we do not wish to part from our beloved son, we transmit the succession to our brother, the Grand Duke Michael Alexandrovich, and give him our blessing to mount the throne of the Russian Empire.”

**Question:** In your opinion, what impact would the abdication of the Czar have on political conditions in Russia?

**6. Political Slogans of the Bolshevik Party (1917).** Source: <http://www.sahistory.org.za/>

*“Peace, Bread and Land!” “All power to the Soviets!”*

**Question:** In your opinion, why would these slogans appeal to the Russian people?

**7. Memorandums from the Office of the American Consulate General in Moscow to the United States State Department.** Source: National Archives, Washington, DC.

<http://history.hanover.edu/texts/tel3.html>

**March 19, 1917.** The coup d’etat, a stage of the uncompleted revolution, executed by revolutionary workingmen and soldiers, too recently recruited to have acquired discipline or to have lost touch with their late companions in field and factory, has whetted already keen appetites for land, social reorganization and autonomy or independence. . . . Discipline was shaken, perhaps irreparably, when soldiers disarmed their officers. In the absence of popular interest in the war, the zeal of the revolutionists and to a certain extent of the liberals also having depended always on the uses they expected to make of the difficulties created by the war in the reshaping of home affairs, it is to be feared that troops at the front will slip away from their commands and return to take part in the carnival of liberty, which to most of them means seizing the large estates for themselves. The workingmen are demanding an immediate Constituent Assembly and there is a tendency not to return to factory and barrack, nor to yield newly acquired weapons, until the political and social reorganization are assured.

**March 20, 1917.** Subject. The political and economical situation in Moscow. . . . At the present writing the street cars are all running, and life has assumed its normal course. There is an undercurrent of unrest, however, and the shortage of food supplies tends to augment the discontent. Long bread lines stretching for blocks may be seen on every street waiting often to be told that there is none left. The daily allowance is . . . nine tenths of a pound. To obtain this one must stand in the bread lines for two or three hours, and often longer. The supply of flour is short and the revolution of the past few days has diminished even this. . . . Prices of all articles of necessity are rapidly rising. It is difficult to give a table showing same as the figures given out are purely fictitious, each shop charging what they can get. Flour, for instance cannot be bought at all. There is none for sale in the city. Meat is practically unobtainable, and then only three days in

the week. Milk, eggs, flour, bread, and meat will soon be sold only by card. The city is thronged with refugees and houses are unobtainable even at exorbitant prices.

**Questions:**

1. What concerns about the revolutionary movement in Russia are expressed in the first memo?
2. According to the second memo, what are conditions like in Moscow?
3. In your opinion, why is the American Consulate sending these memos to the United States government?

**8. Street demonstration in Petrograd (June 18, 1917).** Source: <http://www.nevsky88.com/>



The protest is against the new Provisional government. The banner in the foreground reads “Down With The 10 Capitalist Ministers/ All Power To The Soviets Of Workers’, Soldiers’, And Peasants’/ We Demand That Nicholas II Be Transferred To The Peter-Paul Fortress.”

**Questions:**

1. What does this protest against the new provisional government tell us about political conditions in Russia?
2. In your opinion, what is the significance of the demands made on the banner?

**9. Lessons of the Revolution by V. I. Lenin (July, 1917).**

Source: <http://www.marx.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/sep/06.htm>

“The people want peace. Yet the revolutionary government of free Russia has resumed the war of conquest on the basis of those very same secret treaties which ex-Tsar Nicholas II concluded with the British and French capitalists so that the Russian capitalists might plunder other nations. . . . There is no bread. Famine is again drawing near. Everybody sees that the capitalists and the rich are unscrupulously cheating the treasury on war deliveries, that they are raking in fabulous profits through high prices, while nothing whatsoever has been done to establish effective control by the workers over the production and distribution of goods. The capitalists are becoming more brazen every day; they are throwing workers out into the street, and this at a time when the people are suffering from shortages. A vast majority of the peasants . . . have loudly and clearly declared that landed proprietorship is an injustice and robbery. Meanwhile, a government which calls itself revolutionary and democratic has been . . . deceiving them by promises and delays. . . . The government has become so brazen in its defense of the landowners that it is beginning to bring peasants to trial for “unauthorized” seizures of land. The lesson of the Russian revolution is that there can be no escape for the working people from the iron grip of war, famine, and enslavement by the landowners and capitalists unless . . . they renounce all compromises with the bourgeoisie. . . . Only the revolutionary workers, if supported by the peasant poor, are capable of smashing the

resistance of the capitalists and leading the people in gaining land with out compensation, complete liberty, victory over famine and the war, and a just and lasting peace.”

**Questions:**

1. Why does Lenin denounce the new Provisional government?
2. According to Lenin, what lesson must be learned from the revolution?

**10. Call to Power by V. I. Lenin (October 24, 1917).** Source:

[www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1917lenin1.html](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1917lenin1.html)

“The situation is critical in the extreme. In fact it is now absolutely clear that to delay the uprising would be fatal. With all my might I urge comrades to realize that everything now hangs by a thread; that we are confronted by problems which are not to be solved by conferences or congresses (even congresses of Soviets), but exclusively by peoples, by the masses, by the struggle of the armed people. . . . History will not forgive revolutionaries for procrastinating when they could be victorious today . . . , while they risk losing much tomorrow, in fact, the risk losing everything. If we seize power today, we seize it not in opposition to the Soviets but on their behalf. . . . It would be an infinite crime on the part of the revolutionaries were they to let the chance slip, knowing that the salvation of the revolution, the offer of peace, the salvation of Petrograd, salvation from famine, the transfer of the land to the peasants depend upon them. The government is tottering. It must be given the death-blow at all costs.”

**Questions:**

1. Why does Lenin describe the situation in Russia as critical?
2. What does Lenin want the revolutionaries to do?

**11. Peace Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (March 3, 1918).**

Source:<http://www.animatedatlas.com/ww1/brestlitovsk.html>

Article I. Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey, for the one part, and Russia, for the other part, declare that the state of war between them has ceased. They are resolved to live henceforth in peace and amity with one another.

Article II. The contracting parties will refrain from any agitation or propaganda against the Government or the public and military institutions of the other party. In so far as this obligation devolves upon Russia, it holds good also for the territories occupied by the Powers of the Quadruple Alliance.

**Question:** What are the key provisions of this treaty?

**12. Lenin Demands Defeat of Counter-Revolutionary Kulaks [prosperous peasants] (November 8, 1918).**

Source: <http://archive.ncsa.uiuc.edu/SDG/Experimental/soviet.exhibit/ad2kulak.html>

Comrades! The revolt by the five kulak volost's [communities] must be suppressed without mercy. The interest of the entire revolution demands this, because we have now before us our final decisive battle “with the kulaks.” We need to set an example.

1. You need to hang (hang without fail, so that the public sees) at least 100 notorious kulaks, the rich, and the bloodsuckers.
2. Publish their names.
3. Take away all of their grain.
4. Execute the hostages - in accordance with yesterday's telegram.

This needs to be accomplished in such a way, that people for hundreds of miles around will see, tremble, know and scream out: let's choke and strangle those blood-sucking kulaks.

**Questions:**

1. What does Lenin want to do to prosperous peasants who are opposing the communist revolution?
2. In your opinion, were these actions justified against enemies of the revolution? Explain.

**13. Ten Days that Shook the World (Preface) by John Reed (January 1, 1919) .**

Source: <http://www.marx.org/archive/reed/works/1919/10days/preface.htm>

This book is a . . . detailed account of the November Revolution, when the Bolsheviki, at the head of the workers and soldiers, seized the state power of Russia and placed it in the hands of the Soviets. . . . The propertied classes wanted merely a political revolution, which would take the power from the Tsar and give it to them. They wanted Russia to be a constitutional Republic, like France or the United States; or a constitutional Monarchy, like England. On the other hand, the masses of the people wanted real industrial and agrarian democracy. . . . Many writers explain their hostility to the Soviet Government by arguing that the last phase of the Russian Revolution was simply a struggle of the “respectable” elements against the brutal attacks of Bolshevism. However, it was the propertied classes, who, when they realized the growth in power of the popular revolutionary organizations, undertook to destroy them and to halt the Revolution. . . . [T]he Bolsheviki were the only party in Russia with a constructive program and the power to impose it on the country. If they had not succeeded to the Government when they did, there is little doubt in my mind that the armies of Imperial Germany would have been in Petrograd and Moscow in December, and Russia would again be ridden by a Tsar. . . .

It is still fashionable, after a whole year of the Soviet Government, to speak of the Bolshevik insurrection as an “adventure.” Adventure it was, and one of the most marvelous mankind ever embarked upon, sweeping into history at the head of the toiling masses, and staking everything on their vast and simple desires. Already the machinery had been set up by which the land of the great estates could be distributed among the peasants. The Factory-Shop Committees and the Trade Unions were there to put into operation workers’ control of industry. In every village, town, city, district and province there were Soviets of Workers’, Soldiers’ and Peasants’ Deputies, prepared to assume the task of local administration.

No matter what one thinks of Bolshevism, it is undeniable that the Russian Revolution is one of the great events of human history, and the rise of the Bolsheviki a phenomenon of world-wide importance. Just as historians search the records for the minutest details of the story of the Paris Commune, so they will want to know what happened in Petrograd in November, 1917, the spirit which animated the people, and how the leaders looked, talked and acted. It is with this in view that I have written this book. In the struggle my sympathies were not neutral. But in telling the story of those great days I have tried to see events with the eye of a conscientious reporter, interested in setting down the truth.

**Questions:**

1. According to John Reed, what is the purpose of this book?
2. Why does Reed support the Bolshevik Revolution?
3. Do you agree or disagree with Reed’s statement: “No matter what one thinks of Bolshevism, it

is undeniable that the Russian Revolution is one of the great events of human history, and the rise of the Bolsheviki a phenomenon of world-wide importance”? Explain.

**Short Story for Global History and Geography – “*Shooting an Elephant* by George Orwell”**

It is not always easy to shoehorn a novel about imperialism into an already-packed Global History and Geography curriculum. So it is nice to know that this short story, published in 1936 by George Orwell, can raise important questions for tenth grade teachers and students about the European role in developing countries around

the world. The story draws on Orwell's experience as a colonial official in India and Burma, two regions of the British Empire, in the middle of the century between the two world wars. The story concerns a colonial officer's obligation to shoot a rogue elephant. The narrator does not want to shoot the elephant, but feels compelled to do so by a gathering crowd of Indian residents, before whom he does not wish to appear cowardly or indecisive. The situation depicted in the story underscores the hostility between administrators of the British Empire and their "native" subjects. Both sides feel distrust, hatred and resentment. While the narrator denounces the British presence as corrosive and degrading to both sides, it is the narrator, an agent of the Empire, with whom we are meant to empathize. He presents himself as "an absurd puppet of the yellow faces behind," and his most important revelation about imperialism is how it affects those who practice it: "I perceived in that moment that when the white man turns tyrant, it is his own freedom that he destroys." This story is available in many anthologies and online at <http://www.online-literature.com/orwell/887/>. - Andrea S. Libresco