Lenin’s Rise to Power

The train carrying Lenin pulled into Finland Station in Petrograd on April 16. After ten years of exile, Lenin had returned to Russia. Before arriving, Lenin had sent a message to friends in Petrograd that his arrival should not be seen as an ordinary return, but rather as the return of a leader.¹ Workers gathered at the station flew banners and uttered revolutionary slogans at Lenin’s arrival. After exiting the train, Lenin was carried on workers’ shoulders to an armored car that stood ready for him. Standing on top of the car, the formerly exiled leader spoke to his supporters.

In his speech, welcomed by many but shocking to others, Lenin declared his intent not to work with the Provisional Government.² He said it had done nothing but deceive the people. Lenin promised to continue, with the people, to fight for world revolution. Lenin was taken to Bolshevik headquarters, a lavish villa the party had taken over from a famous ballerina named M. F. Kshesinskaia, said in her youth to have been the tsar’s mistress. At this time, although the Provisional Government was indecisive and the Petrograd Soviet still disorganized, the Bolsheviks had no more than
VLADIMIR LENIN and the RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Lenin speaks to revolutionaries at the headquarters in Petrograd. After Lenin returned to Russia, he encouraged his followers to rise up and overthrow the Provisional Government.
Lenin’s Rise to Power

two hundred thousand members and followers. The Russian population at that time was around 150 million. The outer reaches of the empire were only now, as the snows melted, beginning to hear that a revolution had occurred.

The Controversial “Theses”
The very next day, Lenin proposed the so-called “April Theses.” This document “impressed most members of his audience as written by someone out of touch with reality, if not positively mad [insane].”\(^3\) At first, Pravda refused to print the theses. When it did, the editors wrote an article saying that the theses were only Lenin’s views, not their own. “They [the Bolsheviks] were being told by their leader to turn the Soviet into a battering ram, and with it to demolish the Provisional Government,” according to historian Harold Shukman.\(^4\) Gradually, the Bolsheviks accepted Lenin’s views but “[I]t remained an open question whether Lenin’s strategy was that of a master politician or simply that of a cranky extremist.”\(^5\)

Lenin’s “Theses” called for World War I to stop at any cost, and for the revolution to continue to its next phase—there should be no stopping to allow the middle class to create a democracy. It was time, he said, to move directly to a Marxist, or Communist, state. He said the Provisional Government must be replaced, and a people’s militia would replace the army. All land was to be seized in the name of the nation. All power must rest in the Soviets—the popular councils—including all industrial production and distribution. There would be a single national bank. He promised the people peace, bread, and land—welcome words to people who had only recently been on the verge of starvation. Over the next six months, the Bolsheviks’ amazing rise to power would
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make it clear that the “Bolsheviks were bound together not by what they believed but in whom they believed [Lenin].”

Lenin had no intention of merely taking over the existing government bodies. Instead, he would try to eliminate the old institutions entirely, replacing them with new government structures. Lenin would also avoid counterrevolutionary tactics (actions by those who wanted to stop the revolution) by eliminating the counterrevolutionaries—by whatever means necessary.

German Support

Germany was delighted that Lenin had taken a hard line on the war. Revolution and a world war were incompatible, and the Germans would be the ones to benefit most from Lenin’s ardent antiwar stance. It is clear that German money helped, if not ensured, the Bolsheviks’ rise to power. Some estimates put the total amount given by Germany to the Bolsheviks at somewhere between $6 million and $10 million, although this was kept highly secret after Lenin’s return.

The Soviets Control the Provisional Government

After Lenin published the “April Theses,” the next important Bolshevik move was the formation, in May, of the Bolshevik Red Guard, a militia that would grow larger over time. The Bolsheviks were good at organizing. When disagreements between the Provisional Government and the Soviet over ways to handle the war effort led to street demonstrations, the Bolsheviks were right there, spreading antigovernment slogans. They called for the Soviet to take over the government. Despite these forceful tactics on the part of the
Lenin’s Rise to Power

Lenin delivers the “April Theses.” In his remarks, he set forth his goals for establishing a Communist state.

Bolsheviks, General Lavr Kornilov was turned down by the Provisional Government when he asked to use force against the Bolshevik demonstrators.

The Provisional Government admitted that it was having little success in running the country. It offered the Bolsheviks positions in the cabinet (executive advisors), an offer they had formerly refused but now decided to accept. Next, the creation of a new coalition government played right into the hands of the Bolsheviks. Dual power—
Primary Source—
V.I. Lenin’s “The Tasks of the Proletariat in the Present Revolution,” 1917

The specific feature of the present situation in Russia is that the country is passing from the first stage of the revolution—which, owing to the insufficient class-consciousness and organisation of the proletariat, placed power in the hands of the bourgeoisie—to its second stage, which must place power in the hands of the proletariat and the poorest sections of the peasants.

This transition is characterised, on the one hand, by a maximum of legally recognised rights (Russia is now the freest of all the belligerent countries in the world); on the other, by the absence of violence towards the masses, and, finally, by their unreasoning trust in the government of capitalists, those worst enemies of peace and socialism.

This peculiar situation demands of us an ability to adapt ourselves to the special conditions of Party work among unprecedentedly large masses of proletarians who have just awakened to political life.
shared by the Provisional Government and the Soviets—had been troublesome. Now the Soviets would dominate the Provisional Government, yet remain an independent body.

As part of the government, however, the Soviets were blamed when things went wrong. Still, the Bolsheviks declared that they were the only alternative—the Soviets alone could save Russia. Since the Bolsheviks wanted world revolution, and did not necessarily feel loyal to Russia itself, historian Richard Pipes explained, “they could . . . act with complete irresponsibility, promising every group whatever it wanted and encouraging every destructive trend.” According to Sheila Fitzpatrick, it was the Bolshevik’s “faith rather than scientific prediction that world revolution was imminent” that led them to pursue these policies in Russia.

Antiwar propaganda was carried out quietly among the troops at the war front. Alexander Kerensky, now war minister, gave ringing speeches that rallied troops for hours after he left. But the soldiers were tired after three years—tired of suffering and tired of the mixed attitudes toward the war that were reaching them from Petrograd.

**A Coup is Called Off**

In June, the Bolsheviks planned a mass demonstration against the war, but they lacked the centrality of purpose to actually carry it out. The Russian Army had one more victory against Germany, led by General Kornilov, but was then quickly routed by Austrians coming to Germany’s aid. For Russia, the war just fell apart. Russians soldiers fled for home.

Once again, the antiwar Bolsheviks organized street riots. Meanwhile, Lenin was in Finland, taking a break. He had been suffering from headaches and, according to a friend,
When the Provisional Government began arresting Bolsheviks, Lenin fled in disguise to Finland. In this photo he is almost unrecognizable without his trademark beard.
Lenin’s Rise to Power

“his face was white and his eyes showed great fatigue.” His rest was cut short by the increasing anger at the continuation of the war. Workers and soldiers who did not want to go to the front presented a perfect opportunity for organization by the Bolsheviks. Lenin hurriedly returned to Petrograd.

Though Lenin later claimed that the demonstration he organized on July 17 was meant to be a peaceful means of taking power, it appears that he hoped the time for decisive action had finally come. However, since Lenin had come back to Russia only that morning, news of rioting, looting, pogroms, and general chaos made him lose “his nerve.” Perhaps there had not been enough organizing beforehand. Or perhaps, as historian Dmitri Volkogonov believed, “Having brought out half a million people, the Bolsheviks had acted without a clear plan or precise direction.” Whatever the reason, Lenin called off the planned coup (government overthrow).

The Provisional Government, frightened because it knew the armed Bolshevik troops could easily have taken over Taurida Palace, where it had its offices, released some information condemning the Bolsheviks for treason in dealings with the Germans. These accusations rallied government troops, who occupied the city, hunting for and arresting Bolsheviks the entire next week. Lenin, a master of disguises, first hid in various safe houses in Petrograd, and then, once again, fled as an exile to Finland.
Support for the Bolsheviks increased steadily as Russians grew tired of the war. By September 1917, Bolshevik membership skyrocketed. While Lenin’s brief return certainly helped increase support, there were other capable leaders who reached out to the Russian population. Trotsky joined the Bolsheviks in July and was an excellent orator who used his speaking skills to earn the trust of many Russians. But General Kornilov, appointed Commander in Chief of the armed forces by Alexander Kerensky, helped the party more than anyone. Returning from the warfront angry and defeated, Kornilov stated he would only accept the post if certain military reforms were implemented. Kerensky agreed, but then delayed passing the reforms.

A former Provisional Government official who, up to that time, had been a minor player in revolutionary intrigue, emerged to unwittingly save the day for the Bolsheviks. Vladimir Lvov, in a complicated mix-up of messages between Kerensky and Kornilov, managed to convince both men that each was about to betray the other and make himself dictator. If the long-term results were not so tragic,
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the back-and-forth messages would have been comical. But what did result was that Kerensky, though he became aware that Kornilov had also been misled, relieved him of his command and charged him with treason. Kerensky then asked the Bolsheviks for their help. Forty thousand guns were given out to workers, to stave off Kornilov's supposed military takeover. The majority of these guns became the basic arsenal of the Bolshevik Red Guards.

Instead of increasing his authority within the government, however, the Kornilov affair cut off Kerensky from any future military help. Since it appeared that Kornilov, given his views on the ineffectiveness of the government, might have tried a takeover, the officers of the garrison would not get involved to help Kerensky. They felt that Kornilov had been treated unjustly. Kerensky's days as a leader were numbered.

Lenin Urges Action

Lenin and Grigori Zinoviev, disguised as farm laborers in Finland, kept up with the news from Russia through secret messengers. Though dispirited by the failure of the July demonstrations to turn into a complete overthrow of the government, Lenin kept up his writing. In addition to articles and letters, he worked on a book he had begun in Switzerland. It was called State and Revolution.

When he heard about the Kornilov-Kerensky mess in which Kerensky was actually helping to arm the Bolsheviks, Lenin's mood improved greatly. By September, when Leon Trotsky became chairman of the Petrograd Soviet, Bolshevik power was on the upswing. Trotsky advocated using a nationwide organization of Soviets, in which Bolsheviks held power. This would be done for the sole purpose of seizing
VLADIMIR LENIN and the RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Russian support for overthrowing the government continued to grow throughout 1917. Here a crowd gathers to receive revolutionary newspapers.

control of all the other Soviets, including that of Petrograd. Again, the Bolsheviks were split over their readiness to bring this about.

By way of letter from Finland, Lenin urged, “The Bolsheviks can and must seize power.” Trotsky, too, was in favor of swift movement. Kamenev and Zinoviev voted against an overly quick move. They said it would risk the party, as well as the Russian and world revolutions.

Lenin was infuriated. He saw anyone who opposed his revolutionary goals as an enemy. He wanted Kamenev and Zinoviev expelled from the party because of their dissenting opinion. In 1902, Lenin had proclaimed, “give
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us an organization of revolutionaries and we will overturn Russia.”95 Nothing had changed.

The rest of the party leadership, however, did not see the need or the sense of immediate action. Russia was still involved in World War I, though few soldiers remained at the front. The Provisional Government still had commitments to the Allies. A meeting, or congress, of the various Soviets was soon to take place. The Bolsheviks could use the Soviets to assume power peacefully.

Lenin exploded. In letters he asked: What if the government surrendered Petrograd to the Germans? What if the elections, scheduled by the government to be held on November 12, resulted in an actual democratic election of revolutionaries? How, then, could the Bolsheviks continue to act for the people—as Lenin believed they must—when the people had already elected for themselves?96

Once again, Lenin had to back down and wait. But the Bolsheviks did not waver or act confused—however confused they may have been. As anarchy in the country increased, the Petrograd Soviet did not try to prevent the Bolsheviks from having time to gather pro-Bolshevik delegates for the congress of Soviets. The congress quickly focused on gaining approval for a Bolshevik coup.

Fear of German Occupation

Germany had completed a naval operation that occupied three islands close to Petrograd. Russians now wondered if the capital should move to Moscow, which was farther inland. The Bolshevik Soviets did not want this, because it might help to strengthen the Provisional Government. When it was decided that the government would remain in Petrograd, the Bolsheviks offered their military services
Primary Source—
V.I. Lenin’s Call to Power, 1917

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. . . . We must not wait! We may lose everything! . . . History will not forgive revolutionaries for procrastinating when they could be victorious today (and they certainly will be victorious today), while they risk losing much tomorrow, in fact, they risk losing everything. If we seize power today, we seize it not in opposition to the Soviets but on their behalf. The seizure of power is the business of the uprising; its political purpose will become clear after the seizure. . . . The government is tottering. It must be given the death-blow at all costs.  

for the defense of the capital. As the only military unit not controlled by the Provisional Government, this would put the Bolsheviks in control.  

By this time, Lenin had resurfaced in Petrograd. This was extremely dangerous for him, but he did not trust that other Bolsheviks would act swiftly, decisively, and at the correct time without his being there to help direct their actions.
The October Revolution

Lenin wanted a coup to occur immediately. Kamenev and Zinoviev thought it should come later. Trotsky and some others believed that the coup should occur in conjunction with the congress of Soviets that would take place on November 7.

Lenin’s strategy was offensive, but it claimed to be defensive, hiding behind the excuse that the Germans were about to take over, so the Bolsheviks had to save the day. The Provisional Government, as usual, used half measures in its effort to contain the Bolsheviks, exposing its own lack of unity and decisiveness. Though the government shut down several Bolshevik newspapers, it failed to stop growing Bolshevik military strength. Given power by the government, the Bolsheviks, in the name of the Soviet, had formed a military-revolutionary committee called the Milrevkom. This committee controlled only a minority of Petrograd’s troops in October. By early November, however, the Milrevkom had enlisted a large number of other military units by convincing soldiers that they must defend the revolution against a weak government that might give in to the Germans.

A Bloodless Coup

On the night of November 6–7, the Bolsheviks took over the city of Petrograd. Pickets were posted, and anyone who objected was disarmed. No violence occurred as the Milrevkom took over telephone and telegraph offices, banks, bridges, and railroad lines. Military staff headquarters became Bolshevik quarters. According to one participant, in the most casual manner imaginable, “They [the Bolsheviks] entered and sat down while those who had been sitting there got up and left; thus the Staff was taken.”
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Alexander Kerensky tried to get military backup to protect the Provisional Government at the Winter Palace but failed. He fled toward the war front the next morning. However, the Winter Palace was not yet Bolshevik territory, and Lenin wanted it to be captured. The evening had gone so smoothly that no troops could be seen. The few Bolsheviks who were willing to assault the Winter Palace retreated when they heard shots.

Nevertheless, Lenin, at party headquarters, proclaimed victory for the revolution of workers, soldiers, and peasants. He drafted a declaration that recognized “sovereign power over Russia to have been assumed by a body that no one except the Bolshevik Central Committee had authorized to do so.” Because there was no violence and the night had been virtually undisturbed, on the morning of November 7, people went on with their lives as usual.

Kerensky, from the war front, tried to get the army to restore order to Petrograd. Other forces got close to Petrograd, fired a few ineffectual shots, and stopped. The governmental cabinet, trapped in the Winter Palace, sat around waiting for help. Outside defenders, tired of waiting for reinforcements, drifted away.

There were still government troops and ministers of the Provisional Government in the Winter Palace. All that day, small groups of Bolsheviks entered the palace. They let themselves be disarmed by the bedraggled government troops while trying to convince them to join the Bolshevik cause. By 2:00 a.m. on November 8, Red Guard and sailor troops were able to storm the Winter Palace without firing a shot. The Bolsheviks, with nobody trying to stop them, entered the Winter Palace and arrested the members of the cabinet. In the small room where the ministers waited, a
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Bolsheviks storm the Winter Palace during the October Revolution. Incredibly, no shots were fired during the takeover.
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revolutionary named Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko declared, “In the name of the Military and Revolutionary Committee of the Petrograd Soviet, I declare the Provisional Government deposed. All are arrested.” The former ministers were taken as prisoners to Peter and Paul Fortress.

Lenin’s declaration of successful revolution was approved by the congress of Soviets, which met until dawn. Not everyone was happy about the Bolsheviks’ success. The more moderate revolutionary delegates left the meeting to show their disapproval.

So far, the revolution had occurred without bloodshed. If not a total surprise to both the revolutionaries themselves and to people of Petrograd, the revolution was at least unexpected in its scope and suddenness. It was so sudden, in fact, that few people thought it would last until the end of the year. Trotsky, writing later about the coup, said:

If neither Lenin nor I had been present in Petersburg, there would have been no October Revolution [the coup took place in October rather than November on the old-style Russian calendar]: the leadership of the Bolshevik Party would have prevented it from occurring—of this I have not the slightest doubt! If Lenin had not been in Petersburg, I doubt whether I could have managed to conquer the resistance of the Bolshevik leaders.

While there was some disagreement among the Bolsheviks, however, some historians have questioned whether the October revolution was simply a coup or if it was backed by popular support. According to historian
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Lenin and Trotsky (right) in 1917. Trotsky credited Lenin and himself with successfully leading the October Revolution.
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Orlando Figes, “The October insurrection was a coup d’état, actively supported by a small minority of the population, but it took place amidst a social revolution, which was centered on the popular realization of Soviet power.” Whether or not the Russian population supported this coup, the Bolsheviks would care little for the opinions of the masses once they attained power.

Primary Source—
V.I. Lenin’s Speech to the Citizens of Russia, 1917

The Provisional Government has been deposed. State power has passed into the hands of the organ of the Petrograd Soviet of Workers’ and Soldiers’ Deputies— the Revolutionary Military Committee, which heads the Petrograd proletariat and the garrison.

The cause for which the people have fought, namely, the immediate offer of a democratic peace, the abolition of landed proprietorship, workers’ control over production, and the establishment of Soviet power—this cause has been secured.

Long live the revolution of workers, soldiers and peasants!
The Bolsheviks Take Over

Lenin and the Bolsheviks had been dreaming of and planning for revolution for years. Now that the revolution had taken place, however, the time had come to govern this new state that was once the Russian Empire. While the Bolsheviks were skilled in revolutionary tactics, demonstrations, and political organizing, they had no experience in government administration. Could they successfully govern a population of 150 million Russians?

The Soviet of People’s Commissars

Harold Shukman, a British philosopher, defined Bolshevism as “an impatient philosophy, which aims at creating a new world without sufficient preparation in the opinions and feelings of ordinary men and women.”¹ It was the ordinary men, women, and children of Russia who would suffer to allow that ideology to succeed.

The first thing the new Bolshevik leaders had to do was stop any threat that Alexander Kerensky could come back to Petrograd with enough army troops to stage a countercoup.
VLADIMIR LENIN and the RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Kerensky was able to gather only a small force before he once again escaped, and finally went to America. There, he wrote and lectured, living to the age of eighty.

With Kerensky gone, there remained the problem of governing. First, the Bolsheviks wanted new names for the members of the government. The old term ministers was considered too much of a reminder of the old tsarist regime. Members of the government would now be called People’s Commissars.¹ The government itself would be called the Soviet of People’s Commissars. This suggestion was Trotsky’s. Lenin liked it because it sounded revolutionary.²

Lenin was now the manager of this new government, which proposed to rule over 150 million Russians of varied class and ethnic backgrounds. As he led seemingly endless meetings, Lenin insisted that members of the Sovnarkom, the party cabinet, be on time and stick exactly to the time allotted for their speeches. Being tardy or absent resulted in punishment. Lenin himself worked constantly, as usual, but the tediousness of running a government was difficult for a man who, for years, had moved around from country to country, never having to follow a daily routine. He became continually tired.

Lenin worked to make sure state and local organizations were always under the tight control of the centralized government. According to historian Dmitri Volkogonov, “The old state machine had been broken and the new one was primitive, inefficient and from its very inception markedly bureaucratic. Perhaps even Lenin did not then realize that the new structures being erected were in fact the foundations of a vast totalitarian system.”³
The Bolsheviks Take Over

Problems With the Soviet Government

Government agencies are usually headed by professionals who have experience in the area to be handled by the agency. Someone familiar with finance, for example, would become finance minister; someone who knew about agriculture would become the head of the agriculture department, and so forth. In the new system set up by the Bolsheviks “class considerations took precedence over professionalism”\(^5\). This created clumsy, inefficient, and often corrupt government. The military, too, became disorganized as a result of many of the same kinds of decisions.

Because the “dictatorship of the proletariat”—which was actually a dictatorship of the Bolshevik party—was more important than day-to-day details, government agencies were not monitored closely to make them more effective. Disorganization in the government led to terrible food shortages and breakdowns of all kinds of essential services throughout Russia. Pressed by liberal and social democratic groups—out of power but still in existence—to hold elections for a Constituent Assembly, Lenin did so. However, when the Bolshevik party did not receive a majority of votes, Lenin simply did away with the Constituent Assembly, just as the tsar had done with the Duma in 1906 and 1907.

The Bolshevik government proceeded to mount a campaign of terror by creating the Extraordinary Commission to Combat Counter-Revolution and Sabotage (Cheka). This new agency was at least as ruthless as the tsar’s secret police had been, and it served the same function. It took as prisoners those people who disagreed politically with the Bolsheviks, threatening to execute them if any Bolsheviks came to harm.
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To make matters worse, once again, the peasants were starving. By the 1920s, between seven million and nine million children had been orphaned or abandoned because their parents had died or could no longer take care of them.

While trying to figure out how to run Russia, the Bolsheviks still had to deal with the pesky war. World War I was threatening to enter Russia once again. Although Lenin had declared neutrality and an armistice, neither Russia’s allies nor its enemies paid much attention. No one but the Germans seemed pleased that the Reds—a name for the Bolsheviks taken from their use of the color red as a symbol—had been unleashed in Russia. While the Allies helped Russian troops against German troops, they also helped counterrevolutionary, or White, troops mobilize to fight against the Bolsheviks. Soon a full-scale civil war was raging in the country. It became apparent to Lenin that World War I, at least for Russia, must be ended.

Peace With Germany

Making peace with Germany proved even more humiliating to the Russians than losing Chinese Manchuria to the Japanese had been. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, signed in March 1918 between Russia and Germany, forced Russia to give up a quarter of its territory. This area included the Baltic States, Poland, the Ukraine, part of Byelorussia, and land bordering Turkey. One third of Russia’s population, as well as many farms and industries, were located in these areas.

Lenin had no intention of honoring all the treaty’s terms. He also hoped, since world revolution was his ultimate aim, that Germany would revolt against its monarchy and join the Bolshevik cause. In the meantime, he was satisfied
The Bolsheviks Take Over

Primary Source—
From the Peace Treaty of
Brest-Litovsk, 1918

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.

Article III. The territories lying to the west of the line agreed upon by the contracting parties which formerly belonged to Russia, will no longer be subject to Russian sovereignty; the line agreed upon is traced on the map submitted as an essential part of this treaty of peace. The exact fixation of the line will be established by a Russo-German commission.⁶
VLADIMIR LENIN and the RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

The areas in black on this map show the territory that Russia gave up as a result of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.
The Bolsheviks Take Over

to have Russia out of the war. The government moved to Moscow, farther away from possible German attack, taking up headquarters in the walled Kremlin, from which tsars had ruled in the medieval past.

Violence and Disappointment

Violence reigned in the countryside. Bolsheviks were being assassinated by counterrevolutionaries. They, in turn, were killed by Bolsheviks. The new government quickly became as hated and feared as the tsars’ had been.

One of the worst tragedies of 1918 was the murder of Tsar Nicholas II and his entire family on July 17. They had been moved to Yekaterinburg, where some former members of the Provisional Government hoped to keep them safe. Fearing the tsar would be a symbol for those who opposed the Bolsheviks to rally around, the party decided it was best to eliminate Nicholas, as well as his wife and children. The entire family was brutally shot and killed in the basement of the house in which they had been staying. Nervous about public reaction, the Bolsheviks leaked the false story that only the tsar had been shot and the rest of the family had been sent away. Perhaps this marked the defining moment at which the Bolshevik Revolution became a force that was willing to ignore human suffering in pursuit of its goals.

Perhaps the revolution can best be summed up in the words of writer Maxim Gorky, once an ardent believer in Lenin and the revolution. In an essay called “Triumph Disappointed,” Gorky told of a conversation with an old revolutionary who had told him about a dream he had had:

Now that I am wide awake I can still see the triumphant people, but I feel that I am a
VLADIMIR LENIN and the RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Tsar Nicholas II and his entire family were executed by the Bolsheviks in 1918.

stranger among them... Maybe I, like many others, do not know how to triumph. All my energy went in the struggle; the expectation, the capacity for enjoying possession; is stunted...the point is that I see lots of ferocity and revenge about me, but never any joy—the joy that transfigures a man. And I do not see any faith in victory... I feel utterly miserable—just as Columbus would have felt if he had reached the coast of America only to find that it was repulsive to him.
In 1918 Lenin survived two assassination attempts. The first one, on January 14, occurred as Lenin drove through Petrograd following a speech. Protected by a friend in the backseat, Lenin was uninjured by the bullets fired at him. Then a second attempt on his life occurred on August 30. A young revolutionary named Fanny Kaplan shot at him three times while he was giving a speech at a factory. Two bullets hit their target and Lenin dropped to the ground, unconscious.

Rumors flew that he was dead, but he actually recovered faster than was expected. Before she was executed, Fanny Kaplan explained why she had tried to assassinate Lenin. She said she believed he was a traitor to the revolution, and would put the cause of socialism back many years.¹

After this attempt on his life, Lenin became even more revered by Bolsheviks and their supporters. Terrorist reprisals against “enemies of the state” increased. Full-scale civil war was soon to follow.

**Decline in Health and Death**

Lenin lived only five more years after this assassination attempt. He suffered a series of strokes that steadily
Although he relied on Joseph Stalin and admired his ruthlessness, Lenin began to distrust his colleague in the years before his death. Stalin would go on to become dictator of the Soviet Union, causing millions of deaths under his regime.

diminished first his physical strength, then his speech. He tried desperately to maintain control over party affairs right up until his third and last stroke. Lenin died on Monday, January 21, 1924.

“The Party leaders saw in the very act of Lenin’s burial an enormous opportunity for strengthening the regime,” wrote historian Dmitri Volkogonov. At first, Lenin was simply to be buried after a state ceremony. However, a new procedure that mummified bodies (preserved the flesh) had recently been discovered. It was decided to preserve Lenin’s
Lenin’s Legacy

body for permanent display to the public. This grisly idea soon took hold, and a huge mausoleum was built in the Kremlin so that Communists could make a pilgrimage to see the legendary leader of the new order.

Stalin’s Rise to Power

Before Lenin’s death, power had been passing to a handful of top Bolsheviks who were trusted by Lenin: Joseph Stalin was the party administrator; Lev Kamenev managed Moscow; Zinoviev managed Petrograd; and Leon Trotsky dealt with the army, but never having been fully accepted by the Bolsheviks, he fell from power not long after Lenin’s death.

Although it took a few years for him to emerge as the party’s undisputed leader, by 1927, Joseph Stalin had taken over Lenin’s position as the dictator of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the new name for Communist Russia. Stalin had been very clever at hiding his ruthlessness during his early years as a party leader. Still, before this death, Lenin had begun to distrust him and warned party leaders not to give Stalin great power. Lenin’s final stroke so incapacitated him, however, that he was unable to do anything to dilute Stalin’s power.

The dream of socialist equality passed, therefore, into the hands of Joseph Stalin. Like Lenin, Stalin believed consistently through his life that the final goal of Marxism—equality for all classes—justified any means to reach that end. This included the mass terror that Lenin had started and that Stalin brought into full being. By the end of Stalin’s regime, the USSR would be a nation marked by repression, censorship, and violence against those the government deemed a threat. It was Lenin, with his genuinely admirable
VLADIMIR LENIN and the RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

Primary Source—Stalin’s Speech on Lenin’s Death, 1924

Comrades, we Communists are people of a special mould. We are made of a special stuff. We are those who form the army of the great proletarian strategist, the army of Comrade Lenin. There is nothing higher than the honour of belonging to this army. There is nothing higher than the title of member of the Party whose founder and leader was Comrade Lenin. It is not given to everyone to be a member of such a party. It is the sons of the working class, the sons of want and struggle, the sons of incredible privation and heroic effort who before all should be members of such a party. That is why the Party of the Leninists, the Party of the Communists, is also called the Party of the working class.

DEPARTING FROM US, COMRADE LENIN ENJOINED US TO HOLD HIGH AND GUARD THE PURITY OF THE GREAT TITLE OF MEMBER OF THE PARTY, WE VOW TO YOU, COMRADE LENIN, WE SHALL FULFIL YOUR BEHEST WITH HONOUR!
A pro-Communist crowd marches to the mausoleum holding Lenin's body to mark the eighty-fifth anniversary of his death. Today, Lenin remains a significant, if divisive, figure in Russian history.
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qualities of courage, determination, intelligence, and single-mindedness, who helped pave the way for Stalin’s Terror: “Convinced that their own ideas were the key to the future of the world . . . the Russian intelligentsia divided up the world into the forces of ‘progress’ and ‘reaction,’ friends and enemies of the people’s cause, leaving no room for doubters in between. Here were the origins of the totalitarian worldview.”

Today, the USSR, the world superpower that grew out of the Russian Revolution, has been dissolved. Years of financial troubles and the increasing desire of the people for greater freedom caused the fall of the Soviet system in the late 1980s. Since then, Russia has continued to experience difficulties while reasserting itself as a world power. Vladimir Putin, the President of Russia from 2000 to 2008 and then again from 2012 to today, has received criticism for imprisoning political activists, consolidating his own power, and Russian military intervention in Ukraine (which was part of the USSR, but has been an independent country since its fall). As Lenin learned when he and the Bolsheviks replaced the Provisional Government and the tsarist system, creating meaningful and humane change can be a difficult task.

Fifteen years after the fall of the Soviet Union, the people’s wish for a more democratic nation has not yet been completely fulfilled. Much work remains to accomplish what Lenin failed to achieve: “an end to wars, peace among the nations, [and] the cessation of pillaging and violence.”
1870—April 22: Lenin (Vladimir Ilych Ulyanov) is born in Simbirsk, Russia, on April 22.

1881—March 13: Tsar Alexander II is assassinated.

1886—January 24: Lenin’s father dies.

1887—May 20: Lenin’s brother, Alexander Ulyanov, is executed.

August 25: Lenin enters Kazan University.

December 17: Lenin is arrested for participation in a student protest demonstration.

1891—Lenin passes law examination at St. Petersburg University.

1892—Lenin works as a lawyer in Samara.

1895—May–September: Lenin travels abroad and meets Georgi Plekhanov.

December 21: Lenin is arrested in St. Petersburg.

1897—Lenin starts three-year exile in Siberia.

1898—March: Russian Social Democratic Labor party (RSDLP) founded in Minsk, Russia.


1900—February 10: Lenin’s exile ends.

March: Lenin arrives in St. Petersburg.

June 3: Lenin is arrested but is released ten days later.

June 29: Lenin leaves Russia to go to Western Europe.

1902—March: Lenin’s What Is to Be Done? is published.

1903—July–August: Second congress of RSDLP is held in Brussels, Belgium; the Bolshevik and Menshevik factions split.


September 5: Peace treaty with Japan signed in Portsmouth, New Hampshire.

October 30: Manifesto signed by Nicholas II, promising civil rights and the Duma.

November 21: Lenin arrives in St. Petersburg.


July 21: First Duma dissolved; Pëtr Stolypin is appointed prime minister.
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1907—January–April: Lenin lives in Finland.
December: Lenin moves to Switzerland.

1908—December: Lenin moves to Paris, France.

1911—Stolypin is assassinated.

1912—June: Lenin moves to Poland.

1914—July 30: Russia prepares for war with Germany.
August 1: Germany declares war on Russia.
August 3: World War I begins.
August 8: Lenin is arrested in Austrian Poland.
August 19: Lenin is released.

September: Lenin leaves for Switzerland.

1915—September: Tsar Nicholas II takes over as commander of Russian forces.

1916—December 30: Rasputin is murdered in Petrograd.

1917—March 8: February Revolution begins in Petrograd.
March 15: Provisional Government is formed; Nicholas II abdicates.
April 16: Lenin arrives in Petrograd.
May: Bolshevik Red Guard is formed.
November 6: Bolshevik Red Guards take over Petrograd.

December 20: Cheka is established.

1918—January 14: Assassination attempt on Lenin.
March 3: Treaty of Brest-Litovsk signed between Russia and Germany.
July 17: Tsar Nicholas II and his family are murdered.

1922—April: Stalin becomes General Secretary of the Communist party.

1924—January 21: Lenin dies. Three days later, St. Petersburg is renamed Leningrad.

1991—Leningrad is restored to its former name, St. Petersburg.
CHAPTER 1. A Revolutionary Beginning


CHAPTER 2. The Ulyanov Family

4. Ibid., 50.
5. Volkogonov, 11.
7. Ibid., 49.
9. Ibid.
10. Volkogonov, 12.
11. Payne, 52; Clark, 10.

CHAPTER 3. The Seeds of Revolution

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3. Ibid., 4.
6. Wolfe, 64.

CHAPTER 4. A Revolutionary Is Born

2. Ibid., 19.
10. Ibid., 26, 27.

CHAPTER 5. Lenin in Exile

Chapter Notes

7. Ibid., 34.

CHAPTER 6. Growing Pains in the Party

4. Ibid., 146.
5. Ibid., 145.
8. Ibid., 50.
10. Ibid., 55.

CHAPTER 7. The Road to Revolution

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5. Pipes, 40.
6. Ibid., 41.
7. Ibid., 42.

CHAPTER 8. Stunted Reforms

2. Ibid., 81.
3. Ibid.
5. Shukman, 81.

CHAPTER 9. The Great War

Chapter Notes

CHAPTER 10. The February Revolution

4. Ibid., 81.
5. Ibid., 82–83.
6. Ibid., 84.
8. Pipes, 80.

CHAPTER 11. Lenin’s Rise to Power

5. Pipes, 115.
8. Pipes., 120.
10. Volkogonov, 139.
12. Volkogonov, 140.

CHAPTER 12. The October Revolution

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 137.
5. Ibid., 183.
6. Pipes, 139.
8. Pipes, 139–140.
9. Ibid., 145.
10. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 274–275.

CHAPTER 13. The Bolsheviks Take Over

3. Ibid., 163.
4. Ibid., 167.
5. Ibid., 166.
Chapter Notes


CHAPTER 14. Lenin’s Legacy


2. Ibid., 436.


autocracy—A government that is ruled by one person with total power.

Bolsheviks—Led by Lenin, this radical faction of the RSDLP fought for revolution in Russia.

bourgeoisie—Middle-class business owners.

capitalism—The economic system in which businesses are owned and run by private individuals, leading to competition in a free market.

communism—A social and economic system in which property is shared between all members of a community or state.

constitutional monarchy—A form of government in which a king or queen governs with a parliament and his or her powers are restricted by the constitution.

coup—The overthrow of an established government.

Duma—An elected legislature, created by Tsar Nicholas II in 1905.

feudalism—A social system in which the nobility was given land from the monarchy and peasants were forced to live on and work their lord’s land in exchange for protection.

Ispolkom—The executive committee formed in 1917 to unify and organize soviet groups and run the government.

Mensheviks—The more moderate faction of the RSDLP that believed that violence could be avoided through democratic means.

proletariat—The working class.

Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP)—The communist party that fought for revolution in Russia and split into two separate parties: the Bolsheviks and the Mensheviks.

serf—A peasant who, under feudalism, was bound to live and work on his lord’s estate.

Soviets—Representative governmental bodies, meaning “council” in Russian, that were set up during the Russian Revolution.

tsar—The emperor of Russia.

Zemstva—Local government institutions set up by Tsar Alexander II to end feudalism.
Books

Websites
Russian Revolution
www.history.com/topics/russian-revolution
The History Channel presents an overview of the Russian Revolution along with several short educational videos.

Lenin Internet Archive
www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/index.htm
Website includes Lenin’s works, biography, images, and audio.

Vladimir Lenin
www.biography.com/people/vladimir-lenin-9379007
Provides an account of Lenin’s life as well as several videos.
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