



# REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA: 1917 – 1941

J. Dallimore

## Introduction:

This table provides a brief introduction to the events of the Russian Revolution focusing on the period 1917 – 1941. It focuses on **eight key themes** of the period:

- Socialism
- The Party
- Government and the state
- The economy
- The peasants and proletariat
- The nationalities
- Society and culture
- Foreign Policy

The table is designed to **compare** and **contrast** the main developments in the period by dividing the 24-year block of time into three sub-periods: pre-1917, 1917 – 24 and 1928 – 41.

This should provide a starting point for analysing two key questions that are central to this period of Russia's revolutionary history:

***How did the Russian revolution unfold from 1917 to 1941?***

and

***Why were the Bolsheviks' attempts to implement their plans of 1917 so deeply frustrated?***

Words **emboldened** in the table are included in the brief glossary at the end of this document.

**NOTE:** Most of the factual detail for this table was drawn from the following works but cannot be cited due to formatting constraints:  
Christian, D (1994: 1997) *Power and Privilege: The Russian Empire, The Soviet Union and the Challenge of Modernity*, Longman Cheshire  
Gooding, J (2002) *Socialism in Russia: Lenin and His Legacy, 1890 – 1991*, Palgrave-MacMillan  
Kotkin, S (1997) *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation*, University of California Press  
Lowe, N (2002) *Mastering 20<sup>th</sup> Century Russian History*, Palgrave

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	PRE-OCTOBER 1917	1917 – 24 (LENIN)	1928 – 1941 (STALIN)
<b>Socialism</b>	<p>Classic Marxism seems to suggest that ‘socialism’ would <i>emerge</i> from industrial societies as class conflict intensified.</p> <p>Prior to the <b>October Revolution</b>, Lenin had developed the idea that socialism would be <i>created</i> (first in Russia) by the Bolshevik Party and its loyal supporters. This process of creating socialism would begin after a dramatic seizure of power from the Provisional Government. This process would also be aided by Western European nations who were expected to experience similar revolutionary events. The Bolsheviks thought this would be likely to occur in the near future since World War One was creating mass social dislocation. In essence, Lenin argued that the Bolsheviks could seize control of the old tsarist state and use it to steer Russia towards socialism.</p> <p>To give their revolution the best hope of successfully building socialism, John Gooding (<i>Socialism in Russia</i>) notes that the Bolsheviks required three important developments:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Revolutions in Western Europe (Germany was expected to follow first)</li> <li>2. Rapid economic recovery in Russia (the creation of material abundance).</li> <li>3. Rapid expansion of support for the revolutionary movement/government in Russia.</li> </ol> <p>The Bolsheviks believed that the future Communist society that would emerge from this scenario would be modern, industrialised, classless (egalitarian) and produce a better standard of living for the majority of citizens.</p>	<p>In October 1917 the Bolsheviks seized power through the Soviet movement. Directly after this seizure of power, the Congress of Soviets, issued three important decrees: peace with Germany, <b>nationalisation</b> of land and the formation of a new government called <b>Sovnarkom</b>.</p> <p>In 1919 the Treaty of Versailles between Germany and the Entente Powers was signed. This greatly damaged the prospect of revolution in Western Europe. It also effectively left Russia alone as a socialist state. Furthermore, many Western European powers were very hostile to <b>Sovnarkom</b> since it had withdrawn Russia from World War One and refused to repay money borrowed from the West by the Tsars and <b>Provisional Government</b>.</p> <p>Between 1918 and 1920 Russia experienced a full-scale <b>Civil War</b> that devastated the people and the economy. This essentially ruined any chance of a speedy economic recovery that would help to drive the creation of socialism in Russia.</p> <p>Attitudes towards <b>Sovnarkom</b> inside Russia became more negative which created further challenges. <b>Sovnarkom</b> soon became a <i>minority</i> Party ruling over a <i>majority</i> of the population. This was a great setback to the Bolsheviks since Lenin envisaged the creation of <b>socialism</b> as a <i>collaborative</i> effort between the Party and a steadily increasing majority of the people.</p> <p>All of this required the Bolsheviks to rethink the <b>socialist</b> experiment in Russia. For Lenin and many other Bolsheviks like Bukharin, this meant that <b>socialism</b> was likely to emerge over a much longer period than they had assumed prior to October 1917. It also meant that the Party would have to retain ‘vanguard’ status for much longer than anticipated.</p>	<p>After Lenin’s death in 1924, Stalin emerged as the most powerful of the ‘Old Bolsheviks’ by about 1928-29. He rose to prominence in the context of debates within the Party regarding the economy and the future of socialism in Russia/Europe.</p> <p>Stalin also rose to prominence in very difficult international circumstances. Russia was still largely isolated from Europe and treated with great suspicion. In the 1930s, the Great Depression struck Europe and facilitated the rise of extreme right-wing groups (eg. the Nazis in Germany) who were radically opposed to the ideas of <b>socialism</b> and, therefore, to the USSR.</p> <p>In this context, Stalin argued that <b>socialism</b> in Russia (let alone the world) was in great danger if the <b>USSR</b> did not take immediate and drastic action to ensure the survival of their revolution. He favored rapid <b>industrialisation</b> of the <b>USSR</b> to ensure that it could build a strong military to defend itself. He also favored an uncompromising approach to anyone within the <b>USSR</b> who opposed the state or failed to join in the great modernising project that was initiated in 1928.</p> <p>Stalin’s overarching aim for the <b>USSR</b> was captured in a statement he made in 1931: “<i>We are 50 to 100 years behind the advanced countries [i.e. Western European capitalist nations]. We must make up this gap in 10 years. Either we do this or they crush us.</i>” Stalin’s ‘revolution from above’ from 1928 was quite successful in creating some core elements of a <b>socialist</b> society (especially <b>industrialisation</b> and the destruction of the <b>free market</b> in the <b>USSR</b>). Although it claimed otherwise, the Stalinist state had greater difficulty in promoting other core elements of socialism such as egalitarianism, higher standards of living and world revolution.</p>



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<b>The Party</b>	<p>The Bolsheviks saw themselves as the most suitable group to lead the ‘exploited people’ of Russia toward a new and better society.</p> <p>Under Nicholas II’s rule the Bolsheviks became an underground movement who had to be highly secretive and organised in order to survive. To avoid detection and arrest by the Okhrana, they became conspiratorial and used devious tactics (such as bank robberies) to fund their movement. Many Party members also lived abroad for long periods of time since living in Russia was too dangerous.</p> <p>By 1917 Lenin had developed an image of the Party as a ‘<b>vanguard</b>’ movement’ that would lead the Russian people to socialism. He thought that after seizing power in the name of the people, many Russians would enthusiastically support them. He also thought that over time the Party would become <i>less</i> important to the new society since the people would begin to take control of the economy and social organisation.</p> <p>Lenin thought that the Party would manage the <b>Dictatorship of the Proletariat</b> (DoP). This DoP would give the exploited Russian people a voice but also give them the means to crush any small ‘counter-revolutionary’ groups that might try to challenge their authority. The DoP, Lenin argued, would only need to exist for a short time since revolutions in the West and the Russian peoples’ support for the new socialist government would eliminate opposition. Their enthusiasm would also drive an economic recovery that would generate material abundance and allow a rapid transition toward <b>socialism/Communism</b>.</p>	<p>Throughout the <b>Civil War</b> period (1918 – 1920), The Bolsheviks found it increasingly hard to ‘hand over’ control of Russia to the people. In fact, in this period the Bolshevik Party came to dominate the Soviet movement and the new government <b>Sovnarkom</b>. Other political parties were banned and only trusted Bolsheviks served in important political positions.</p> <p>During the <b>Civil War</b>, the Party had to fight incredibly hard to ensure their own survival and the survival of the revolution they had initiated in 1917. Rather than handing over power to the people, the Bolsheviks increasingly amassed power in their own hands. In other words, power was becoming <b>centralised</b> and began to resemble rule by <b>oligarchy</b>. The Bolsheviks claimed to be doing this in order to ensure that the revolution was not defeated by the <b>White armies</b> and their capitalist allies (eg. Britain, the USA and Japan).</p> <p>From 1918 – 1924 the Party began to look less like a small, <b>vanguard</b> movement and more like a ‘mass party’. In 1917 the Bolsheviks had 24 000 members and by 1924 they had 472 000.</p> <p>There was a growing concern among the ‘Old Bolsheviks’ that new members to the Party did not share their deep political convictions. They were concerned that if they were not careful, new members would ‘dilute’ the tight-knit and highly disciplined Party they had created before 1917.</p> <p>These concerns were the basis for early <b>purges</b> within the Party in the 1920s. The leaders tried to reduce the size of the Bolshevik Party by expelling members for a range of misdemeanors that called into question their commitment to building <b>socialism</b>.</p>	<p>From the 472 000 members of the Party in 1924, numbers grew rapidly under Stalin’s leadership. By 1941 the <b>Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU)</b> (the new name for the Bolsheviks) had over 3.8 million members. The vast majority of these members were ‘new Bolsheviks’ who had not been involved in the planning or execution of the <b>October Revolution</b>.</p> <p>After Lenin’s death the great debates of the early 1920s returned with greater force. The <b>CPSU</b>’s leadership could not agree on how socialism should be built in Russia. The <b>NEP</b> had helped stabilise the economy after WW1 and the <b>Civil War</b> but it was only capable of producing material abundance and <b>industrialisation slowly</b>. For some leaders like Bukharin, this was the <b>USSR</b>’s best opportunity to <i>safely</i> build socialism. For others like Trotsky it was far too slow. These debates were only resolved when Stalin forced through the ‘Great Breakthrough’ from 1928 which aimed to rapidly <b>industrialise</b> the <b>USSR</b> and quickly build its military might.</p> <p>In the Stalinist era, two contradictory trends within the Party were evident. Firstly, the Party reached its largest size since 1917. At the same time, the Party was <b>purged</b> with far greater frequency and violence than at any other stage of Russia’s revolutionary history (eg. The <b>Purges</b> and <b>Show Trials</b> of 1930s). By 1941, this meant that the Party had radically changed its nature. The small <b>vanguard</b> movement of committed older intellectuals of Lenin’s day had become an incredibly large party. It was mainly made up of younger men who had not been part of the October coup but had come to place their hopes in the promises of the <b>CPSU</b> and Stalin.</p>

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<p><b>The Government or 'State'</b></p>	<p>In traditional Marxist thought, after a revolution, one of the main trends would be the 'withering away of the <b>state</b>'. In other words, Marx thought that traditional governments would become <i>smaller</i> in size and <i>less</i> important to the running of <b>socialist/Communist</b> nations. Instead of large governments, people would organise <i>themselves</i> collectively. True Communist societies, it was thought, would be organised for the benefit of all people rather than the interests of a small group.</p> <p>The Bolsheviks certainly agreed with this general vision. They did, however, have a fairly particular idea of how this process would need to work in Russia since its circumstances were different to Western Europe (which Marx had focused on). Lenin had argued that the tsarist <b>state</b> of 1917 could be <i>seized</i> by the revolutionary movement and used to <i>create</i> socialism quickly in Russia. The Bolsheviks planned to take over power and use government institutions (eg. banks, railroads, postal services, etc.) to help revive the Russian economy. They would ensure that this was done quickly and in the interests of the majority of the people.</p> <p>Similar to Lenin's arguments regarding the <b>Dictatorship of the Proletariat</b> (DoP), Lenin also thought that, once the state had achieved its purpose, it could be gradually minimised. He also argued that it could eventually disappear altogether. Lenin certainly agreed with Marx's general idea that a future <b>Communist</b> society would have no real need for a traditional <b>state</b>.</p>	<p>The Civil War did not allow the Bolsheviks to oversee a 'withering away of the state'. In fact the size, strength and power of the Soviet <b>state</b> <i>grew</i> between 1917 and 1924. The <b>Cheka</b> was established in December 1918 and grew steadily in size throughout the Civil War period. Although Lenin still believed that this situation was only temporary, he conceded that, for the foreseeable future, it was necessary to ensure the safety of socialism in the <b>RSFSR</b>.</p> <p>Before Lenin's death in 1924, he succeeded in pushing <b>Sovnarkom</b> towards two main goals regarding the state and its future:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. That no power could be shared with anyone but the proletariat and the Party that represented it (i.e. the <b>CPSU</b>).</li> <li>2. That this power should be used to foster a <i>better</i> relationship with the people after the devastation of the Civil War.</li> </ol> <p>At 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1921, the Party decided that the policies of <b>War Communism</b> needed to be replaced by the <b>New Economic Policy</b> (NEP). This gave much greater freedom to the peasants by replacing food requisitioning with a more gentle 'tax-in-kind'. Within the <b>USSR</b> productivity quickly increased, small markets reappeared and small private businesses began to operate.</p> <p>At the same time, all alternative political parties were finally abolished and <b> censorship</b> was tightened. Even within the <b>CPSU</b>, any dissenting voices were silenced through the <b>decree</b> 'On Party Unity' which placed a ban on <b>factionalism</b>. Most important jobs in the <b>USSR</b> were also given to Party members by appointment (this group of appointees became known as the <b>nomenklatura</b>).</p>	<p>By 1941 the <b>USSR</b> had, in an administrative sense, become larger. In 1922 the <b>USSR</b> had 4 member states. By 1941 there were 16. The total population living within the <b>USSR</b> in 1926 was about 148 million and in 1941 about 196 million.</p> <p>In the Stalin era, the <b>USSR</b> was governed by a <b>Constitution</b> (there were two: 1924 and 1936). This meant that the Union was organised through a complex federalist system. In general, the governing of the <b>USSR</b> was exercised through <b>dictatorship</b> and <b>oligarchy</b>.</p> <p>During the Stalin period almost all aspects of the Soviet state expanded. The size of the Soviet <b>bureaucracy</b> grew as the government took more direct control over all aspects of life. For example, the role of '<b>Gosplan</b>' (the central body responsible for economic planning) became far larger and more important when the <b>Five Year Plans</b> were implemented. This necessitated an expansion of the <b>nomenklatura</b> as the most important posts were filled by appointment rather than merit selection.</p> <p>Two other institutions that became more important to the <b>USSR</b> in the period were the <b>OGPU/NKVD</b> (security) and <b>Gulag</b> (prison camps). <b>Gulag</b> was established in 1930 and housed 500 000 inmates in 1934. By 1941 this had risen to 2 million. Growth in the size of inmate necessitated a growth in the size of guards, administrators, etc.</p> <p>The reason for this expansion was the growth of 'terror' itself. In the <b>USSR</b> the reliance on terror grew after Kirov's murder/the 'Kirov Decrees' in 1934. It reached its peak in the 'Great Terror' of 1937 – 38. In 1937 alone 700 000 Soviet citizens were executed including 60% of the military's upper command. Many of the most important cases were publicised through the 'Show Trials'.</p>

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<b>The Economy</b>	<p>There are at least three important themes in Marxist thinking about economy:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. That <b>Capitalism</b> (the main organising system for Western European economies in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) had been useful in developing a broad level of material abundance.</li> <li>2. The process that delivered this material abundance was, however, prone to crisis and was generally <b>exploitative</b> of the vast majority of people within the system. Marx saw the ability to ‘own’ resources privately as a core reason for exploitation since it allowed a small number of people to accumulate huge amounts of wealth and use this wealth to maintain their position of privilege.</li> <li>3. A more stable and rational system of economics could be created after a successful revolution. Instead of competition and crisis, this new economy would be defined by planning, stability and equality. In addition, the new economy would be more productive than <b>capitalism</b> and result in higher living standards for all.</li> </ol> <p>In the lead up to October 1917, this faith in a future <b>socialist</b> economy lay at the heart of the Bolsheviks’ vision. Once the Party and the <b>proletariat</b> in Russia seized power, they could abolish private property and begin rebuilding the economy through central planning. The revolutionary enthusiasm of the people would underpin this economic transformation.</p>	<p>The expected economic miracle of the revolution did not transpire in the new <b>RSFSR</b>. In fact, the opposite did. This was disastrous for the Bolsheviks who knew that without a swift economic recovery, the task of building <b>socialism</b> quickly would be near impossible.</p> <p>In the realm of industry, <b>Sovnarkom</b> immediately began to <b>nationalise</b> large factories. Lenin hoped to oversee a period of ‘transition’ where workers’ committees would manage the factories and full control of the workers would emerge over time. In 1917 industrial production in the <b>RSFSR</b> had fallen to 30% of pre-war output and the <b>Civil War</b> only made production more difficult. In the context of the growing conflict, Lenin called for ‘iron discipline’ to overcome these challenges. Lenin advocated using old bourgeois bosses/managers to help train the workers and manage factories in these difficult times. This received much criticism from leftist thinkers in the Party who regarded it as a concession to the capitalists and a lack of faith in the proletariat. As the <b>Civil War</b> intensified from March 1918, the more rigid and demanding policies of ‘<b>War Communism</b>’ took effect.</p> <p>Agriculture was also difficult to manage in this period (see section below on ‘peasants’). <b>Nationalisation</b> of land and early attempts at <b>collectivisation</b> were chaotic and produced much resentment among the peasantry. Securing food supply to the Red Army during the <b>Civil War</b> became the highest priority.</p> <p>At the 10<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in 1921 the Bolsheviks decided on a more lenient set of economic policies to give the people ‘breathing space’. These policies became known as the <b>NEP</b> (New Economic Policy).</p>	<p>In November 1929 Stalin wrote in Pravda: “<i>We are advancing full steam ahead along the path of industrialization – to socialism, leaving behind the age old “Russian” backwardness. We are becoming a country of metal, a country of automobiles, a country of tractors.</i>” The ‘Great Break’ of 1928/29 aimed to move away from the more relaxed <b>NEP</b> and make this dream a reality.</p> <p>The overall idea was to develop a socialist economy based around coherent planning rather than the chaotic markets used in <b>capitalist</b> societies. This meant a clear break with the <b>NEP</b> and the attempt to build a non-<b>capitalist</b> path to growth, industry and prosperity.</p> <p>Agriculture was rapidly <b>collectivised</b> from 1929. This turned 96% of the USSR’s 25 million small strip farms that existed in 1924 into 230 000 large, state-owned <b>collective</b> farms (Russian: ‘Kolkhozy’ and ‘Sovkhozy’) by 1940. This was a chaotic and brutal process as peasants resisted the ‘all-out drive’ for <b>collectivisation</b>. These <b>collectivised</b> farms increased state procurements of grain from 10 million tons in 1928 to 22 million tons by 1933.</p> <p>From 1929 the <b>USSR</b> began implementing a series of three <b>Five Year Plans</b> (Russian: ‘Piataletka’). These were developed by the state planning agency <b>Gosplan</b> and set targets for production in all areas of economic life. The expectations were incredibly high and the proletariat was worked incredibly hard to achieve these targets. They were far less rational than the government proclaimed but Soviet industrial output doubled in the period 1929 – 1933. In addition, the people’s access to consumer goods never reached the levels seen in the West.</p>

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<p><b>The Proletariat and the Peasants</b></p>	<p>In traditional Marxist thinking, the proletariat (urban workers) would be the most ‘revolutionary class’ in society since they were experiencing the worst elements of capitalist <b>exploitation</b>. It was also thought that they would become the largest ‘class’ in society as industry expanded.</p> <p>By 1917, the Bolsheviks had already made alterations to this prediction for Russia since it had not experienced capitalism in the same way as many Western European nations. With relatively low levels of <b>industrialisation</b> in Russia, the <b>proletariat</b> only numbered about 2.5 million in 1917 (out of a population of more than 180 million). This seemed to indicate that Russia did not possess the large revolutionary working class that Marx regarded as integral to a successful revolution.</p> <p>The Bolsheviks figured that Russia’s case was different to Western Europe’s and needed to be rethought. They argued that most of Russia’s peasants (10 million families of about 15 million) experienced similar exploitation to the proletariat. In the event of a <b>socialist</b> take-over of power, the Bolsheviks thought that these peasants would <i>unite</i> with the <b>Proletariat</b> in an enthusiastic bid to create a new social order. Lenin referred to this union between the proletariat and the peasants as the <b>Smychka</b>.</p> <p>For Lenin, the revolution would only survive and flourish if it successfully fostered this <b>Smychka</b>. He also believed that this union could not and should not be forced by the <b>state</b>. Lenin’s overall emphasis was on <i>collaboration</i>, not coercion.</p>	<p>In Lenin’s thinking, the Russian <b>Proletariat</b> would grow rapidly after the revolution as a new economic miracle unfolded. The <b>socialist</b> economy and the trade that they hoped would flow from Western nations would help Russia <b>industrialise</b> and produce material abundance in a relatively short period of time.</p> <p>The opposite of this happened. The <b>Civil War</b> devastated Russia’s already troubled economy and no other socialist nations appeared in Western Europe. The size of the Russian <b>proletariat</b> declined quickly as many urban workers fled back to the countryside or joined the Red Army. From a size of 2.5 million in 1917, the Russian <b>proletariat</b> fell to less than 1 million by 1920. The Bolsheviks no longer had a special ‘revolutionary class’ that would help them lead the people to <b>socialism</b>.</p> <p><b>Sovnarkom’s</b> ‘Decree on Land’ announced in October 1917 sped up the process of peasants taking over land that had begun earlier that year. In the process, the 16 million ‘strip farms’ of the tsarist empire turned into 25 million. Despite the excitement that this entailed, the <b>Smychka</b> proved much harder to facilitate than had been hoped. In 1918 a grain crisis struck the major cities of Russia and <b>Sovnarkom</b> ordered armed men to go into the countryside and <b>requisition</b> grain at a fixed price. Many peasants resisted and the process quickly became violent. The <b>Cheka</b> reported over 100 peasant uprisings between July and November 1918 alone. The ‘gap’ between peasants and proletariat widened and it became increasingly difficult for <b>Sovnarkom</b> to claim to represent the peasants given their harsh approach towards them.</p>	<p>As early as 1925 Stalin had claimed: <i>“To transform our country from an agrarian one into an industrial one ... that is our general line.”</i> From 1929 this vision began to be implemented and the life of Soviet peasants and <b>Proletariat</b> took radically new directions as a result. The new ‘planned economy’ and <b>collectivised</b> farms changed many old patterns of life and stimulated new developments in the nation’s history.</p> <p>In the countryside, 96% of farmed land in the USSR was <b>collectivised</b> by 1940. The process of <b>collectivisation</b> was brutal as the Stalinist regime simultaneously pursued a policy of <b>dekulakisation</b> aimed to break the influence of ‘richer peasants’ in the countryside. There was much violence and resistance throughout the process but the state essentially succeeded in asserting its influence over the peasants by force. The <b>USSR’s</b> peasants also suffered several famines in the 1930s. The Ukraine, Kazakhstan and the Northern Caucasus were the hardest hit by these.</p> <p>The <b>USSR’s</b> proletariat expanded in the 1930s. This had been the Bolsheviks’ traditional support base and it was central to Lenin’s original vision of creating <b>socialism</b> in Russia. Between 1926 and 1938 the urban population grew from 26 million to 55 million. During the three <b>Five Year Plans</b> (‘Piataletka’) Stalin proclaimed their success in doubling industrial output between 1929 and 1933. Massive industrial cities like Magnitogorsk showcased Russia’s new <b>industrialisation</b>.</p> <p>Overall, the economy still suffered chaotic episodes of oversupply and undersupply and despite the regime’s claims of success, promises of plenty were never really fulfilled.</p>



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J. Dallimore

	PRE-OCTOBER 1917	1917 – 24 (LENIN)	1928 – 1941 (STALIN)
<p><b>The Nationalities</b></p>	<p>Before the <b>October Revolution</b>, about 57% of the Russian empire’s population was made up of ethnic minorities (eg. Poles, Finns, Jews, etc.). These groups had been brought into the empire mainly by force and many had made bold attempts to break away from St. Petersburg’s control. Lenin thought that these groups would become another important force behind the revolution after a <b>socialist</b> seizure of power.</p> <p>Lenin generally thought that after a successful revolution in Russia, ethnic minorities could be given the opportunity to secede and establish their own, autonomous states. Many saw this as dangerous thinking since Russia may stand to lose a huge portion of its population and some of its best arable land (eg. in the Ukraine).</p> <p>Lenin argued that after breaking away, these groups would see that they had more in common with <b>socialist</b> Russia than the capitalist West. He also argued that they would appreciate the positive treatment they had received from the new <b>socialist</b> state and develop a friendly view of the <b>USSR</b>.</p> <p>In the end, Lenin expected that even if the national minorities broke away, they would soon return to form a harmonious <b>USSR</b>. In this union they would have relative freedom to develop their own culture (language, arts, etc.) while the <b>RSFSR</b> would guide them in a federal system. Over time, Lenin thought that old nationalist cultures would give way to a new <b>internationalist</b>, proletarian culture.</p>	<p><b>Sovnarkom</b> also had great difficulty in securing the willing allegiance of Russia’s ethnic minorities after October.</p> <p>In some smaller states like Latvia and Estonia, local Bolsheviks were quite successful in elections that were held after the regions seceded. In the more populous areas of Ukraine, Finland and Poland the opposite was the case. In Poland, for example, a new popular <b>Menshivik</b> government was installed.</p> <p>This threatened Lenin’s vision of the ethnic minorities freely <i>choosing</i> to form a Soviet Socialist Union with the <b>RSFSR</b>. This raised a difficult question for the Bolsheviks: if the minorities did not <i>chose</i> to join a socialist Union, should they be forced to do so?</p> <p>Lenin favored a lenient attitude to the nationalities. He hoped to create a ‘federalist’ union that allowed the minorities to remain reasonably <b>autonomous</b> while still having some connection to Moscow. More hardline members of the Party favored a tougher approach that <i>forced</i> the minorities into a ‘centralised’ Union that was tightly governed from Moscow and gave little autonomy to the smaller republics. In the 1920s a mix of the ‘federalist’ and ‘centralist’ approaches was adopted.</p> <p>By 1924, <b>Sovnarkom</b> had dragged most of the former tsarist territories into the <b>USSR</b> controlled by the <b>RSFSR</b> in Moscow. In large part this was done by force. Moscow controlled most major political decisions but there was relative freedom of cultural expression and members of the different republics were promoted into important positions of government in the <b>USSR</b>.</p>	<p>In the late 1920s and early 1930s, the <b>USSR</b> pursued a similar line regarding the ethnic minorities. Even in the 1936 Constitution the minorities were officially respected and were given the right to express their distinctive cultures.</p> <p>In reality, from 1932 the <b>USSR</b> began to take a more hardline approach to the nationalities. Partly in response to peasant resistance to <b>collectivisation</b> in the Ukraine, Kazakhstan and other areas, there was a crack-down on non-Russian cultural expression. Ukrainian language schools were closed and it became more difficult to freely express national culture through festivals/celebrations. During the second half of the 1930s Russian culture was promoted over minority cultures. Russian was made the official language of the <b>USSR</b> in 1938 and all decision-making power for agriculture, taxation, justice, health, etc. was <b>centralised</b> into the hands of the <b>RSFSR</b> although this was always formalised through the constitution of the <b>USSR</b>.</p> <p>This did not make it impossible to express distinctive culture through celebrations, language or ceremonies but it became much more difficult and was treated with greater suspicion.</p> <p>In the most extreme cases of the late 1930s, some historians have claimed that the <b>USSR</b> practiced ‘ethnic cleansing’ with the harshest critics going so far as to label some events as ‘genocidal’.</p> <p>In general, by the end of the 1930s power in the <b>USSR</b> had become much more ‘centralist’. Most power was in the <b>RSFSR</b>’s hands and Russian culture was promoted above all others inside the Union.</p>



## REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA: 1917 – 1941

J. Dallimore

	PRE-OCTOBER 1917	1917 – 24 (LENIN)	1928 – 1941 (STALIN)
<b>Society and Culture</b>	<p>Marxism is essentially founded on ‘materialist’ ideas. In a basic sense, what this means is that history is mainly driven by <i>material circumstances</i> (rather than supernatural or spiritual forces such as gods or souls). Marxism basically claims that if material circumstances change then the people living in those circumstances will/can also change. For example, if <b>capitalism</b> was replaced with <b>socialism</b> as the main organising principle in society, then people would begin to change the way they thought and behaved. It would effect the family, art, work, etc.</p> <p>Prior to October 1917, the Bolsheviks had developed a strong commitment to the idea that a revolution would radically alter the material circumstances of Russia. The new planned, <b>socialist</b> economy and the abundance it produced would provide a very different foundation for life in Russia than had been experienced under the tsars. In the broadest sense, life would become less competitive and more fulfilling since food and consumer goods would be provided to everyone according to their need. The result would be that the people would become more content.</p> <p>In addition, the new society would provide a platform for a much ‘higher culture’ than any produced in a <b>capitalist</b> society. It was believed that where <b>capitalism</b> had produced competition, crisis and the division of society into classes, <b>socialism</b> would produce cooperation, stability and equality. In these circumstances the family, education and even the individual self could be remade and <i>improved</i>. This is one reason why many people consider Marxism a <b>utopian</b> philosophy.</p>	<p>Although the 1920s saw most major elements of <b>capitalism</b> removed from Russia, the economic base of the nation was not founded on material abundance.</p> <p>The great changes and challenges of the early 1920s resulted in large emigrations of Russian elites. Many artists, writers and intellectuals fled Russia in the face of the new regime. Some, like the composer Prokofiev and the write Maxim Gorky, would return at different points. This did not necessarily deprive the new state of elites. Nor did it necessarily mean that Russia went into a cultural decline.</p> <p><b>Sovnarkom</b> promoted theatre and important works of Russian literature were written. Architects also experimented with new types of ‘socialist housing’ and great Soviet films by the likes of Sergei Eisenstein were also produced. The <b>Commissar</b> for Education, Lunacharsky, also promoted many progressive ideals in the hope of creating a ‘new Soviet men and women’. Free education was expanded, progressive education was encouraged and peasants/proletarians were given preference at many universities. Nevertheless, this was not a period in which artists and intellectuals were given liberal freedoms to think or create as they wished. In 1922 the Censorship Office (‘Glavlit’) was established which closed down newspapers and banned the publication of ‘dangerous’ literary works. All cultural endeavors, however progressive, had to take on a ‘proletarian’ character. The <b>Proletkult</b> movement took up the task of promoting <b>proletarian</b> values and culture through a range of artistic mediums.</p> <p>The <b>USSR</b> also began to crack down on religion by confiscating Church property. The <b>USSR</b>’s Muslim population of 15 million remained essentially hostile to <b>Sovnarkom</b> and <b>socialism</b>.</p>	<p>The economic base of the <b>USSR</b> underwent massive and rapid changes in the 1930s. Russia was essentially <b>industrialised</b> in a decade and this profoundly changed the nature of life in Russia.</p> <p>Generally, Soviet society became more urbanised, more conservative and more rigidly ordered than it had been in the period of the <b>NEP</b> (latter 1920s). In addition, life remained hard for most citizens. Food shortages, famine, rigid rules and terror made life difficult.</p> <p>In many ways, life for the average Soviet citizen also became more conservative. For example, more traditional family structures were favored, divorce was discouraged and technical education was favored over experimental and artistic pursuits. For example, the number of engineers in the <b>USSR</b> rose from 47 000 in 1928 to about 900 000 in 1940.</p> <p>At the All-Russian Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, <b>Socialist Realism</b> was officially ordained as the guiding principle behind all artwork produced in the <b>USSR</b>. This kind of art had to be ‘accessible’ to the people and, in some way, capture/represent the ‘spirit’ of the party and the people.</p> <p>Soviet youth were encouraged to join the ‘Pioneers’ and ‘Komsomol’ (Communist youth organisations).</p> <p>In 1935 Stalin claimed: <i>“Life has improved comrades. Life is more joyous.”</i> There was some truth to this as theatres, sportsfields, the Moscow Metro (rail network) and many other public projects were developed in this period. In addition, the average Soviet citizen also became better educated (literacy rates rose from 56% in 1926 to 81% in 1940). Overall, life was still very hard and rationing and shortages were common.</p>





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	PRE-OCTOBER 1917	1917 – 24 (LENIN)	1928 – 1941 (STALIN)
<b>Foreign Policy</b>	<p>Before the <b>October Revolution</b> the Bolsheviks had placed huge faith in the idea that revolutions were imminent in Western Europe.</p> <p>In <i>Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism</i> (1917) Lenin argued that the competition between the major empires for material and markets had been the main driving force behind the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. The Bolsheviks came to believe that a combination of this competition, the war that resulted from it, and Russia's own socialist revolution combined to make circumstances in the West more favorable to revolution. The thinking was based on at least three key ideas:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The war was devastating and caused great social/political tension in the nations involved. This turmoil was helping to expand <b>socialist</b> movements in places like Germany which seemed on the cusp of revolution in 1917.</li> <li>2. The First World War meant that millions of proletariat from all over the world were already armed and supplied since they were serving in their national armies. Their 'war-weariness' could be exploited to become a 'class-war' against the capitalists throughout Western Europe.</li> <li>3. Russia's revolution would inspire <b>socialist</b> movements in the West to stage their own revolutions. These new governments would become linked as a network of <b>socialist</b> powers.</li> </ol>	<p>The period 1917 – 24 delivered a very complicated set of circumstances to <b>Sovnarkom</b> regarding Soviet foreign policy. Their faith in an immediate wave of revolutions in the West was shattered but they held strong to the idea that revolution would eventually spread worldwide.</p> <p><b>Sovnarkom</b> faced a real dilemma with its foreign policy in the 1920s. Should it pursue revolutionary aspirations in Europe or take a more relaxed approach to foreign affairs? A revolutionary approach risked antagonising Western powers who were deeply suspicious of the new regime in the <b>USSR</b>. A more relaxed approach would run the risk of hardline socialists criticising the <b>USSR</b> for abandoning world revolution.</p> <p>The first real difficult decision was the issue of peace with Germany. Some wanted to try to turn the war into a 'revolutionary class war' while others, like Lenin, argued that this might result in an overthrow of the new government. The <b>Treaty of Brest-Litovsk</b> signed in 1918 caused so much bitterness in the Party that some prominent Bolsheviks (eg. Kollontai) resigned from the government.</p> <p><b>Sovnarkom</b> never clearly resolved this dilemma. Essentially, throughout the 1920s, <b>Sovnarkom</b> wavered between its commitment to revolution and its desire to trade with wealthier nations in order to improve their economic circumstances. Trade agreements with Germany and Britain were signed in 1922 and 1924 improving economic cooperation between the <b>USSR</b> and some Western powers. At the same time, Lenin made speeches about world revolution and Soviet agents became involved in various strikes in Europe. All of this deepened the West's suspicions of the <b>USSR</b>.</p>	<p>The seemingly contradictory trends of the 1920s were continued in the 1930s. The political landscape of Europe changed radically in this period, however, with the rise of Fascism in Germany, Italy and Spain. This prompted a unique set of challenges and responses from Stalin's regime.</p> <p><b>Fascism</b> was a set of political ideas almost diametrically opposed to <b>socialism</b>. Particularly after Hitler's success in gaining emergency powers in 1934, Stalin and the leadership within the <b>USSR</b> became incredibly concerned with how soon a new major European war might break out. Many of the desperate events in Russia in the 1930s (rapid <b>industrialisation</b> and The Great Terror for example) have to be understood in this context.</p> <p>In general, Russia's foreign policy in the 1930s subordinated its international revolutionary ideals to the <b>USSR's</b> more immediate needs of ensuring that Soviet <b>socialism</b> in Russia was safe. This meant trying to relax the efforts of <b>Comintern</b> and using <b>Narkomindel</b> to find avenues to promote 'collective security' with non-<b>Fascist</b> Western powers like Britain and France. Only when this had obviously failed by the 1930s did the <b>USSR</b> sign the Non-Aggression Pact with its apparent nemesis, Nazi Germany, in 1939.</p> <p>At the same time, the <b>USSR</b> faced challenges to its south and east. Of particular concern was the growth of the <b>Fascist</b> Japanese empire in the 1930s. Their invasion of China and Korea produced great fear in the <b>USSR</b> that it could be threatened on its eastern borders.</p> <p>Amid all of this, Stalin never lost sight of the ultimate dream of finding some way to help bring about revolutions abroad.</p>



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## Glossary of Key Terms:

<b>Autonomous</b>	Self-governing.	<b>Constitution</b>	A system of rules and laws that govern a nation.
<b>Bureaucracy</b>	A system of institutions/organisations that assist in running a nation (eg. Immigration department, education department, tax office, etc.)	<b>CPSU</b>	Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Formerly known as the Bolsheviks.
<b>Capitalism</b>	An economic system that allows individuals to own private property and relies on markets rather than government planning to organise production and consumption.	<b>Decree</b>	An order, rule or law delivered by a group or individual in power.
<b>Centralised</b>	A situation in which power/control is concentrated into the hands of an individual or small group.	<b>Dekulakisation</b>	The policy of stripping richer peasants of their wealth and influence.
<b>Censorship</b>	The process of controlling the information made public in a society.	<b>Dictatorship</b>	A system of government in which an individual controls most of the power. Stalin is one of the 20 <sup>th</sup> centuries best examples of a dictator.
<b>Cheka</b>	The abbreviation for the 'Extraordinary Commission against Counter Revolution and Sabotage'. This was effectively the secret police of Sovnarkom. It was first used extensively in the Civil War period (1917 – 22).	<b>Dictatorship of the Proletariat</b>	The general situation Marx had written about when the workers had taken power by revolution. Lenin and the Bolsheviks expanded the idea suggesting that it would involve a degree of repression against the workers' class enemies.
<b>Civil War</b>	A large-scale conflict between two or more forces from the same nation. The Russian Civil War (1917 – 22) was fought between the Bolsheviks and their political opponents (mainly the 'White armies').	<b>Exploitation</b>	Abuse or mistreatment.
<b>Collectivisation</b>	The process of combining small agricultural areas into large, state-owned farms.	<b>Factionalism</b>	A group of people within a party or organisation who take a different view to the majority position.
<b>Comintern</b>	Short for the 'Communist International'. This was established to coordinate the relationship between Communist parties throughout the world. It was effectively dominated by the Russian CPSU.	<b>Fascism</b>	Right-wing political philosophy often associated with an authoritarian government and an emphasis on national unity.
<b>Commissar</b>	Political and administrative officials in the USSR. These roles are similar to those of a government 'minister' or the 'director' of a department.	<b>Five Year Plan</b>	(Russian: 'Piaetaletka') An economic plan developed in the USSR to guide the economy. During Stalin's rule in the 1930s there were three Five Year Plans.
<b>Communism</b>	According to Marx, this would be the most enlightened political/social structure that would have no need for large governments and ensure that all people had their needs met.	<b>Free-Market</b>	An economic arrangement that allows goods to be produced and sold without government intervention or restrictions (apart from tax).
<b>Congress of Soviets</b>	The meeting of various Soviets established around Russia in 1917. Each Soviet would send delegates to a national gathering to make important decisions.	<b>Gosplan</b>	State Planning Committee of the USSR. This body was responsible for creating the Five Year Plans.



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<b>Gulag</b>	The system of labor and prison camps that were established in the USSR beginning in the 1920s. Thousands of victims of the Great Terror became inmates of these camps.	<b>RSFSR</b>	Acronym for the 'Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic' created after the revolution in 1917. This was the largest Republic that made up the USSR from 1922.
<b>Industrialisation</b>	The process of developing industry (factories, mines, power plants, etc).	<b>Show Trials</b>	Public trials that were set up to dramatically portray the confession and conviction of prominent politicians before their execution.
<b>Internationalism</b>	Contrast to 'nationalism'. Belief in the importance of global connections.	<b>Smychka</b>	The 'union' between peasants and proletariat Lenin wished to foster.
<b>Menshivik</b>	A moderate socialist party in Russia.	<b>Socialism</b>	The stage between Capitalism and Communism in Marx's philosophy.
<b>Nationalise</b>	The process of transferring ownership of businesses or resources from private owners to the state/government.	<b>Socialist Realism</b>	The type of art sponsored by Sovnarkom. It was supposed to promote the ideals of socialism and the working class.
<b>Narkomindel</b>	The name of the 'Commissariat for Foreign Affairs'. This was a government department of Sovnarkom that organised the USSR's foreign relations.	<b>Soviet</b>	Generic Russian word for 'council' that is often applied to political gatherings. In 1905 Workers and Soldiers' Councils (often referred to simply as Soviets) sprang up across Russia. It was in the name of these councils that the Bolsheviks seized power in 1917.
<b>NEP</b>	(New Economic Policy) Implemented in 1921. This was a more relaxed set of economic policies that allowed some free trade in the USSR.	<b>Sovnarkom</b>	The name of the new government established after the October Revolution in 1917.
<b>Nomenklatura</b>	The lists of individuals who received the most important positions in the Soviet government. These individuals were appointed.	<b>State</b>	A system of institutions designed to organise a nation/community (eg. Governments, courts, police, etc.).
<b>October Revolution</b>	The overthrow of the Provisional Government on October 25 <sup>th</sup> 1917. This was organised and executed by the Bolshevik Party. They claimed power in the name of the Soviet movement.	<b>Treaty of Brest-Litovsk</b>	The treaty signed between the RSFSR and the German government in March 1918 formally ending the war between Russia and Germany. The treaty was incredibly harsh on Russia and caused much criticism of Sovnarkom.
<b>OGPU/NKVD</b>	The state security organisations that replaced the 'Cheka' after the Civil War.	<b>USSR</b>	('Union of Soviet Socialist Republics'). This was the formal name of the political structure made up of Soviet Republics. It was established in 1922 and fell apart in 1991.
<b>Oligarchy</b>	A term that refers to a situation where a small group of people effectively control most of the power in a nation.	<b>Utopian</b>	An idealistic vision for how society/the world could or should look.
<b>Proletariat</b>	The urban working class who usually work in factories or industry.	<b>Vanguard</b>	The leading part of a larger group.
<b>Proletkult</b>	An artistic tradition that tried to capture and promote 'Proletarian Culture'.	<b>War Communism</b>	A series of economic policies implemented by Sovnarkom during the Civil War (1918 – 20).
<b>Provisional Govt.</b>	The government that took over control of Russia after Tsar Nicholas II.	<b>White Armies</b>	The main armies that opposed the Bolshevik 'Red Army' during the Civil War. White armies began to mobilise in 1918.
<b>Purges</b>	An attempt to reduce the size of a group or rid it of unwanted elements.		