

**RUSSIAN REVOLUTION
(1917-1922): LENIN
AND THE OCTOBER
REVOLUTION**



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Description

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the October Revolution of 1917, how Lenin and the Bolsheviks took control of Petrograd and what Lenin's basic plan was for creating a socialist state in the early days of the Bolshevik revolution.

Subjects

World History, European History

Grade Level

11-12

Duration

90 minutes

Tour Links

- [Lenin's Mausoleum, Moscow](#)

Essential Questions

- Who was Vladimir Lenin?
- What was Lenin's philosophy on socialism and the revolution?
- How did Lenin come to power in Russia? What was his role in the events of the October Revolution?
- What reforms did Lenin institute during his reign (1917-1924)?

Academic Summary

Lenin, "What is to be Done? (pamphlet), 1901

The active and widespread participation of the masses will not suffer; on the contrary, it will benefit by the fact that a "dozen" experienced revolutionaries, no less professionally trained than the police, will centralize all the secret side of the work-prepare leaflets, work out approximate plans and appoint bodies of leaders for each urban district, for each factory district and to each educational institution, etc. (I know that exception will be taken to my "undemocratic" views, but I shall reply to this altogether unintelligent objection later on.) The centralization of the more secret functions in an organization of revolutionaries will not diminish, but rather increase the extent and the quality of the activity of a large number of other organizations intended for wide membership and which, therefore, can be as loose and as public as possible, for example, trade unions, workers' circles for self-education and the reading of illegal literature, and socialist and also democratic circles for all other sections of the population. etc., etc. We must have as large a number as possible of such organizations having the widest possible variety of functions, but it is absurd and dangerous to confuse those with organizations of revolutionaries, to erase the line of demarcation between them, to dim still more the masses already incredibly hazy appreciation of the fact that in order to "serve" the mass movement we must have people who will devote themselves exclusively to Social Democratic activities, and that such people must train themselves patiently and steadfastly to be professional revolutionaries. Aye, this appreciation has become incredibly dim. The most grievous sin we have committed in regard to organization is that by our primitiveness we have lowered the prestige of revolutionaries in Russia. A man who is weak and vacillating on theoretical questions, who has a narrow outlook who makes excuses for his own slackness on the ground that the masses are awakening spontaneously; who resembles a trade union secretary more than a people's tribune, who is unable to conceive of a broad and bold plan, who is incapable of inspiring even his opponents with respect for himself, and who is inexperienced and clumsy in his own professional art-the art of combating the political police-such a man is not a revolutionary but a wretched amateur! Let no active worker take offense at these frank remarks, for as far as insufficient training is concerned, I apply them first and foremost to myself. I used to work in a circle that set itself great and all-embracing tasks; and every member of that circle suffered to the point of torture from the realization that we were proving ourselves to be amateurs at a moment in history when we might have been able to say, paraphrasing a well-known epigram: "Give us an organization of revolutionaries, and we shall overturn the whole of Russia!"

Lenin, State and Revolution, 1918

The whole of society will have become one office and one factory with equal work and equal pay.

But this "factory" discipline which the proletariat will extend to the whole of

society after the defeat of the capitalists and the overthrow of the exploiters, is by no means our ideal, or our final aim. It is but a foothold necessary for the radical cleansing of society of all the hideousness and foulness of capitalist exploitation, in order to advance further.

From the moment when all members of society, or even only the overwhelming majority, have learned how to govern the state themselves, have taken this business into their own hands, have "established" control over the insignificant minority of capitalists, over the gentry with capitalist leanings, and the workers thoroughly demoralized by capitalism—from this moment the need for any government begins to disappear. The more complete the democracy, the nearer the moment when it begins to be unnecessary. The more democratic the "state" consisting of armed workers, which is "no longer a state in the proper sense of the word," the more rapidly does every state begin to wither away. For when all have learned to manage, and independently are actually managing by themselves social production, keeping accounts, controlling the idlers, the gentlefolk, the swindlers and similar "guardians of capitalist traditions," then the escape from this national accounting and control will inevitably become so increasingly difficult, such a rare exception, and will probably be accompanied by such swift and severe punishment (for armed workers are men of practical life, not sentimental intellectuals, and they will scarcely allow anyone to trifle with them), that very soon the necessity of observing the simple, fundamental rules of everyday social life in common will have become a habit.

The door will then be wide open for the transition from the first phase of Communist society to its higher phase, and along with it to the complete withering away of the state.

Late October 1917...

Russian society was in chaos, just the way he wanted it. The previous spring, after over two years of terrible losses in the Great War, a revolution had brought workers and soldiers to prominence after a series of mutinies. In Petrograd (St. Petersburg), when citizens took to the streets and the army refused to fire upon them, a "soviet" (council) of workers had been established which seemed to have the support of commoners. Nicholas II, Emperor and Autocrat of all the Russias, was placed under house arrest with his family and forced to abdicate the throne by a new provisional government set up that spring and led by more conservative elements of the socialist uprisings, including Alexander Kerensky, a moderate socialist. Things had not gone well, however, for the new government. In a decision that stunned and angered many Russian soldiers and sailors and left citizens across Russia dismayed and feeling deceived, the provisional government decided to continue fighting Germany in support of the Allied Powers (especially England and France). This decision ultimately spelled doom for the government. By August, General Kornilov, then commander in Chief of the army, led a coup against Kerensky. The coup was ultimately unsuccessful, but it showed the weakness of Kerensky's position. A vacuum seemed to be forming around Petrograd, where the people desperately looked for someone who would lead them out

of the chaos. Vladimir Lenin, a radical Marxist and unquestioned leader of the “Bolsheviks”, was more than happy to fill the void.

Lenin had been born Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov to well-educated members of the lower nobility. Although he and his siblings grew up in a conservative household, young Vladimir and his brothers each turned to radical socialism during their college years. Vladimir himself was temporarily expelled from university for participating in a radical demonstration (he was later readmitted and received a degree with honors). His older brother, Aleksandr, was implicated in a plot to assassinate Tsar Alexander III in 1887 and was hanged, an event that had a profound effect on the then 13-year-old Vladimir. According to a legend that may or may not be true, when told of his brother’s execution, Vladimir is reported to have said, “There is another way.” (This story came from later Soviet historians and thus may not be true, but it makes for a good story.)

After graduation, Vladimir settled in St. Petersburg, where he subsequently hooked up with radical revolutionary elements in the city, including a woman named Nadya who would eventually become his wife. He quickly rose within the ranks and by the fall of 1894, the 24-year-old was the leading revolutionary Marxist in the capital. In 1897 he was sentenced to three years exile in Siberia for treason and sedition, and would be joined in prison by Nadya the following year. All the while, Vladimir read, wrote and continued to advocate for a violent revolution of the proletariat. After he and Nadya were released, Vladimir, now using the name “Lenin” (possibly a reference to a Russian river), traveled Europe, visiting radical cells across the continent.

By 1905, Lenin was back in St. Petersburg in support of a revolution breaking out against the tsar, now Nicholas II, but again left the empire when the revolution turned to more conservative elements in society. Lenin and other Bolsheviks were dismayed that the people didn’t fully rise up against the tsar. The 1905 revolution brought about a constitution and the establishment of a Russian parliament (the Duma), but Lenin came to believe that the masses would never spontaneously rise without a leader to guide them.

Whereas Marx had called for a spontaneous uprising of the workers, Lenin believed that the workers needed guidance and leaders who would push socialism through on their behalf. Without that leadership, workers would have no real direction or coordination in their programs, allowing the capitalists to regroup and turn the revolution. By late 1917, the time had come for Lenin and his Bolsheviks to take control of what he saw as a revolution spiraling out of control.

On October 25 (Julian calendar), Lenin and other Bolsheviks, promising Russians “land, bread and peace” led an armed (but largely bloodless) uprising in Petrograd. Within hours, the city was in their hands. Within a month, Lenin had consolidated his power and the government began arresting opposition leaders. Lenin issued emergency decrees designed to gain support from the masses. Under Bolshevik leadership, agricultural land, industries and Russian banks were nationalized. Church properties were seized by the government as well under Lenin’s direction. The revolution was on its way.

Lenin’s rule in Soviet Russia would last until 1924, when he died after a series of strokes. Under his leadership, the Bolsheviks fought and won a civil war against anti-socialist forces and changed the structure of the Soviet economy to one of state control

over agricultural and industrial output. When he died, the USSR was on its way to self-sufficiency. It certainly wasn't, however, all roses under Lenin. During the so-called "Red Terror" campaign of 1918-1922, tens of thousands of peasants and industrial workers were arrested and executed under Lenin's orders. Later Soviet historians would dismiss the campaign as "necessary" to root out dissenters.

Through it all, Lenin and the Bolsheviks used propaganda and coercion to sway public opinion. By the time he died in 1924, Lenin was almost seen as a demigod, a savior who had given selflessly of himself to bringing about the revolution. After his death, almost one million Russians filed by his body as it lay in state, many braving freezing conditions to catch a glimpse of the revolutionary. Lenin had instructed that his body be buried in Petrograd (renamed "Leningrad" three days after Lenin's death in 1924), but Soviet leaders decided to embalm and display him in a permanent mausoleum in Red Square, where he remains to this day. Over the last 90 years, an estimated 100 million visitors have seen Lenin's tomb, and it remains one of the most popular and recognizable attractions in Moscow today.

Through an analysis of primary and secondary sources, students in this lesson will identify, understand and be able to explain the October Revolution of 1917, how Lenin and the Bolsheviks took control of Petrograd and what Lenin's basic plan was for creating a socialist state in the early days of the Bolshevik revolution.

Objectives

1. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain the October Revolution in Soviet Russia.
2. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain how Lenin and the Bolsheviks took control of Petrograd and Moscow.
3. Students will identify, understand and be able to explain Lenin's basic plan for creating a socialist plan and then analyze whether that plan was successful by the time Lenin died in 1924.

Procedure

I. Anticipatory Set

- Writing / Question: Is totalitarian terror necessary to affect change? (5 min)
- Handouts – Copies of documents and readings from the websites listed. (5 min)

II. Body of Lesson

- Lecture / PPT – Russia under Lenin (20 min)
- Video – Lenin: Revolutionary (20 min)
- Independent Activity – Students read the articles and sources on Lenin and the October Revolution. (20 min)
- Suggestion: Have the students read some of these articles and sources for homework
- Suggestion: AP/Advanced students should read Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution*.
- Group Activity – Socratic Seminar: Discussion on Lenin's philosophy for revolution and his role in the October Revolution of 1917.

III. Closure

- Assessment – Essay: Explain in detail the October Revolution of 1917, how Lenin and the Bolsheviks took control of Petrograd and what Lenin's basic plan was for creating a socialist state in the early days of the Bolshevik revolution.

Extension

On tour: Lenin's Mausoleum, Red Square, Moscow

While on tour, students in Moscow will visit Red Square and Lenin's Tomb. The Soviet leader suffered a series of strokes in 1922 that left him incapacitated. By March 1923, he was bed-ridden and unable to speak. He slowly withered away and died on 21 Jan 1924. His body was embalmed and preserved by Soviet scientists and he was put on display in Red Square (something that continues to this day). With the exception of when Lenin was moved to Siberia during World War II, the body has lay in state in Red Square for the last 70 years. When the Soviet Union fell in the early 1990s, there were discussions as to whether or not to bury Lenin in St. Petersburg (that was his wish), but Russian leaders ultimately decided to leave him in Moscow. According to an online poll of Russian citizens in 2011, 70% of those voting said that the former Soviet leader should be buried, and yet he remains in the Mausoleum. The Cold War may be long over, yet Lenin's Tomb continues to attract visitors from across the globe. Also on Red Square is the Lenin Museum (a branch of the State Historical Museum), where students can see for themselves many artifacts and personal items belonging to Lenin and other Soviet-era Bolsheviks.

Web Links

Lesson Plan Websites

- www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1930/hrr/
The History of the Russian Revolution (primary source) – from Leon Trotsky. Trotsky's book, written in 1930, is decidedly biased, but since he was at the center of the revolution in 1917, it is particularly valuable. Highly recommended for AP/Advanced students.
- www.firstworldwar.com/source/calltopower.htm
Lenin's Call to Power, 24 October 1917 (primary source)
- www.fordham.edu/Halsall/mod/lenin-staterev.asp
Lenin: State and Revolution (primary source). Excerpts from Lenin's book. From the Modern Internet Sourcebook at Fordham University.
- www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1918/jan/03.htm
Declaration of Rights of the Working and Exploited People, 1918 (primary source)
- www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/lenin_vladimir.shtml
Vladimir Lenin (website) – from the BBC. Good, basic information on Lenin.
- econfaculty.gmu.edu/bcaplan/museum/his1a.htm
Lenin and the First Communist Revolutions (website) – from Bryan Caplan, Professor of Economics at George Mason University
- www.historylearningsite.co.uk/vladmir_lenin.htm
Vladimir Lenin (website) – from the History Learning Site (UK)
- www.rjgeib.com/thoughts/zhivago/lenin.html
Vladimir Ilyich Lenin (academic essay / website)
- alphahistory.com/russianrevolution/treaty-of-brest-litovsk/
The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk (website). Great basic information on the treaty, German motivations and why Lenin accepted it. Highly recommended for all students.
- xa.yimg.com/kq/groups/23937810/1566826270/name/Russia+Under+Lenin.ppt
Russia Under Lenin (PowerPoint)
- www.teachingchannel.org/videos/choosing-primary-source-documents?fd=1
Reading Like a Historian: Primary Source Documents (video). Great 2-minute video on how to incorporate primary sources into the Common Core and history classes. From Shilpa Duvoor of Summit Preparatory Charter High School in Redwood City, CA. Highly recommended for teachers.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGE6T3SRNAs&list=PL9E051214F74C3AE4
Lenin: Revolutionary (video) – Part 1 of a 4-part video about Lenin.
- www.youtube.com/watch?v=aaK-l0bPyY0
Vladimir Lenin: Voice of the Revolution (video) – from the Biography Channel. Highly recommended for all students and teachers.

Background Information

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vladimir_Lenin

Vladimir Lenin – Wikipedia article

- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leninism
Leninism – Wikipedia article
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/October_Revolution
October Revolution – Wikipedia article

Key Terms

- Bolsheviks
- Lenin
- Marxist
- October Revolution
- Socialist
- Soviet

