

Bill of Rights in Action



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LENIN AND THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

VLADIMIR LENIN DEVOTED HIS LIFE TO REVOLUTION. A DISCIPLE OF KARL MARX, HE SPENT MOST OF HIS LIFE PLANNING A WORLD-WIDE REVOLUTION. HE BELIEVED WORKERS WOULD RISE UP AND DESTROY CAPITALISM AND A HAPPY, CLASS-LESS SOCIETY WOULD EMERGE.

IN RUSSIA IN 1917, LENIN AND HIS BOLSHEVIK PARTY DID SUCCEED IN SEIZING POWER AND IN FOUNDING THE FIRST COMMUNIST REGIME. BUT THE REVOLUTION DID NOT SPREAD INTO EUROPE, AS LENIN HAD HOPED, AND HIS NEW RUSSIAN SOCIETY SOON DEGENERATED INTO A TOTALITARIAN STATE.

Lenin was born in 1870 in Simbirsk, a small city far from the Russian capital where, according to his brother Alexander, “one could grow up completely dull.” His father was a school “inspector”—in charge of



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IN 1917, LENIN, recently returned from Europe, made speeches calling for “all power to the soviets.”

building schools and training teachers in thousands of villages. Lenin was a top student in school and a model of good behavior. But his life changed forever in March 1887 when his brother Alexander was arrested and executed for plotting to assassinate the czar, Alexander III.

The czar’s father, Alexander II, had been assassinated six years earlier. Alexander II had worked to reform and modernize Russia. He issued an edict that freed peasants—who had been serfs—and took land

away from noblemen who owned most of the farmland. He drafted plans to create an elected parliament, or Duma, which were completed the day before he died. But the plans were never released, and after the assassination, his son, Alexander III, became czar. Alexander III dismissed the idea of a Duma and began to clamp down on dissent. Russian factory workers, poorly paid, were not allowed to protest and were forbidden to form trade unions. Student groups were closely watched and constantly harassed by the police. The suppression of civil liberties and police brutality returned in full force. And terrorist groups, like the one that Lenin’s brother had joined, continued to plot assassinations and to incite revolution.

Lenin’s Plans for Revolution

Lenin enrolled in Kazan University in 1887, but he was expelled after only three months for signing a petition complaining about student affairs. He earned a law ►

COMMUNISM

This edition of *Bill of Rights in Action* looks at issues related to communism. The first article explores Lenin and the Russian Revolution, the revolution that put the first communist government in power. The second article examines the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Cold War standoff between the U.S. and Soviet Union that almost led to nuclear war. The last article looks at North Korea, a poor, outcast, communist nation with nuclear weapons.

World History: Lenin and the Russian Revolution

U.S. History: The Cuban Missile Crisis

Current Issue: North Korea: The Rogue Nation

Guest writer Lucy Eisenberg, Esq., contributed the first two articles on Lenin and the missile crisis. Our longtime contributor Carlton Martz wrote the article on North Korea.

WORLD HISTORY



IN 1905, RUSSIAN troops massed outside the Winter Palace fired into a group of peaceful protesters.

degree in 1891, and two years later, he moved to St. Petersburg, then the Russian capital, and began writing revolutionary propaganda. In 1895, he was arrested for attempting to organize a labor movement and plotting against Czar Alexander III. He spent 14 months in prison and was then sentenced to three years in exile in Siberia.

During his time in exile, Lenin continued to read and write about revolution. He studied the works of many revolutionary theorists and Russian activists who were working underground to end autocracy (a regime where one person, such as the czar, rules with unlimited power). Lenin also worked with European socialists who were working to foment the worldwide revolution prophesied by Karl Marx.

Marx was a German socialist who had written a book 50 years earlier titled *The Communist Manifesto*. Marx believed that industrialists and other businessmen, whom he called the bourgeoisie, were using their wealth and political power to exploit the working class, whom he called the proletariat. According to Marx, this exploitation would lead to a worldwide worker revolution and a “violent overthrow of the bourgeoisie.” He believed that the proletariat would control the government, which would confiscate all the means of production, like factories, mines, and farms, and that eventually there would be no

more class struggles and no need for a government.

Many Russian liberals, including businessmen and some noblemen, did not agree with Marx’s socialist theories. But they did believe in the overthrow of autocracy and in the struggle for civil rights and democratic institutions, such as a representative Duma. But Nicholas II, who became czar in 1894, had no interest in constitutional reform, which he denounced as “senseless dreams.”

Lenin was initially conflicted about whether to support the liberal activist groups who were working to establish a democratic government. But by 1900, he had decided to break with the liberal bourgeoisie and devote his time to organizing an effective revolutionary movement. His goal would be to organize a political party “to inculcate socialist ideas and political self-consciousness into the mass of the proletariat.” Accomplishing this goal, he wrote, would require full-time professional revolutionaries “who devote to the revolution not only their free evenings, but their whole life.”

After completing his term of exile in Siberia in 1900, Lenin went to Europe, where he lived until 1917. In Munich, he and a group of Marxist compatriots, founded a revolutionary newspaper, *Iskra*. In 1902, he wrote out his ideas of how to make the revolution happen. In his essay titled “What Is To Be Done,” Lenin laid out a blueprint for

the communist structure and for what would become the Bolshevik Party. What needed to be done, he wrote, was to create a party of professional revolutionaries who would dictate “a positive program of action.” It would teach the working classes that the whole political system is worthless and combine the existing revolutionary forces into “a single gigantic flood” of revolution. Under Lenin’s plan, as one commentator described it, a small group of professional revolutionaries would be the architects, and the workers would be the bricklayers to build a new structure “without having seen or understood, let alone approved, the master blueprint for the new society.”

The Revolutions of 1917

At the turn of the 20th century, Russia was still an agricultural economy (four-fifths of its population were peasants). Most peasants did not own the land they worked and resented that most land was owned by noblemen. Russia was just beginning to industrialize. With capital investments by European investors, railways, mines, and factories were being built. In search of better work, millions of peasants began flooding into the cities. But urban conditions were generally terrible. Working days were long, wages low, and strikes were forbidden. Tensions and political unrest began to grow.

Political activism was on the rise. Many revolutionary intellectuals formed secret organizations dedicated to organizing a peasant revolution and ending the evils of the landlords. Other Marxists, like Lenin, fled to Europe, where they produced political propaganda, held party congresses, and made speeches to large groups of workers.

Russia’s defeat in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904 inflamed anger at the czar and his government. Anger grew after “Bloody Sunday” in January 1905, when government troops fired on people marching peacefully to the Winter Palace to

present a petition to the czar. Workers and soldiers began to organize in councils known as “soviets.” Unrest continued through the summer, culminating in a general strike in October that paralyzed the country.

The czar responded to the general strike by forming a Duma and providing voting rights. Slowly, political unrest declined. But the outbreak of World War I in 1914 brought new pressures on the government. Russia had allied with the West to fight against Germany. But the Russian army was repeatedly defeated, Russian cities suffered from food shortages, and the troops began to revolt. By early 1917, the czarist government had lost all power. The czar abdicated, and his brother, Michael, fearing for his safety, declined the throne. On March 13, 1917, the 300 year-old Romanov dynasty ended.

The Duma assumed control as the Provisional Government, composed largely of leaders of the bourgeois and liberal parties. The Petrograd Soviet and Workers and Soldiers Deputies emerged as a separate, self-appointed government, which claimed to speak for all the workers and soldiers in Russia. And then there was Lenin, who decided that his time had come to claim power and lead Russia.

Lenin favored Russia’s ending its involvement in the war. The German government, also wanting Russia out of the war, arranged for a “sealed train” with German guards to help carry Lenin back to Russia.

On April 13, 1917, he arrived at the Finland Station in St. Petersburg. The next day he delivered two speeches, stating that he did not intend to cooperate with the Provisional Government and calling for “all power to the soviets.” Over the next six months, he persuaded the other leaders of the Bolshevik Party to follow him and to assemble a small military force from soldiers in the Petrograd Soviet. On October 24, his troops occupied crucial points in the capital including banks, railroad

aristocrats and landed gentry were seized without compensation, with the goal of distributing the land to the peasants. But the result created more, not less, government control. The attempt to nationalize industry—referred to as “War Communism”—caused so much disruption that strict economic centralization was put in place. And after the land decree, the peasants were producing less food than usual, and the government ordered food to be taken from them.

The revolution did not spread into Europe, as Lenin had hoped, and his new Russian society soon degenerated into a totalitarian state.

stations, and bridges. The next day, they took over the Winter Palace where the Provisional Government was headquartered. The prime minister escaped, but the other ministers were arrested and taken to jail. A second revolution had taken place, and a new government, with Lenin as chairman, was in power.

The Aftermath of Revolution

Shortly before arriving back in Russia, Lenin had finished writing a pamphlet titled “The State and Revolution.” His pamphlet set forth a utopian view of how society would change after the revolution. In the post-revolution society, he wrote, people would subordinate their needs to the needs of the whole society; there would be material abundance for all; and man’s competitive spirit would disappear. In this utopian world, there would be no need for any coercion, and the state would “wither away.”

This was not to be. Between 1917 and 1921, the Bolshevik Party began its socialist program. Industries and factories owned by the bourgeoisie were seized by the state and supposedly transferred to workers’ control. Large estates owned by

The War Communism policy damaged the country’s economy. Russia was soon consumed by a civil war, which began as more and more people became disenchanted with the Bolshevik Party (which renamed itself the Communist Party in March 1918). Lenin’s decision to withdraw from the World War I by making peace with Germany in 1918 (the treaty of Brest-Litovsk) helped fuel the anger of counterrevolutionary forces, which mobilized a “White Movement” to fight to depose the Communist Party. Many thousands died in the civil war, which lasted until 1921. As the country began sinking into a terrible economic depression, thousands more died from famine and disease.

The party’s response to opposition—and to an assassination attempt on Lenin in August 1918—was the “Red Terror.” In September 1918, the Communist Party newspaper called for workers to “crush the hydra of counterrevolution with massive terror.” Security police, called the Cheka, began arresting all opponents, including rioting workers and army deserters. The Red Terror was aimed at exterminating everyone who opposed the new regime. Thousands were ►

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BOLSHEVIK TROOPS MARCH on Red Square, Moscow, during the Russian Revolution.

shot without even the formality of a trial or revolutionary tribunal. “Class enemies” were put in forced labor camps policed by the Cheka. As a result, all vocal opposition disappeared, and the bourgeoisie vanished from the political system.

Will Socialism Work?

In 1921, Lenin realized that the socialist system he had put in place during the civil war had not worked. At the 10th Party Congress in March 1921, he told the delegates that it was necessary to slow down the transition to socialism. “What is needed,” he said, “is a much longer period of preparation, a slower tempo . . . in order to determine our basic tasks in the coming year and in order to avoid . . . mistakes in the future.”

With this in mind Lenin put into place a New Economic Policy (NEP) and began to restore some freedom of trade and a limited kind of

capitalism. The NEP ended the food requisitions from the peasants and allowed small businesses to open for private profit. And it proved successful: Agricultural production increased dramatically, and by 1928, the economy had been restored to the pre-World War I level. Even so, many hard-line Bolsheviks were angry because they saw the New Economic Policy as a betrayal of Communism and Marxism.

But Lenin was not ready to allow dissent. In the same year that the NEP was introduced, the 10th Party Congress passed a resolution “On Party Unity.” It outlawed all factions within the party. Party members who opposed policies adopted by the Central Committee would be expelled from the party. All political opposition within the Communist Party was ended. The one-party state did not even allow democracy within its own party.

The New Regime

In 1918, Russia was officially renamed as the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (soon the USSR), and the capital was moved to Moscow. The new one-party state was run by a Council of People’s Commissars, with Lenin as chair, or prime minister. But Lenin did not have long to live. In May 1922, he suffered the first of two strokes and died in January 1924.

In his last years, while he was ill, Lenin expressed unhappiness with the state of existing Soviet

institutions. In one article, he wrote of the need to change the focus from political struggle and revolution to “peaceful, organizational ‘cultural’ work” and of the need for a “cultural revolution” to bring universal literacy to Russia. In his last article, “Better Fewer, But Better,” he argued again of a need to slow down change and to reduce the state machine. He also tried, unsuccessfully, to prevent his successor, Joseph Stalin, from taking power.

After a power struggle, Stalin did take power in 1929. In the 1930s, the economy failed and food was in short supply. Stalin ordered the government to take away all grain crops from peasant farmers. When criticism of Stalin mounted, the secret police rounded up “enemies of the people,” including Communist Party members. Thousands were executed, imprisoned, or set into exile without a trial. High-profile party members were given “show trials” in which they “confessed” their guilt. Stalin ruled by terror, and the Soviet state was a totalitarian police state.

FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING

1. What do you think were the main causes of the Russian Revolution?
2. Describe the two revolutions that occurred in 1917. Can you think of other revolutions in history that began with moderate governments and ended with radical governments?

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LENIN (left) SITS NEXT to his successor, Joseph Stalin.

ACTIVITY

Who Is to Blame for Soviet Totalitarianism?

Much has been written on the Russian Revolution and its aftermath. Historians agree that Stalin ruled over a ruthless, totalitarian regime. Over the years, however, a question has been debated: Was Stalin primarily responsible for the totalitarianism that ultimately gripped the Soviet Union or did Leninism lead to Stalinism? Some historians believe that Lenin set the new state on a good course only to have Stalin lead it to totalitarianism. Other historians argue that the foundation of totalitarianism can be found in Lenin’s rule.

In small groups, do the following:

1. Look for and discuss points that would support each side of the debate.
2. Decide which side of the debate you agree with.
3. Be prepared to report the points on both sides, your conclusion, and the reasons for your conclusion.