3 March 2008

The Russian Revolution
Introduction

In their *Communist Manifesto* (1848), Marx and Engels predicted that communist revolution would follow from high levels of industrialization. Yet when a self-styled “communist” revolution did actually occur in Europe, it was in the Russian Empire—a notoriously “backward” state that was home to over 150 million peasants.

Why did this happen?

With what consequences?

Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto* (1848)

Industrialization increases the production of wealth; when industry is organized in capitalist terms—that is, when the means of production are owned by individuals as *private* property—then industry also creates greater gaps in wealth. The rich (the *bourgeoisie* who own property) get richer, while the poor (the proletariat, who have nothing to sell but their labor power) get poorer.

Industrialization brings workers together and creates for them a sense of “class consciousness.” That is, they come to understand that their poverty is *socially produced* by capitalist forms of production—it is not due to an individual failing in their character or to fate.

Eventually, the bourgeoisie’s exploitation of the urban working class (the proletariat) will become unbearable and prompt a revolution.

“Political power, properly so called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another. If the proletariat …by means of a revolution, makes itself the ruling class, and, as such, sweeps away by force the old conditions of production, then it will, along with these conditions, have swept away the conditions for the existence of class antagonisms and of classes generally, and will thereby have abolished its own supremacy as a class.”
Why a Communist revolution in backwards Russia?

• Specifics of Russian political tradition

• Social and Economic Context

• The Great War

With what consequences?

• Russian Revolution both resembles nineteenth-century model of revolution, and departs from it.

• Outbreak of Civil War (1917-1923)

• “War Communism” (1918-1922) followed by much more liberal New Economic Policy (1922-1928)
Westernizers and Slavophiles in the Russian Empire

Peter the Great, 1672-1725
built new capital at St. Petersburg
introduced Dutch and British naval technology
mandated that aristocratic men shave their
beards and the women should wear
“French” fashions
made French and German the court languages

Peterhof Palace, outside St. Petersburg
(Russia), 1720s

Slavophiles (during reign of Nicholas I,
1796-1855)
denounced Europe as “corrupted” by
Enlightenment emphasis on reason
rejected European “individualism” and
praised communal organization of
Russian peasants (*Mir*)
emphasized role of Orthodox Church

Konstantin Thon, Cathedral of Christ the Saviour,
Moscow (Russia), 1839-1860

Russian political tradition: part of Europe, or not?
Autocracy and Reform in Nineteenth-Century Russia

1825 uprising of military officers demanding constitutional government (Decembrists)

1830-31 Russian troops repress liberal, nationalist uprising in Russian “Poland”

1849 Russian troops repress Hungarian revolution of 1848

1856 Russia defeated in Crimean War (by alliance of Great Britain, France, and Ottoman Empire)

1861 20,000,000 privately owned serfs granted freedom (must pay reparations to owners thereby deprived of “property”)—Alexander II’s “Great Reforms”

1864 judicial reform—jury trials introduced for some cases in European Russia; district- and provincial-level representative bodies (zemstva) created

1881 Alexander II assassinated by members of “People’s Will” revolutionary party

Jan. 1905 petitioners asking for 8-hour work day, higher wages, and end to the Russo-Japanese War fired on by imperial troops (“Bloody Sunday”)

Oct. 1905 “October Manifesto” grants representative government (Duma)

Russian political tradition: autocracy and resistance to reform
Educated Russian Society and the Revolutionary Tradition

*intelligentsia*

1873-1874 “going to the people” movement (Populism)

1881 “People’s Will” assassinates Alexander II, prompting further repression

1898 underground organization of Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (Marxists) marks break with idealization of peasantry

1903 Second Congress of Russian Social Democratic Labor Party becomes divided between

   Bolsheviks (literally, “the majority view”) and
   Mensheviks (literally, “the minority”)

Boris Kustodiev, *Bolshevik* (1920)
Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement.

The movement is, in its essence, an international movement.

The national tasks of Russian Social-Democracy have never confronted any other socialist party in the world. ...emancipating the whole people from the yoke of autocracy imposes vast political and organisational duties ...At this point, we wish to state only that the role of vanguard fighter can be fulfilled only by a party that is guided by the most advanced theory.

Lenin, *What is to be Done?* 1902

Belousov, *We Will Take a Different Path*—Lenin and his mother
Industrialization in the Russian Empire, 1880s-1914

huge factories, concentrated in or near St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Ukrainian Donbass

very fast economic growth:
8-9% annually in 1880s continued to grow more quickly than any other European economy in period 1900-1914

very high levels of foreign investment

3 million urban industrial workers by 1914
Russia and the First World War

“Down with high prices!
Down with hunger!
Bread for the workers!
Down with the war!”
demands of women protesters,
Petrograd, March 1917

women guarding the Winter Palace
during October Revolution 1917

Russian military losses
1914  1,500,000
1915  2,500,000

total by end of 1916
3,600,000 dead or seriously wounded
2,100,000 prisoners of war

The Great War
PROGRESS OF RUSSIA in attaining liberty
headline of New York Times September 1917

Feb.-March 1917 massive protests in Petrograd; troops refuse to fire on protesters

1 March Nicholas II abdicates

Provisional Government(s) authority unofficially divided between Duma and Petrograd Workers’ Soviet (soviet = council)

Lenin’s April Theses call for end of war

July Days street demonstrations in support of Soviet taking full control

August “Kornilov Affair”-threat of military coup

October Bolsheviks, claiming to defend Soviet, take power

soldiers and workers on streets, Nov 1917

Consequences: Russian Revolution compared to other revolutions
Russian Civil War, 1917-1923

Red Army: over 5,000,000 men (mainly peasant draftees)
50,000 officers from former Imperial Army

Cheka “All Russian Extraordinary Commission for Struggle Against Counter-Revolution, Sabotage, and Speculation”

White Armies – distinct armies, each led by separate group of officers from Imperial Army
--supported by British, American, and Japanese troops

“Only the close cooperation of worker and peasant will save Russia from desperation and hunger”

Civil War poster

Consequences: Civil War