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This course encompasses the origins of communist ideas and then their unexpected coming to power in the context of World War I.

The first half of the course, “The Specter Haunting Europe,” introduces Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels as thinkers and intellectual partners who created a total ideology in answer to the challenges of modern times. Lectures consider the origins of these men, their development, and their political activism. The course also examines the vocabulary of key concepts they advanced and takes an in-depth look at the vital texts, *The Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital*.

The course analyzes a highly ironic turn of events: The fiery Paris Commune uprising of 1871 was attributed to Marx, even though his role had been marginal. By the time of Marx’s death in 1883, a growing socialist movement was mobilized to carry his ideas forward, but it did so in an atmosphere of factional infighting, even as it pledged international solidarity. World War I shattered that socialist unity of purpose, and it brought to center stage previously unknown Russian revolutionaries.

The second half of the course, “Lenin and the Founding of the Soviet Union,” mines a rich paradox: If Marxists saw the backward Russian Empire as lagging in progress and an unlikely place for a modern industrial workers’ revolution, why was it that communism triumphed there first? The course reveals how Russian revolutionaries fused homegrown traditions of rebellion against harsh tsarist rule with foreign ideological elements into a potent mix. Out of this context, Vladimir Lenin crafted the idea of a vanguard party of totally dedicated professional revolutionaries who could accelerate historical development and travel the road to power.

Lenin’s disciplined Bolsheviks still a catalyst—a crisis that would afford them opportunity. That came in 1914, with the explosion of World War I. Amid the storms of that conflict, Lenin was allowed to travel in secret back to Russia across Germany, enemy territory, and to foment revolt in his home country. In October 1917, Lenin’s Bolsheviks
seized power in a coup, taking advantage of a political power vacuum. They established a new state committed to the overthrow of all world governments.

Out of necessity, the revolution was not to be limited to Russia. It relied on unleashing world revolution. The course traces the appeal of that prospect with a close biographical look at the world’s most famous woman revolutionary: Rosa Luxemburg. After a failed attempt at radical revolt in postwar Germany in 1919, she was murdered and was celebrated as a martyr to the cause.

Attempts to spread revolution in Hungary and Bavaria also went down to defeat, but these failures only deferred Bolshevik hopes. At the same time, Russia was engulfed in a civil war of astonishing brutality, which pitted the Bolsheviks against a wide array of opponents. To the surprise of many, Lenin’s government survived. It even set about cementing the foundations for a new civilization, with unprecedented monuments, social plans, and new traditions. When Lenin died in 1924, and his mummified body was entombed in Moscow in front of the Kremlin, the new Soviet Union was on a route to yet more upheaval. Rivals Joseph Stalin and Leon Trotsky competed to lead the way into the promised future.
The Specter Haunting Europe
communism and responses to it shaped the world as we know it today. Shortly after World War II, when communist regimes were at their peak, it is estimated that regimes espousing Marxism ruled over a third of the world. Even now, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite states, and the transformation of China, communism remains relevant, especially in places that still claim adherence to communist ideals.
Defining Communism

Communism, as shaped by Karl Marx, is defined as the abolition of private property and a market seeking profit with a new system of collective control of the means of production and resources. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and his associate Friedrich Engels announced that communism could be “summed up in a single sentence: Abolition of private property.”

Associated with this were promises of total social equality and sharing in a new stage of human societal evolution. In fact, Marx’s scheme promised liberation from history, the entire record of struggle and exploitation and suffering to date. A later formulation of Marx’s was that communism would be the stage when all of society was organized along the lines of one idea: “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.”

A related concept to communism is socialism. Socialism involves public ownership and control of property, and it envisions a cooperative society, in opposition to capitalist notions of private property, free market, and individual choices.

The meanings and association have shifted, but originally, communism was meant to signify a higher or full form of socialism. There were key moments when communists and socialists argued and clashed.

Anarchists, who denounced state structures of any variety as inevitably corrupting and constraining, also play a fascinating role in the story: Anarchism was sometimes an ally and yet often a fierce critic of communism.

An Evolving Tradition

Communism featured both continuity and change. Additionally, once in power, communist regimes revealed internal contradictions, which stressed their systems. When it comes to communism, five contradictions in particular are notable.
The first has to do with the role of the individual in history. Marx presented a powerful vision of history being made by masses of people. By contrast, individuals played less of a role. However, with communism, it is the case that decisive leaders loom up again and again, starting with Marx himself.

The second contradiction involved geography. Although communism was meant to be global, Marx expected it to evolve first in the most industrially advanced countries. Thus, in the imagination of communists, the real prize was Germany—a leading industrial power. However, against expectations, communism’s greatest influence came in less developed countries, beginning with Lenin’s rise to power in Russia.

A third problem was that communism never entirely settled its relationship to nationalism. Predating communism, nationalism as an ideology was another powerful model of community and an idea about belonging. Marx deplored nationalism; however, communist regimes tried to co-opt nationalist sentiment to use it to reinforce their power. This saw mixed and sometimes contradictory results.

A fourth contradiction was the way in which the communist project turned into a tradition, even when it promised radical breaks with the past. Communism became a tradition full of historical echoes, venerable precedents, time-honored rituals, and original texts that held nearly sacred status.

Finally, a fifth contradiction appeared that had everything to do with commitment to communism as a faith. While it promised scientific certainty and discarded religious dogma, communism also drew on and mobilized faith or even fanaticism. This occurred to the point that many observers have called communism a political religion.

**Suggested Reading**

- Pipes, *Communism*.
Marx and Engels: An Intellectual Partnership

Lecture 2 — Marx and Engels: An Intellectual Partnership
This lecture examines the life and ideas of Karl Marx as well as those of his close comrade, Friedrich Engels. In one of the most famous intellectual partnerships in history, Marx and Engels brought different skills to bear on a project very much grounded in its time and place.

Before diving into that, the lecture provides background on the context from which communism arose as a system of ideas. This context involved three different recent elements: French political revolution, the Industrial Revolution in Britain, and German philosophical evolution.

**French Political Revolution**

Beginning in 1789, the French Revolution ushered in the era of ideological mass politics, which we are still in today. That revolution, its radicalism radiating out from Paris, haunted socialist and communist thinkers. It seemed both a model for how to make revolution and a cautionary tale.

In a quick review, the French Revolution became steadily more radical after it erupted in Paris in 1789. First, revolutionaries sought to break with feudal privileges. Then, radicals deposed the king and executed him. Suspecting treason against the revolution, they identified “enemies of the people” and sent them to their deaths. In the Reign of Terror from 1793–1794, tens of thousands were killed.

In short order, the revolutionary regime became so radical that it was soon arresting revolutionaries as insufficiently devoted. Eventually, radical leaders were themselves arrested and replaced by a more conservative leadership, which in turn was deposed by a young military genius, Napoleon Bonaparte. In 1799, he made himself dictator and then emperor. He presided over years of constant war in his bid to control Europe.

When Napoleon finally was defeated in 1815, it seemed that this conflagration had burned itself out. Many of those who were still attached to utopian hopes of making a new society now sought peaceful, cooperative, voluntary means of association rather than force. Turning away from revolutionary violence, such socialists, as they began to call themselves, hoped that their utopias could be realized without killing, but instead demonstrating new forms of association.
This age saw many communal experiments, including the model factories of Robert Owen, the Welsh manufacturer, and his settlement in the US: New Harmony in Indiana, which only lasted two years. The followers of the French thinker Henri de Saint-Simon also dreamed of a cooperative society owning all wealth, tools, and land in common.

Another French thinker was Charles Fourier, a clerk in Lyon who spent much time dreaming up new principles of organizing people. In France, some followers of Fourier tried to establish communities along the lines he envisioned, but it was in the New World that his experiment proliferated.

In describing their communism, Marx and Engels would later pour scorn on the ineffectiveness of these earlier socialists, deriding them as merely utopian (which was not a compliment in their vocabulary). However, they were generous and admitted that this was at an early stage of the development of the true revolutionary ideas.

**The Industrial Revolution in Britain**

Marx and Engels promised to bring a correct understanding of the Industrial Revolution, which first roared to life in Great Britain. The world was being visibly and dramatically changed by science and technology. This made Marx and Engels eager for a theory that would describe human society as it changed and predict where the future was headed.

From the 18th century and accelerating in the 19th century, the Industrial Revolution had consequences as profound as political revolutions. Industrialization had important consequences for society and politics, remaking physical landscapes and disrupting traditional ways of life.

Industrialization also changed the social order. The aristocracy and peasants were still around, but they seemed less important. The new middle class, the bourgeoisie, arose in the cities and towns. In the cities, there also arose an industrial working class. At the extreme edge of survival lived a class of miserable poor and unemployed, denounced as dangerous or criminal classes.

In search of markets and resources, Europe’s powers also engaged in overseas imperialism. This brought industrialization to other lands, wiped out Indian textiles, and forced China to accept the trade in opium so that Britain could buy tea.
German Philosophical Revolution

While France revolted and Britain industrialized, Germany was already famed for its profound scholarship and thought. Especially huge was the impact of the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who proposed history with a direction and transcendent meaning.

In Hegel’s scheme, a dialectical process (that is, a dynamic series of clashes) moves history forward. A given existing social state (the thesis) encounters opposing forces (the antithesis). The result of their collision is a new state (synthesis)—a higher resolution. In this age of growing nationalism, Hegel tended to identify the Prussian state and Prussian bureaucracy with the realization of the principle of freedom.

Some of his followers set off in other directions, which were radical rather than conservative. Other disciples of Hegel, called the Young Hegelians or Left Hegelians, moved on to demolish Christianity with this argument of historical change.

Marx and Engels

Two thinkers addressed all of these elements: political revolution, industrialization, and philosophical transformation. The revolutionary ideas of Marx and Engels rocked this society and affected the lives of millions.

These two men were very different. In their partnership, Marx was the dominant personality. He seemed to see himself as a heroic martyr.

Marx was born in western Germany. He came from a Jewish family in Trier, then part of the kingdom of Prussia. Marx did not receive training in Jewish religious practice. Marx fell in love with Jenny von Westphalen, the daughter of a baron. They became engaged, and Marx went off to college, eventually ending up at Berlin University. There, he breathed in deeply the great impact of Hegel’s philosophy.

Marx was a member of a new group that had appeared in society—intellectuals—who proclaimed their devotion not to dynasties or tradition or religion, but to ideas and humanity.

Marx earned his doctorate in 1842, married von Westphalen, and was all ready to become a professor. However, because of his radicalism and atheism, Marx proved unable to get a job. Also playing a role were his careless personal appearance, sloppy writing,
his inability to meet deadlines, his love of quarrels, and his personality that focused on dominating others around him.

Marx turned to journalism and by 1842 was editor of the radical *Rheinische Zeitung* in Cologne. Only months later, the paper was shut down at the insistence of the conservative Russian government. In 1843, Marx and his family moved to Paris.

Marx’s future partner, Friedrich Engels, was a total contrast. Born in 1820 in Barmen in the Rhineland, he came from a wealthy German commercial family of factory owners. His father was a fundamentalist Christian. Engels was handsome, dashing, and had a personality that drew others to him, very different from Marx’s abrasive qualities.

Like Marx, Engels attended the University of Berlin, and there, he converted to socialism. When Engels first came to see Marx while passing through Cologne in 1842, he met with a chilly reception. Engels moved to England, where he worked at the family factory in Manchester, observing firsthand the condition of the workers. In 1845, he published his book *The Condition of the Working Class in England*.

Engels did not marry, but he had a secret long-term relationship with a working-class Irishwoman, Mary Burns. (After her death, Engels took up with her sister, Lizzie Burns.)

When Engels met Marx for the second time in 1844 in Paris, they got along much better. There, the two wrote out their ideas in *The Communist Manifesto*, which they had finished drafting by 1847.

**The Ideas of Marx and Engels**

The body of theory espoused by Marx and Engels later came to be called dialectical materialism. Marx first announced his doctrines in *The Communist Manifesto*, published in 1848. Later, he continued to work out his theories in *Das Kapital*.

Marxism was presented as a science of revolution. Rejecting earlier thinkers as merely “utopian socialists” whose plans were not based on material realities, Marx’s doctrine was to be a scientific socialism. Marxism brought together many contemporary concerns, including evolution, science, and mass politics. It drew on French politics, English economics, and German philosophy as a comprehensive response to the age.
Marx's doctrine was based on historical (or dialectical) materialism, seeing human reality as economic at its base. Ideas were merely superstructure built on top of the base, and ideas reflected economic interests, even if people were unaware of this. Thus, there could be no just law as such, but only a legal system protecting the interests of the ruling class. Art, morality, and ideas were the same.

Marxism offered something different and, so it claimed, scientific: It presented a tableau of human history, a dramatic narrative of progress, with starring roles played by the toiling masses and economic forces like industry. Individuals, by contrast, played a lesser role. However, Marx and Engels worked in a disclaimer. With themselves in mind, they stated that certain exceptional individuals could rise above their class origins to survey and influence the historical process as a whole.

Mankind had reached the penultimate stage of history: capitalism. A new working class (the proletariat) confronted the owning class (the bourgeoisie). The term *proletarian* Marx used is derived from the classical Latin term *proles*—that is, “offspring.” In ancient Rome, those who did not own property were listed in censuses as having only offspring, *proles*, so they were proletarians. In Marx’s usage, proletarians had nothing to sell but their labor, and thus they were the lowest class in society.

Relentless competition and low wages meant that the proletariat was constantly growing. The bourgeoisie became smaller, with once-prosperous people dropping down into the proletariat. Over time, inevitably, the proletariat’s growing misery would drive it to revolution. This was a process variously called pauperization, immiseration, or in German, *verelendung*. When the upheaval inevitably came, this would be a final revolution made for all humanity, as the proletariat class was universal.

It is important to note who were not full-fledged members of this idealized group. Marx looked down on those he called the *lumpenproletariat*. *Lumpen* in German means “rags,” so this harsh term refers to the ragged poor, unemployed, criminals, bohemians, and dropouts. These were not the saviors he had in mind. Additionally, Marx saw peasant farmers as a fading class.
Marx and Engels opened their *Communist Manifesto* with the ringing declaration: “A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism.” Their movement was already an irresistible force, they claimed, and they called for working men across the globe to unite.

After an international workers’ revolution, the end of history would ensue. This evocative concept did not mean that all time would cease, but that rather the logic of history had reached its necessary endpoint, with all great ideological struggles finally resolved. The state was to wither away, leaving a classless society free of private property, in which equal individuals would find fulfillment in work. The transition stage, as perfection approached, would be socialism, which then would give way to full, perfect communism.

**Suggested Reading**

› Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men*.


› Sperber, *Karl Marx.*
This lecture examines how Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels tried to put their revolutionary message into action. First, the lecture closely looks at their famous *Communist Manifesto* and then Marx's struggle to produce his intended masterwork, *Das Kapital*.

The lecture also provides a theoretical treatment of Marx's model of history and economics, and his reaction to capitalism. Additionally, the lecture examines the revolutionary lives Marx and Engels lived.
Revolutions across Europe

When Marx and Engels finished polishing *The Communist Manifesto*, which they had initially drafted in rough form in 1847, the timing of its publication seemed very fortunate. It came out a few months before the outbreak of great revolutions of 1848 throughout most of Europe.

The 1848 revolutionaries were liberals and nationalists seeking to overthrow old monarchies to establish new republics, constitutions, and national unification. First, revolt flared in France. That spread to Austria, Hungary, and Italy.

There was no revolt in Britain or in Russia. Britain was too liberal already, while Russia was the opposite: so conservative under the tsar that revolt was crushed immediately.

The revolutions began in February 1848, when the French government banned banquets held by reformers as a form of indirect protest. Parisians went to the barricades, and the monarchy crumbled. King Louis Philippe I fled to Britain. A second French republic was declared, mirroring the declaration of the first republic in 1792 following the French Revolution.

News of this spread, and March 1848 saw waves of revolution hit Vienna. Additionally, Berlin saw rioting, and the kings of German lands promised constitutions. A national convention, the Frankfurt Assembly, was called to forge a new national state.

In France, the new republic went into action. Among the reform initiatives undertaken by socialists in the provisional central government in Paris, the government established national workshops to guarantee universal employment. When the more conservative National Assembly voted to shut down these controversial workshops, protests broke out in Paris, which led to clashes in June 1848. Four days of fighting killed about 1,500 workers and 1,000 troops. Thousands were arrested and exiled to the overseas colonies.

Louis Napoleon Bonaparte—the nephew of the general—was elected president in December 1848 because of his name recognition. When his term was about to end and he could not be reelected, he seized power on December 1, 1851. The following year, he declared himself the emperor Napoleon III.
In other lands, the revolutionaries proved poorly organized and the authorities regrouped. By October, Vienna was retaken by imperial troops. The German National Assembly in Frankfurt dissolved. Austrian armies crushed the Italian rebels in March 1849, and now only Hungary remained, alone. The Hungarians pushed back the Austrian army. Russia sent an army of 100,000 troops to help the Habsburgs and quell the proud Hungarians.

**Marx and the Revolutions**

*The Communist Manifesto* was mostly unknown at the time of the revolutions. Only in retrospect did it acquire immense significance. The pamphlet had been written for a small group of radical tailors and shoemakers in London. Several hundred copies were printed before the revolutions broke out. One historian estimates that at the time of the revolutions, only one in 100,000 revolutionaries read *The Communist Manifesto*.

When the revolutions began, Marx threw himself into politics. Soon after *The Communist Manifesto* was published, revolution broke out in Germany. Marx went back, returning to the Rhineland. There, he edited a newly established radical newspaper in Cologne, urging revolution in Germany and war against Russia as the policeman of Europe. When the revolution sputtered out in humiliating failure in 1849, Marx was ordered to leave the country. He published one last issue of his newspaper and left.

In August 1849, Marx moved to London. Many other political exiles also were to be found in this liberal state. He would live in London until his death in 1883 (and indeed is buried there). For 34 years, Marx worked in the library of the British Museum, scribbling away at his desk.

Marx only published one volume of his vast work, *Das Kapital*, in 1867. Marx left the other two volumes to be completed from notes by Engels after his death.

**Marx’s Theories**

Marx's theories reacted most of all to the rapidly changing 19th-century world around him, to industrialization and to the establishment of what was increasingly called capitalism. Capitalism may be defined as an economic system operating in a free market with private ownership of the means of production, following the competitive pursuit of profit.
Marx grounded his thinking in a model of historical change. He declared, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.” Capitalism to him was a stage in this historical evolution. It was not a final, natural, or organic and stable state of human organization. The aim of historical evolution was the progressive liberation of human beings. This was to be a collective liberty—not the individual liberty championed by classical liberals, which Marx saw as selfish.

Capitalism was not the end stage of human history, but rather the next to last stage of development, where the clashes reached a climax. Industrialization as a means of production depended on a complicated division of labor, subdividing tasks and work. In the process, this alienated the worker.

As their exploitation increased, the workers’ lot worsened in the process of immiseration. Then, society at large grew increasingly polarized between the few rich and the masses of the poor. As competition between capitalists sharpened, ever more members of the bourgeoisie who lost out in competition would sink into the working class, swelling its numbers.

For Marx, history was moving toward a final struggle with an inevitable outcome: world communism. The revolution would not be about compromise. Instead, it would totally abolish all exploitation and hierarchy in an elemental overthrow of bourgeois society. After the workers took control and abolished all other classes, the state would wither away, as politics ceased to exist. Technology would now produce plenty for all. The result would be a radically different society under communism.

The Manifesto had stated “the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property.” In Das Kapital, Marx described it with his famed formula, “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” Yet how this would come to pass was not spelled out in detail. In the Manifesto, Marx and Engels listed 10 immediate steps to move in the right direction, including income taxes and a central bank, but did not give a detailed blueprint.

Even with this ambiguity, Marx’s prophecy of inevitable revolution was not about compromise. Instead, it was a call to arms. Human society needed to be broken in order to be remade anew. Marx hailed the “radical rupture” in all parts of life in the Manifesto.
Life in Exile

During his life in exile, Marx and his family had a series of bad rented apartments around London. They lived in precarious circumstances. The children had to learn to lie about their father’s whereabouts when debt collectors came around. Several children of the family died in their penurious conditions: Of seven, only three survived to adulthood.

Marx only once actively sought a job, but he was turned down because of his terrible handwriting. He did do some journalism for an American newspaper in New York. In many cases, Engels would write the articles, which appeared under Marx’s name. When the first volume of *Das Kapital* appeared, Engels wrote reviews praising it, without revealing that he was the author’s intellectual partner.

In essence, the Marx family depended on money from Engels. He even went back to the family factory, where he hated working, to fund the Marx family over some 30 years.

In this same period, Marx did something that fit uneasily with his thunderous denunciation of middle-class men’s sexual exploitation of working-class women. He fathered an illegitimate son by Helene Demuth, the maid that his wife’s mother had funded for them. Engels helped out by claiming that he was the father. The son was put into foster care and later became a worker. Engels later confessed the truth on his deathbed.

Meanwhile, Engels had continued his own complicated double life. His mistress Mary Burns died in 1863, and Engels then lived with her sister, Lizzie Burns. Marx’s wife Jenny disapproved of these relationships and refused to see Engels’s mistresses socially. When Lizzie died in 1878, the coldness the Marxes showed led to a temporary break in Engels’s friendship with them.

The Views of Marx and Engels

From his London exile, Marx had the chance to try to figure out what had gone wrong in France in 1848. He explained the failure in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. In general, Marx’s conclusion was that the middle classes could not be trusted in their historical role, and that workers should have parallel organization to keep pressing the revolution forward. Marx was waiting for the next wave of turmoil.
One other core notion of Marx and Engels in this period had to do with the role of Russia. They hated its conservative imperial system (which had propped up monarchies in 1848) and despised its overwhelming agrarian backwardness. Yet it would be in Russia that a Marxist party first came to power in 1917.

Marx and Engels, as educated Germans, saw Slavic peoples as less civilized. Smaller nations would have to fuse with larger ones in the interest of progress. War with Russia would be progressive.

Engels wrote statements that were derisive of the Slavs. The historian A. J. P. Taylor states of Engels, “His views on the Slavs were indistinguishable from those of Hitler.” Later, statements deriding the Slavs were edited out by the Soviets—they would not have looked good.

**Marx’s Constant Revisions**

Marx’s thoughts were never fully finished or set in stone. Rather, he was constantly revising. In 1881, Marx got a letter from a Russian socialist, Vera Zasulich, asking him for advice, in particular asking whether Russia would have to undergo a complete industrial revolution before reaching socialism. Marx replied vaguely, but this showed that he was already open to the idea of other paths to socialism.

Apart from writing at his desk in the reading room of the British Museum, Marx took an active political role as well. He and Engels helped found the International Workingmen’s Association in London. Active from 1864 to 1876, it came to be called the First International for short, and it had representatives from many different countries as organizations and unions joined. It may have had 800,000 members by 1869.

**Mikhail Bakunin**

In all this activity, Marx battled against his main foe, the Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin. Bakunin had famously announced in 1842, “The passion for destruction is also a creative passion.”

In contrast to Marx and Engels, Bakunin saw Slavic peoples as progressive. For him, the Russian peasant would prove to be a key actor in abolishing the state.
Bakunin warned that Marx’s domination of the movement was a bad sign, suggesting a future distortion of the movement in which intellectuals and Germans would take over. In 1872, Marx and Engels personally attended the Hague conference to fight against Bakunin and were able to get him expelled. That must have afforded Marx great satisfaction.

Even greater was Marx’s excitement in 1871, when it seemed that the end of the established order was at hand. Paris went up in flames yet again, with the Paris Commune. It was also an event, mistakenly attributed to Marx, that would make him one of the most feared and hated men in the world.

**Suggested Reading**

- Marx, *The Portable Karl Marx*. 

[Image of Mikhail Bakunin]
This lecture looks at how the violent upheaval of the Paris Commune and its stunningly severe suppression produced multiple misunderstandings: Marx and his foes both incorrectly saw the revolt as proof of Marx’s influence. Marx saw the revolution in Paris as a potential breakout moment for his ideology. His foes blamed him for sparking the revolt and atrocities like the murder of hostages. Marx became at a stroke both famous and infamous. The memory of the Paris Commune, substantially and artificially reworked, became a communist tradition and a template for understanding later revolutionary action.
The Paris Commune was a political experiment that lasted from March 18 to May 28, 1871. From 1851, Emperor Napoleon III, the nephew of France’s famed military commander, had ruled France. He traded on his unmatchable name recognition among French voters to be elected president of France in the wake of the failed revolutions of 1848. Like his uncle, he soon seized power in a coup d’etat in 1851 and became emperor of the French.

Mysterious and unpredictable, he dominated Europe for several decades. Yet in spite of this, he was ridiculed and hated by his opponents. Marx was among those foes and wrote scathingly about him in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*.

The reckless foreign policy of Napoleon III led to his downfall. Napoleon III’s last mistake was to declare war in July 1870 against Prussia and the allied German states. This was a mistake that he had been lured into by Chancellor Otto von Bismarck.

At the Battle of Sedan in September 1870, Napoleon III was captured by the enemy along with his entire army. Later, after he was released from prison in Germany, he would head off to exile in Britain, just like Karl Marx.

Meanwhile, after the crushing defeat at Sedan, an emergency government took over in Paris, replacing the emperor. France’s Third Republic was declared, and resistance against the Germans continued. Paris came under German siege on September 19, beginning a four-and-a-half-month ordeal.

French armies surrendered in October, and the provisional government surrendered on January 28, 1871. Armistice negotiations began, and the Germans under Prussian leadership forced upon France a hard peace, demanding a huge indemnity (reparations), all of Alsace, and a third of Lorraine.

After this humiliation, in February 1871, the National Assembly was elected and met to decide how to structure the republic. Soon after, on March 1, along the Champs-Élysées in Paris, 30,000 Prussian soldiers marched in a victory parade, one of the conditions of the peace treaty.
Revolt

Parisians boiled with rage, and they feared that the new National Assembly was preparing to restore the French monarchy. The situation now went from tense to threatening.

Preemptively, Adolphe Thiers, the head of the provisional government, sought to disarm the National Guard troops in Paris, many of them workers. On March 18, when government troops tried to take control of cannons positioned about the city on the heights of Montmartre, revolt broke out. The government troops were chased off, except for two generals who were captured by the crowd and killed on the spot. At this, the provisional government pulled out of Paris, taking the army with it to Versailles, 11 miles away.
Civil war had now broken out in France. Paris was to be the focus of this for 72 days. The Central Committee of the National Guard, a volunteer force of armed citizens, declared itself in control in Paris. Yet they refused to march on Versailles, as some suggested they should, to eliminate the rival power center. Rich Parisians, fearing turmoil, fled the city and flocked to Versailles, which swelled to six times its earlier small size.

Municipal elections held amid all this chaos on March 26 led to victory for revolutionary candidates. The Hôtel de Ville was decked out with red flags and French tricolors on March 28 to celebrate the new Paris Commune. The term *commune* simply means “local or city government” in French usage.

**The Government of the Commune**

The commune supporters were called Communards, but they came in many different varieties. They included neo-Jacobins, who looked back to the original French Revolution with hopes of reenacting it. Others were socialists, but not owing special loyalty to Marx. Rather than being purely proletarian, the Communards were as much petite bourgeoisie, a category that included shopkeepers, white-collar workers, and especially proud artisans.

Given its brief tenure, the Paris Commune did not have time for much in the way of new practice, but it undertook symbolically weighty gestures and promises. Armed citizens, not professional soldiers, were now its army. Its program pledged to end government support for religion. It promised a 10-hour workday for laborers. It restored the revolutionary calendar from the first French Revolution, and it re-created a so-called Committee of Public Safety, just like in the Reign of Terror in 1793.

Orders went out for the demolition of two chapels, but time ran out to accomplish this. The crowds did manage to topple the Vendôme column with its statue of the first Napoleon. (It was later re-erected and can be seen today.) They also demolished the Paris house of President Thiers.

**A Second Siege**

The French government in Versailles now collected its military forces and sent them to encircle Paris. Paris had just endured a German siege and now was again besieged, by the French. This second siege would last nine weeks.
On May 21, government soldiers entered Paris. The house-to-house fighting that followed came to be called the Bloody Week. Cobblestones ran red as Frenchmen fought Frenchmen. The Communards resisted the onslaught by throwing up barricades across the urban landscape. They also tried to use hostages, and the Communards shot an estimated 63 to 107 of them.

Some 20,000 Parisians were killed in the suppression of the commune. Some of the dead were rebels, and some were not. About 750 government troops were killed. After the suppression of the commune, the government had about 38,000 survivors arrested. It deported more than 7,000.

**Marx and the Commune**

In 1870, Karl Marx was living obscurely in his London exile. However, after the commune, which he was blamed for, he became famous and notorious overnight.

In the lead-up to the Franco-Prussian War, Marx and Engels had sided with their native Germany, but they then felt Germany had gone too far in imposing a harsh peace. Once the commune was declared, Marx was electrified and supported it from a distance.

He was officially charged with writing a manifesto from the First International addressed to the Parisians, but he did not deliver the text for two and a half months, as he fell ill with bronchitis and liver problems. It was only on May 30, 1871, two days after the end of the suppression of the commune, that Marx read his text, which was later published as *The Civil War in France*.

In it, Marx hailed the commune as the greatest moment in history so far. He claimed that the commune was a sign of his predictions coming to pass. The working class had showed it understood it needed to seize governmental power. Marx concluded, “Workingmen’s Paris, with its Commune, will be forever celebrated as the glorious harbinger of a new society.” It represented “a magic formula for freedom.”

Even though it had failed, Marx and Engels considered it the first living example of the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” They saw the Paris Commune not as an end, but as a first sign of things to come.
At the same time that Marx was rhapsodizing, he was being blamed for the commune, as if he had been pulling strings and setting the agenda. Newspapers called him “the revolution incarnate.” Forged documents appeared in France allegedly proving that Marx had masterminded the commune. This attention pleased Marx.

**The Legend of the Commune**

The Paris Commune had been politically diverse and tentative in practice because it lasted so briefly, without one coherent unifying theory. It had only a handful of Marxists. It had not been a concerted attempt to use the 1848 *Communist Manifesto* as a roadmap to the future.

However, it was turned into a distinct legend, which diverged from reality and then became part of revolutionary theory. That legend had quite an impact on the century to come.

In the historic year of 1917, when the Bolsheviks seized power in Russia, Vladimir Lenin was breathlessly determined to outlast the days of the Paris Commune. The Bolsheviks treasured relics of the Paris Commune.

The commune as an episode also heightened friction within the First International. British activists who wanted to agitate for peaceful change did not like Marx’s support for violent revolt or the abuse they received in public because of being associated with the commune.

Marx’s feud with Mikhail Bakunin continued. Bakunin also celebrated the commune but argued that Marx, being too authoritarian, was not in line with its spontaneous uprising. The next year, in 1872, Marx and Engels finally got him expelled from the First International.

Then, fearing he would lose control of the First International, Marx succeeded in having the First International’s steering committee moved from London to New York, where it would wither. In 1876, it was disbanded in Philadelphia.

After this, Marx’s later years proved grim. His health failed, he suffered from depression, and he pulled back from political organizing. His wife, Jenny, died in 1881, and he died in 1883. He was buried in Highgate Cemetery in London.
Engels lived on until 1895. Now the highest authority on Marxism, he completed the second and third volumes of *Das Kapital*, published in 1885 and 1894. When Engels died in 1895, he willed his considerable fortune to Marx’s two surviving daughters. They did not have a happy fate: Both daughters died by suicide.

**Conclusion**

Marx’s thought was not monolithic or unchanging, and he was not always consistent, which would complicate life for those who sought to put his ideas into action. He was emphatically not a liberal. He was not concerned with democratic procedure. Rather, he was concerned with his vision of the coming crisis that would produce the perfect future.

A deep irony is contained in this: Marxism became a tradition. Marx had established a tradition when he really wanted to be a revolutionary, breaking with the past. His name, image, and writings would be used as a program for the future.

**Suggested Reading**

› Merriman, *Massacre*.

› Shafer, *The Paris Commune*. 
Marxism after Marx

Lecture 5
This lecture examines how the Marxist movement reacted to Karl Marx’s passing in 1883. One reaction was the founding of mass political parties, the most impressive and advanced of which was the Social Democratic Party of Germany. Another reaction was the establishment in 1889 of a new international organization that sought to unite the individual mass parties, the Second International. This succeeded the First International, which Marx had been involved with. A third reaction was a huge internal debate over whether reform or radical revolution was the real goal of the movement, a debate that came to be called the struggle over revisionism.

Post-Marx Questions

In surveying this entire period, the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski concludes in his magisterial *Main Currents of Marxism*, “The period of the Second International (1889–1914) may be called without exaggeration the golden age of Marxism.”

Beforehand, the Paris Commune of 1871 had been mythologized on many different sides into an inspiration or an object of fear. Middle-class people and conservative elites assumed, incorrectly, that there was a causal tie between *The Communist Manifesto* and the commune. More broadly, many observers worried about the explosive potential of class conflict.

Additionally, during this era, something historians have dubbed the Second Industrial Revolution was brewing. Historians date it to 1870, the year of the Franco-Prussian War. The war resulted in the declaration of the German empire, uniting the German lands in the euphoria of victory over the hereditary enemy, France.

Germany would lead this new wave of industrialization. The second wave was based on new advanced technologies, the production of steel, chemicals, electricity, and the combustion engine. In this period up to World War I, Europe saw a 260 percent increase in industrial production.

“The Internationale”

One song became emblematic of international socialism: “The Internationale,” a worldwide, borderless anthem. It was written in 1871 during the Paris Commune uprising by Eugène Pottier, a Paris transport worker who had been a member of the commune.
At the same time, under the impetus of the Second Industrial Revolution, the class structure of society changed, but not in the ways Marx had predicted. Marx had foreseen the relentless concentration of capital. Instead, what happened was far more complex, and had its bright sides.

This period saw the rise of new social groupings: office workers, technical experts, and a growing middle class. In addition, capitalist societies demonstrated the capacity for reform and improvement of living conditions. For instance, Britain’s Factories Act of 1847 limited how long women and teenagers could work in textile factories.

**Socialist Activities**

From the 1860s, socialist parties were established on a national basis throughout Europe. In some ways, this was practically in tension with the declaration of Marx and Engels in their manifesto that the working man had no country, but the full resolution of this tension was left for the future.

Socialists also cooperated with trade unions that were likewise established on a national basis. Yet here, too, there was often a tension between the aims of unions and socialist parties: Unions and trade organizations sought improvements now for their members on the factory floor or in workshops, while socialist thinkers and leaders kept their vision on the long-term goal of revolutionary transformation.

These parties also saw women taking more active roles than elsewhere in politics. However, even here, women’s issues were subordinated to the greater struggle.

After the death of Marx, and with the blessing of Engels, these parties united in the Second International, also known as the Socialist International, which was established in 1889—the 100-year anniversary of the outbreak of the French Revolution. The parties represented in the Second International were committed to meeting in periodic congresses and avowing their solidarity across borders.

**The Social Democratic Party of Germany**

The most impressive of the national parties was the Social Democratic Party of Germany, which originated in 1875. Amid the dizzyingly fast industrialization in Germany that epitomized the Second Industrial Revolution, the organization experienced huge growth.
The party competed with increasing success in elections to the Reichstag, or parliament. In 1871, they had one deputy, but by 1877, they had a dozen. Between 1871 and 1874, their national vote more than tripled in size. As industrialization advanced, it seemed likely their support would increase apace as well, which horrified conservatives like the Reich chancellor Otto von Bismarck.

In 1878, Bismarck drew a direct connection between the now legendary Paris Commune and the Social Democrats. After two assassination attempts by anarchists on Bismarck in 1878, he outlawed the party in the Anti-Socialist Laws of 1878. However, the party continued to operate and grow, and the anti-socialist laws were allowed to lapse after Bismarck resigned in 1890.

The socialists had won. The main ideological thinker of the party, Karl Kautsky, articulated the confidence that resulted from this. As the British historian A. J. P. Taylor put it, Kautsky “postulated in The Way to Power that the secret of success lay in doing nothing: the longer the Social Democrats sat tight and allowed their supporters to accumulate, the greater and more irresistible would be their triumph when it came.” Success seemed inevitable.

By the federal elections of 1912, the Social Democrats were the largest party in Germany in terms of votes. It had a total vote of 4.5 million, and it had 110 parliamentary deputies, about a third of the possible seats. Women were active in its ranks, forming 16 percent of the members of the party.

But the party was loudly committed to the coming decisive revolution. The organization and discipline it had built up were so impressive that, worldwide, people interested in leftist politics learned German (the language of radicalism would only become Russian after the Bolsheviks took power).

However, there was a more complex picture beneath the surface. An elaborate subculture of clubs, societies, institutions, and parliamentary delegations existed, and they could actually make the party invested in the status quo, even as they railed against it.
Other Countries
In other countries, different movements emerged with distinctive characters, even as they looked to the Social Democratic Party of Germany as a formidable model. In the incredibly diverse and multiethnic Habsburg Empire, Austria-Hungary, a group of so-called Austro-Marxists felt that they needed to wrestle with nationalism and ethnic identity, which Marx had said were fading.

The socialist movement of Austria-Hungary also presented a formidable image of dynamic mass power, as evidenced in the streets. In Vienna, in 1908, a down-and-out young man, recently arrived in the city, witnessed demonstrations swirling around the imperial parliament, with red flags, crowds, and shouting. That young man's name was Adolf Hitler. He rejected the Social Democrats, but he was profoundly impressed with mass politics.

The situation of the Polish people was unique, as their former country Poland had been divided up by surrounding empires in the late 18th century, so they found themselves living under Russian, German, and Austrian rule. In the territories inhabited by Poles, underground Polish socialist parties fragmented early and often.

In France, along with other older revolutionary traditions, non-Marxist socialist ideas retained their appeal. Anarchist ideas and utopian socialism found eager adherents, as did practical trade union organizing.

In the recently established Kingdom of Italy, the socialist party was founded in 1892. Benito Mussolini led the revolutionary wing of that party after 1912.

As for Britain, even though Marx had settled in exile there, his ideas never gained strong adherence. By contrast, British socialism was heavily influenced by Fabianism. The Fabian Society in Britain, founded in 1884, emphasized gradualism, methodical preparation for social reform, and coordination and waiting—not revolt.

The Haymarket Square Incident
America, too, diverged from general European patterns, without a mass socialist movement. A key historical moment came in 1886 in Chicago. On May 4, a group of anarchists, many of them German, had led a protest meeting in Haymarket Square
downtown. The police moved to end it, and someone threw a bomb. The police started firing wildly. In a few minutes, seven policemen and at least four civilians were dead. A group of anarchists were convicted of conspiracy and four were hanged.

This event led to what has been called the first Red Scare in America, from 1886 to 1887. Anarchists and socialists were lumped together in the common perception. They were seen as foreign, exotic, and dangerous.

**Internal Debates**

The national parties were imposing, especially the Social Democratic Party of Germany. However, they were soon wracked by internal debates over a larger question that dealt with the teachings and tradition of Karl Marx. This was a debate over revisionism—that is, whether Marx’s outlines of thought needed to be revised, updated, and corrected in view of changes in the present.

The man who came to be identified most with revisionism was the German socialist Eduard Bernstein. With Bismarck’s imposition of the anti-socialist laws, Bernstein went into political exile, eventually resettling in Britain.

There, Friedrich Engels befriended him and became his mentor. Bernstein also came to know Fabian leaders, with their emphasis on methodical organizational work and reform. This influence impelled him to reconsider aspects of Marx’s thought. Bernstein’s reconsiderations appeared in print in his 1899 book, *Evolutionary Socialism*.

In his writings, he denied that general crisis and world revolution were near, and he pointed out that Marx’s expectations on the inevitable concentration of capital and pauperization of society were not coming true. Economic crises were getting less frequent, not more common.

Bernstein proposed that incremental reforms could actually over time turn the capitalist system into a more socialistic one, even in cooperation with bourgeois parties. This could be advanced through parliamentary reform. In his view, the answer lay in constant reform, not in violent overthrow. Bernstein’s ideas were furiously rejected by Karl Kautsky and other theorists in an ideological showdown.
On the face of it, those condemning revisionism or evolutionary socialism won, formally. At a congress in Dresden, the Social Democratic Party of Germany condemned revisionism. At the Amsterdam congress of the Second International, the majority voted against revisionism. In spite of this, Bernstein and like-minded comrades remained in the party. Its leadership did not want to provoke a rift. In practice, while talking revolution, the Social Democratic Party of Germany often practiced revisionism while rejecting the label.

**Suggested Reading**

› Bernstein, *Evolutionary Socialism*.

Lenin and the Founding of the Soviet Union
An important historical question is this: Why did a Marxist regime first come to power in Russia in 1917, when Marx considered Russia a most unlikely and unpromising place for a proletarian revolution? This lecture looks at why Russia was a supposedly unlikely location for that revolution and why that assessment proved to be wrong.
Background on Russia

As he envisioned what he conceived to be the next stage of human history, Marx thought that Germany, Britain, France, or the United States were likely places. They had industrialized, their societies had advanced and produced large middle classes and wealth, and they had a proletariat ready to play the role Marx envisioned. The case of Germany was especially promising, as it had an active Marxist party.

Russia had none of those things. Additionally, it was a feudal assembly of a vastly diverse population of 164 million, divided into some 200 ethnic groups large and small, with ethnic Russians less than half the overall population. Far from being industrialized, the Russian Empire was about 80 percent rural, and Russian agriculture was primitive.

The lives of peasants were marked by traditional ways. Religious ritual was a source of consolation in a hard life. A corner of each peasant hut was dedicated to the beautiful holy pictures called icons, depicting saints and the divine, sharing in the life of the peasants. They observed a calendar of religious feasts celebrated by the Russian Orthodox Church.

Economic and population pressures steadily grew in the countryside, as evidenced by the dreadful famine of 1891–1892. Bad weather led to failed harvests and mass hunger. The government’s response was ineffective and halting. Industrialization and the growth of a middle class were only in their beginnings in Russia, in new factories concentrated in some urban centers like St. Petersburg, Moscow, or Warsaw.

Russia’s political system also was reactionary and authoritarian. The Romanov dynasty of tsars had ruled for three centuries and thought of themselves as ruling by divine right, a concept that was by now archaic in Western Europe.

Internationally, Russia played the repressive role of the policeman of Europe, as it was nicknamed. Tsarist forces helped suppress liberal movements or revolts. For example, in 1849, a Russian

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Alcohol and the Regime

The tsarist regime was financially invested in the miserable status quo it presided over, as can be seen in one notorious detail. The government had a stake in the epidemic alcoholism among the poor, as the state had a monopoly on vodka sales. Over the course of the 19th century, sales of vodka accounted for 40 percent of state revenue on average, making it the single largest source of government income.
army was sent to help the Austrian Habsburgs quell the Hungarian uprising. The tsar's notorious secret police spied on revolutionaries in exile.

**A Combustible Mix**

Russia was marked by poverty, underdevelopment, and repression. This was a combustible mix. Periodically, the government tolerated or encouraged discrimination and violence against the empire’s large Jewish minority, as a cynical safety valve of sorts.

Within Russia, among thoughtful observers and intellectuals, the state of things often led to despair. Those who felt that emotion and a resulting sense of obligation to change the country formed a small group of educated people who came to be called the intelligentsia. They were not marked by noble origins, but rather assumed their group identity due to education and professional training as doctors, lawyers, or engineers.

This group was growing, too, as university enrollments skyrocketed. This included women in great numbers, as 45 percent of university students were women before the outbreak of World War I.

Their deep sense of duty and obligation to society often led the intelligentsia into opposition with the autocratic regime, as during the famine of 1891. Would-be reformers, frustrated at slow results and persecuted by the heavy-handed and uncompromising state, often turned into revolutionaries and terrorists.

**A Revolutionary Tradition**

Long before Vladimir Lenin came on the stage, there was an indigenous revolutionary tradition in Russia. One example was Marx’s nemesis and archenemy, the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, who declared destruction to be a creative act. From the 1850s, he lived in exile, but exerted influence both in Russia and in radical circles worldwide.

In Russia in the 1860s, middle-class students and intellectuals were attracted by the message of populism or narodnichestvo. Followers of this view aligned themselves with the people at large, as they imagined them to be. They argued that the Slavic peasants mystically represented the ideal of a future society.
Another revolutionary group was the nihilists, who rejected all authority and tradition and claimed that they would live by science alone. Nihilists were inspired by Nikolai Chernyshevsky and his 1863 novel *Shto Delat’* (*What Is to Be Done?*). The novel featured a circle of young revolutionaries totally committed to the cause of revolution. This manifesto electrified a movement that now aimed to realize their ideas.

A notorious example of this urge was a revolutionary terrorist who was so fierce that he even frightened fellow revolutionaries while inspiring others. This was Sergei Nechayev. Unlike other activists, he was himself of serf origins, and he articulated a message based on perfect hatred and revenge. In 1869, he crafted the infamous manifesto entitled “Catechism of a Revolutionary,” blending religious devotion with politics. In 26 points of faith, Nechayev outlined what it took to be a professional revolutionary.

With revolution as the sole consideration, that end justified any means and was the only way of judging people and change. Nechayev’s radicalism led him to engineer the murder of one of his own comrades in the underground movement as a way of cementing the group’s cohesion through shared guilt.

**The 1870s and 1880s**

In 1874, populist students announced a new movement of working among the peasants, spreading their political message and preparing the way for general social revolt. Yet in going out into the countryside, they instantly encountered a huge cultural gap and received no welcome. The peasants did not understand them, suspected them, and turned them in to the police in some cases.

After this failure, the populist movement splintered into groups that retained their peasant mysticism and others that craved revolutionary action now. The tsar’s secret police tried to infiltrate all of these societies.

In 1879, students and revolutionaries formed a terrorist group called the People’s Will or *Narodnaya Volya*. In 1881, they managed to assassinate Tsar Alexander II. This terrorist attack led to further cycles of retribution and violence in the years that followed.
In the 1880s, Marxism arrived in Russia as a very different revolutionary faith. Unlike the previously present populism, it was not Russian and homegrown, but instead had the prestige of being an imported Western ideology, with the status of science.

In place of rural utopias and the notion that the elemental violence of terrorist acts would reshape society, Marxism arriving in Russia proposed the certainty of regular social development according to the laws of economic progress. With calm determination, Marxists counseled that in Russia, a long process of development and years of industrialization would be needed to bring that country to the point of social democracy.

**Georgi Plekhanov**
The figure who did the most to bring Marx’s teachings to Russia was Georgi Plekhanov. Born to minor nobility and later joining the intelligentsia, Plekhanov had at first devoted himself to populist revolutionary activity. To avoid capture, Plekhanov left Russia in 1880 (and would only return in 1917). Settling in Switzerland, he and comrades established the first Russian Marxist group, Liberation of Labor, in 1883, the same year that Marx died. Another member of that group was Vera Zasulich, who corresponded with Marx.

From Western exile, the writings and theories of Plekhanov filtered back to Russia. In his works, Plekhanov insisted that Russia needed to go through two stages. The first stage was to topple the tsar and establish a middle-class democratic regime, which would develop capitalism in Russia. Then, in the necessary following stage, Marxists would organize the working class to overthrow democratic capitalist Russia to usher in socialism.

In the view of most Russian Social Democrats or Marxists, there was little that could be done to radically speed up history. In general, the route of evolution, which Marx had revealed, would have to be followed patiently and gradually, but with absolute certainty in the end.

At first, Plekhanov and his fellow Russian Marxists were a tiny faction, but by the 1890s, their influence grew. In 1898, at a conference in Minsk, the Russian Social-Democratic Workers’ Party was founded. Its journal *Iskra* (meaning “Spark”) aimed to ignite revolt.
Lenin and the Russian Revolution

In spite of his intellectual prominence, Plekhanov would soon be eclipsed in leadership by a younger man who had followed in his footsteps, Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov. This man is best known by the revolutionary pseudonym he took in 1901: Lenin. He was a significant part of the answer to the big question of why Marxism took hold in Russia.

At the start of the 20th century, the situation was this: Multiple groups of Russian revolutionaries were dreaming of and planning for different visions of Russian revolution. However, when the Russian Revolution indeed broke out in 1905, it did so unexpectedly, catching the revolutionaries by surprise. While they had been debating, theorizing, and arguing, a crisis had exploded.

The precipitating cause was a series of government-produced disasters that gripped Russia and demonstrated the callous incompetence of the authorities, chief among them the tsar himself. In 1904, Russia had gone to war against the rising imperialist power of Japan. Russian military planners assumed that their triumph was assured. Instead of a quick Russian victory, Japan sank two Russian fleets.

Internal discontent expanded as news of humiliating defeats in Asia multiplied. A vital spark came on January 9, 1905. On this Sunday, a loyal and peaceful workers’ demonstration of some 100,000 protestors gathered in St. Petersburg outside the Winter Palace to humbly petition the tsar for reforms. Nervous imperial troops deployed in front of the palace and fired on the crowd. This atrocity came to be known as Bloody Sunday. The people’s traditional trust in the tsar was broken forever.

The entire vast empire of Russia erupted in disorder. Mutinies swept the fleet and the army, and massive strikes wracked the cities. Rural revolts took a brutal turn as peasants sacked manor houses, destroying nearly 3,000 estates. They burned land records and attacked their former landlords.

Non-Russian areas of the empire—like Poland, Lithuania, and Finland—saw revolts and entertained thoughts of autonomy or even independence. Authority seemed to melt away. Policemen, fearing for their lives, discarded their uniforms and did not report for duty.
Russia Near Collapse

In this revolution of 1905, Russia almost underwent internal collapse. In the cities, workers’ councils called soviets were established, and then soldiers established their own soviets. (The term *soviet* in Russian simply means “council.”)

These grassroots councils, arising spontaneously as an expression of local control, claimed true and legitimate political authority. A central soviet, a council of councils, was set up in St. Petersburg. As other traditional authorities and government offices seemed powerless, this central soviet under the Social Democrat Leon Trotsky became ever more influential.

Reluctantly, Tsar Nicholas II promised reforms in his so-called October Manifesto, including the establishment of a parliament with limited powers, the Duma. This and
other reforms stabilized the regime for a time. The government was able to abolish the St. Petersburg soviet and imprison revolutionaries like Trotsky.

Lenin, who had been absent, arrived back in Russia in November, too late to decisively affect events. However, years later, Lenin would call the 1905 revolution an indispensable “dress rehearsal” for the successful revolution he himself would later seize hold of in 1917.

Suggested Reading

› Moynahan, *The Russian Century*, pp. 1–44.
Like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the communist leader Vladimir Lenin led a revolutionary life, totally dedicated to the political program of revolt. He brought a communist regime into power in 1917. To provide background on Lenin, this lecture focuses on his early life and his inner workings.
Lenin’s Early Days

Lenin’s given name was Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov. He was born in 1870 in Simbirsk, a modest town on the Volga River in central Russia, to a middle-class family. He later took on Lenin as a political codename.

His family was deeply marked by the character of the intelligentsia. On his father’s side, Vladimir Ilyich had Tatar and Kalmyk background, in addition to being Russian. On his mother’s side, he was of German Lutheran, Swedish, and Jewish origins. His father was a school inspector of humble origins who reached the lower nobility.

However, the man essentially worked himself to death. For Vladimir Ilyich, growing resentment set in against the state structure and traditional authority that had overtaxed his father’s health and brought him to an early grave. The second event was even more searing: the execution of his beloved and admired older brother.

Vladimir’s brother Aleksandr, a student at St. Petersburg, was executed by the government in 1887 as a terrorist. He had been part of a revolutionary group planning to kill Tsar Alexander III. In addition to losing Aleksandr, the family was ostracized socially.

A Revolutionary Turn

With this, Vladimir rejected traditional religion, denounced liberalism, and turned toward radical, revolutionary politics with remarkable single-mindedness. Contemporaries who knew the young man observed that he lived the revolution around the clock, seven days a week. He read *Das Kapital* and by 1889 was an avowed Marxist. Even as he took up Marxism, the distinct traditions of Russian radicalism from the populists and nihilists had left their mark and continued to actively influence his Marxism.

His radical activities led to his expulsion from the Kazan Imperial University. Still, he was able to finish his law degree. He worked in St. Petersburg as a public defender while remaining secretly involved in revolutionary politics.

Lenin admired Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s novel *What Is to Be Done?* and is supposed to have read it over and over again, saying it had truly showed him how to be a genuine revolutionary.
It remains unclear why he chose the name Lenin as a pseudonym. He had many pseudonyms for different purposes, but it was as Lenin that he became famous.

In 1895, Lenin traveled to Switzerland to meet with Georgi Plekhanov, the leader of Russian Marxists, whom Lenin would eventually displace in terms of prominence after 1900. Lenin continued on to Paris to make a pilgrimage to the site of the Paris Commune. Back in Russia, he continued his underground revolutionary activism with the Social Democratic Labour Party (SDLP).

**Deliberate Hardness**

Lenin fashioned himself. He bred in himself a huge discipline. He was an organizational fanatic, although his neatness did not extend to clothes. He did not smoke and drank little, and he exercised to keep himself ready. Lenin confessed that he did not often listen to music because it made him too sentimental.

One moment of Lenin’s deliberate hardness shocked even his fellow revolutionaries. In 1891–1892, famine raged in the Russian Empire, especially in the Volga region, which saw some 400,000 die. Given the fecklessness and slowness of the government response, influential activists and writers like the great novelist Leo Tolstoy organized voluntary relief efforts to bring food, help, and medical aid.

Lenin disagreed with this. He said no relief efforts should be mounted. He explained that the famine was no accident or random occurrence, but rather was an absolutely inevitable result of industrialization and the dislocations produced by capitalism. By the laws of history, it had to happen, so that with growing misery on a massive scale, the revolution would be brought closer.

**Lenin’s Exile**

Lenin could not escape the secret police forever. In 1895, he was arrested and exiled to Siberia. There, in 1898, he married a teacher and fellow revolutionary he had started a relationship with, Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya. Their marriage of the next 26 years seemed a stable political partnership rather than a passionate attachment and did not preclude Lenin from having a mistress, the French communist Inessa Armand.
Lenin used his Siberian exile productively. He produced his first major work, *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*. Then, in 1900, his Siberian exile ended. Lenin went into exile abroad and later was followed by his young wife. He spent the next years living in Munich, then London, and eventually Switzerland.

In exile, Lenin and Krupskaya worked on *Iskra*, the SDLP newspaper, which was smuggled back into the Russian Empire. From 1901, he had firmly adopted his revolutionary pseudonym, Lenin. However, he had over 140 other pseudonyms.

Lenin eventually settled into exile in Switzerland, which one would not naturally associate with revolutionaries. However, in addition to neutrality, cleanliness, and orderliness, Switzerland also offered refuge to exiles, including Lenin and many other different kinds of Russian revolutionaries.

**What Is to Be Done?**

In 1902, Lenin wrote a pivotal manifesto, entitled *What Is to Be Done?* The name of the pamphlet was a tribute to Chernyshevsky’s novel by the same name. In this manifesto, Lenin argued for the creation of a party of a new type, quite different from the elaborate, bureaucratic, slow-moving structure of the SDLP. Instead, Lenin proposed a smaller, totally dedicated secret society of professional revolutionaries committed to Marxist socialism. This elite would steer the revolution and direct the working class, functioning as its vanguard and pointing the way to the future.

Lenin’s plan would mean action now, not waiting for development the way some, like Eduard Bernstein, suggested. Lenin adapted Marx’s scheme to Russian conditions to make way for revolution there. In the process, Lenin added ideas about secret organization and activity from Russia’s prior, pre-Marxist revolutionary traditions.

**Lenin Strikes**

Lenin set about enforcing his vision of how the movement should be organized, even at the cost of forcing a split in the SDLP. The crisis was precipitated almost on the run. The SDLP started its congress in Brussels, Belgium, in 1903, but Belgian police forced this revolutionary gathering to disband, so the delegates moved to London. At the relocated congress, Lenin forced a split between his own adherents and their other, more moderate comrades.
Lenin led his Bolshevik faction, labeling his foes as Mensheviks. These terms reveal how astute he was at factional infighting. The term Bolshevik means “majoritarian.” The term Menshevik means “the minoritarian group.” Despite these names, the Bolshevik group was smaller than the alleged minority, the Mensheviks.

However, during the party congress, Lenin had chosen a moment when his followers were in the majority to pass the key resolution about how the party was to be structured and who would have the leading posts, and won the label of majority. That would prove to be a mandate of success.

The Hunted
The Russian revolutionaries were hunted, and they knew it. They were playing an unrelenting cat-and-mouse game with the imperial secret police, in Russia or in exile. Terrorists hunted political leaders to assassinate, and the police hunted those planning revolution.

After the 1881 assassination of Tsar Alexander, the Okhrana, a secret police that had earlier been organized to quell radicalism, now surged into action on an international scale. The organization had a staff of 20,000 and a huge budget.

In the 1880s, only 17 people were executed for political crimes in Russia. However, many assassinations continued in the years afterward, among them a prime minister, a minister of education, and two ministers of the interior (who were thus in charge of the Okhrana).

The Okhrana infiltrated the different revolutionary groups, even the disciplined and well-organized Bolsheviks. At one point, the St. Petersburg Bolshevik leadership of five men included four Okhrana agents.

The Okhrana also undertook psychological warfare operations, including spreading conspiracy theories. In 1903, in Russia, there appeared the notorious text The Protocols of the Elders of Zion, which claimed a global conspiracy of Jews to take over the world. It has long been suspected that Okhrana agents produced this, scapegoating the Jews, a persecuted minority, to divert dissatisfaction from the Romanovs.
The Revolutionary Lifestyle

Within the underground movement, there was a proud tradition of vigorous debate. Engaging in this fierce debate, while remaining in the end comrades, was a sign of a desirable hardness of character, forged in the underground.

As a part of this somewhat ritualized culture of internal debate, the elite Bolsheviks cultivated a tradition of self-criticism known in Russian as *samokritika*. This was a confessional practice with religious roots. To own up to mistakes and correct them showed the needed determination and other qualities essential for a revolutionary.

Personally, revolutionaries also often indulged in bohemian lifestyles, espousing what they called “free love” and rejecting traditional family models. The result could be a heady mix of romance, jealousy, and secrecy. This milieu was united by living in expectation of revolution.

Lenin Waits

The question remained of whether revolution was approaching in Russia. After Lenin went into exile, industrialization had continued apace in Russia, making impressive gains from a very low starting point. Additionally, in 1905, a Russian revolution did indeed break out unexpectedly, but it sputtered out. That same year, Lenin returned to Russia too late to affect events and had to retreat back into exile, disappointed.

After somehow surviving the crisis of 1905, when the empire seemed almost to dissolve into chaos, the tsar would have been well advised to work ceaselessly to reform the government and save the dynasty. Instead of reform, however, the Russian Empire fell under the influence of a Serbian mystic by the name of Rasputin. He increasingly dominated the court because of his alleged powers, which the tsar and his wife believed would heal their ailing son, Alexei. This damaged the ruling regime’s reputation.

Meanwhile, Lenin was waiting, but not patiently. Back in exile, he continued to work on creating his party of a new type to be ready for the next revolutionary spasm in Russia. Lenin also argued that in the coming crisis, allying with the bourgeoisie would be impossible. Instead, the industrial proletariat should ally with the peasantry, who formed the masses of Russia’s population. This would be only a tactical alliance, because the industrial proletariat were the ascendant class.
Other Marxists still maintained that Russia would have to go through two stages in its historical development: first a middle-class democratic stage, and then a move toward workers’ control and socialism. Lenin rejected that prescription. Instead of going through two stages, Lenin urged that they should just plunge directly into socialism.

Comrades who did not share Lenin’s strictness and single-mindedness tried to mediate and reconcile the factions. They urged compromise as a way of healing the split between the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks, but Lenin refused, showing total devotion to his own formula.

At another SDLP conference in Prague in 1912, the split became permanent. Lenin rejected the charge that he was the troublemaker and instead declared that it was the Mensheviks who were deviationists and splitters.

Lenin was waiting for a crisis in the world system that he could turn to his advantage with his model for a new revolutionary strategy. That crisis came with the outbreak of World War I.

**Suggested Reading**


› ———, *Lenin*, pp. 1–250.
World War I’s impact on socialism and communism was hugely transformative. In fact, the socialist/communist split would come to a head during the war. World War I brought socialists into national governments for the first time. In Russia, the war led to the first communist regime. As a result of all this, a civil war opened up for hearts and minds.
Tensions Grow
Vladimir Lenin entered exile in Switzerland after the defeat of 1905’s revolution. Now it was necessary to wait for some crisis, economic or military. Lenin speculated—correctly, as it turned out—that a great war between capitalist powers might break out.

As tension grew in Europe among the Great Powers, the Second International repeated its pledge that it would help prevent a world war. In 1912, the German Social Democratic Party declared that if war broke out, it would call strikes to immobilize the war machine.

When World War I did break out in late July and August 1914, the war broke the Second International and destroyed the ideological promise of internationalism. In every major European country (with one exception), socialists discovered that they had competing loyalties. They were not only followers of socialism; they were also patriots who wanted to defend their countries. Only the Russian socialists held firm and followed the prewar plan.

When war was declared, in all countries except Russia, socialist parliamentary deputies voted for war credits to fund the national defense. The case of the German Social Democratic Party was decisive. Had this party voted against funding the war effort, it might have stopped the chain reaction. German socialists surprised themselves. They also surprised the German imperial government, which had arrest lists ready for the outbreak of war, yet ended up not needing to arrest any socialist leaders after all.

Lenin, in Switzerland, was thunderstruck. When he was told that the German socialists voted for war, he refused to believe it at first, and then furiously denounced his comrades as “social chauvinists,” not real revolutionaries.

Lenin in Zimmerwald
In different countries, some voices were raised against the war, urging a more radical path than the established political parties had taken. Yet the group of socialists who were antiwar to begin with was small. The Swiss socialist Robert Grimm organized a meeting of this group in September 1915 in the Swiss village of Zimmerwald.

Only some three-dozen gathered. At the conference, Lenin demanded a more radical solution. He urged the creation of a new international, a third one, to gather genuine
revolutionary socialists and work to transform this imperialist war into a civil war. In his view, workers and soldiers should turn on their own ruling classes and overthrow them all.

But Lenin was unable to convince the group. Upset with this result, he organized what came to be called the Zimmerwald Left group, consisting of some eight people.

Among the participants at Zimmerwald were two vivid personalities: Leon Trotsky, a future communist leader from Russia, and the socialist figure Karl Radek from Poland.

Some Marxist theorists saw different countries as having to pass through phases of development, first bourgeois and then proletarian. However, Trotsky argued that in one swift and continuing dynamic, the working class could accomplish all these tasks in some countries, all in the context of a world economic system that was increasingly interconnected.

Meanwhile, as an internationalist, Radek effectively bridged different national contexts. In Germany at the Göppingen showdown of 1912, Radek headed a radical faction challenging the party leadership.

As participants from the Zimmerwald gathering like Lenin, Trotsky, and Radek departed the little village, they had no way of knowing the paths they would shortly be embarking on. Lenin in particular continued waiting hopefully. He was impressed with how the German war effort was concentrating industry, and he thought this might actually prove to be the basis on which socialism could be built after a revolution.

**Lenin’s Books**

In 1916, Lenin wrote his book *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*, which was published the next year. In it, he argued that finance capital had created an integrated world system. The implication was that revolution in a place like Russia, the weakest link in that system, might unleash a chain reaction globally.

He also started work on *State and Revolution*, in which he articulated his intuitions about what would follow an uprising: Any state was the “centralized organization of force, the organization of violence.” The working class would need such a state to enforce the dictatorship of the proletariat, before that state would become unnecessary and wither away.
In *State and Revolution*, Lenin made another startling declaration, comparing fully developed socialism in the future to a post office. Perhaps he had in mind a highly efficient, punctual German post office. He called a post office a “mechanism of social management,” at present capitalist but able in the future to be repurposed under workers’ control.

**Lenin Changes His Tone**

However, after yet more waiting, even Lenin finally grew discouraged. In January 1917, he gave a talk to young Swiss socialists in Zurich and said:

> We, the old people, perhaps won’t survive until the decisive battles of this forthcoming revolution. But it occurs to me that it’s with a large amount of confidence that I can articulate the hope that the young people who work so wonderfully in the socialist movement of Switzerland and the entire world will have the happiness of not only fighting but also of winning victory in the forthcoming proletarian revolution.

This was important: Like Marx, Lenin had always been saying that the revolution was imminent. Now it seemed the war would go on forever, deferring the revolution indefinitely. In this case, Lenin was simply wrong.

**The February Revolution**

One month later, the Russian Empire was gripped by the February Revolution. The news electrified Russian revolutionaries in Swiss exile. Russia’s war effort had put huge strains on its society. Some 12 million men were mobilized. They were poorly equipped, sometimes sent to the front without rifles.

Defeats mounted, and by 1917, the empire had suffered 5 million casualties. Some blamed the mystic Rasputin, but his murder in late 1916 did not bring help. Strikes mounted, and then revolution broke out, started by women protestors in the streets.

In late February 1917, troops were sent out to put down protests by women demanding bread in Petrograd. These troops instead joined the protestors. As more regiments followed suit, the revolution accelerated and imperial authority evaporated. A provisional government was formed by the Duma parliament, including liberal Constitutional
Democrats and socialists of different orientations. Tsar Nicholas II abdicated, and three centuries of Romanov rule ended.

Russia stayed in the war. A situation of dual power emerged, with the Petrograd Soviet pursuing more radical policies, claiming to speak for other grassroots councils or soviets in the army regiments.

**Lenin’s Return**

Lenin was impatient to return, but warring countries surrounded neutral Switzerland, so returning to Russia was daunting. Eventually, the German government made Lenin an offer: They promised to ship him to Russia in return for his spreading the message of Russia leaving the war.
Negotiations followed, with Lenin urgently wanting to use the Germans while not tainting himself as a German spy. Finally, an agreement was reached that Lenin and 31 other Russian revolutionaries would cross Germany in what was called a sealed train.

Despite the “sealed” designation, only a chalk mark on the floor separated the German officials overseeing the project from their human cargo. That line was to be inviolable, and Lenin's part of the train car would be off-limits.

On April 9, 1917, the train left from Zurich with 32 revolutionaries on board. Lenin strictly enforced discipline on the train; for instance, he threw a German socialist who tried to hitch a ride off the train, and he forbade smoking in certain areas of the train. Lenin also came up with a ticket system for who could use the toilet.

After some delay in Berlin, the train finally reached the Baltic Sea at Stralsund and the island of Rügen. The train went to the port of Sassnitz, where the party boarded a ferry to Sweden. It had taken them three days to cross Germany, and now they needed to cross the icy Baltic.

Once in neutral Sweden, the revolutionaries relaxed. Because he was not a Russian citizen, Radek did not continue with Lenin into Russia. Instead, he stayed behind in Sweden to promote Bolshevism from this neutral country. He joined up with Lenin half a year later.

Clothes Shopping

While in Stockholm, Karl Radek grew concerned that Lenin was shabbily dressed. Radek badgered Lenin into going clothes shopping, succeeding at outfitting Lenin with new shoes and a suit. Lenin, however, balked at the idea of a new overcoat. He said he was going to Russia for revolution, not to start a clothing business.

After crossing Finland and more delays, Lenin finally arrived in Petrograd on April 16, 1917. Outside the station, supporters lifted him on top of an armored car they had brought. Lenin announced to the waiting crowd of Bolsheviks what came to be called
his April Theses: He wanted peace, land, and no support for the provisional government. Only seven months later, Lenin and the Bolsheviks would seize power in Russia.

**Suggested Reading**

- Lerner, *Karl Radek*.
- Merridale, *Lenin on the Train*. 
In April 1917, in his sealed train, Lenin returned to Russia to help the Bolsheviks seize power. They did so in October 1917, which they celebrated afterward as the Great October Socialist Revolution, or Red October. The Bolshevik coup was a pivotal event of the century, for communism did much to shape the ideological discourse of the modern age; states and societies were forced to respond to it.
Turmoil in Russia
Lenin and Leninism, his doctrine of a vanguard party, proved decisive. Lenin went into action immediately on his return. His critics called him a German spy, insisting that he was even now funded by German gold. Lenin responded that, in fact, he had used the Germans.

Lenin preached revolutionary defeatism, which signified his opposition to preserving and reforming existing nation-states, which had been the goal of so-called defensist socialists. Instead, Lenin demanded the overthrow of the Provisional Government.

Within the Provisional Government, the social revolutionary Alexander Kerensky was prime minister, from July 1917. Kerensky was a powerful orator, but when he launched a new offensive against the Germans, speeches were not enough. On the front, Russian efforts slumped, as the offensive failed. This led to a failed attempt at an uprising in July 1917 by the Bolsheviks.

After the failed uprising, Lenin fled to Finland to escape arrest by the Provisional Government. While lying low, Lenin continued work on *State and Revolution* and urged his comrades to prepare for revolt.

During the so-called Kornilov Affair that August, General Lavr Kornilov, commander of the Russian army, apparently tried to seize power and establish a personal dictatorship to oust the Provisional Government—or so Prime Minister Kerensky claimed. The confused affair is shrouded in mystery, but in any event, it failed due to its internal incoherence and the resistance of Russian workers.

The Bolsheviks Make Their Move
Lenin returned to Petrograd from Finland, wearing a series of wigs as disguises. By October 1917, Bolsheviks had achieved a majority in the Petrograd Soviet. Motivated by Lenin’s fierce words, they moved to seize power throughout Russia.

They succeeded by the end of October 1917 by the old calendar, so the event would be mythologized as Red October. Leon Trotsky, who had returned from exile in the Bronx in New York City in May, would be a key player. He had been a Menshevik—that is, one of Lenin’s socialist rivals—but that summer, he switched over to the Bolsheviks. He
would coordinate the effort as chairman of the Petrograd Soviet and its Milrevkom, the Military Revolutionary Committee. It was planned for October 25, 1917.

The plan was to use the upcoming Second Congress of Soviets as cover, to take power in its name, and to then dominate it from within. The Bolsheviks would not rule in alliance with other parties—rather, they would be a vanguard, justifying a one-party state. The decision to strike was made. Lenin had returned to Petrograd and moved about awkwardly in hiding, wearing an ill-fitting wig.

The night from October 24 to October 25, the capital’s life seemed to go on as normal. The day of October 25 passed, and people tensely waited for an assault on the city’s Winter Palace. Then, at 9:40 pm, an explosion echoed along the canals and palaces of Petrograd. Moored along the Neva river, the cruiser *Aurora* had shot a blank and thus given the signal for the climactic attack on the Winter Palace, which was only lightly defended. The assault was over in short order. Six people were killed in the skirmish.

**After the Coup**

In Moscow, days of fighting erupted, but ultimately the Bolsheviks took control in the Kremlin, the old seat of power. The coup had been timed for the second all-Russian congress of soviets, the grassroots councils. Lenin announced, “The oppressed masses themselves will form a government. The old state apparatus will be destroyed root and branch.”
In response to the Bolshevik announcement, social revolutionaries and Mensheviks walked out of the congress in protest. However, the Bolsheviks moved fast to consolidate authority and start addressing the world. They were motivated by Lenin’s teaching that revolutionary stages could be telescoped and accelerated by a disciplined, professional party.

Lenin was thinking globally, beyond all this. The Bolsheviks saw themselves as constantly imperiled by world capitalism. The key was just to hang on long enough in Russia to spark a world revolution.

Formally, the Bolsheviks claimed that they merely ruled in the name of the soviets. However, real power lay with the Council of People’s Commissars. Lenin was president of the Council of People’s Commissars, Trotsky was commissar for foreign affairs, and a Georgian revolutionary named Joseph Stalin was commissar for nationalities, responsible for policies toward the ethnic groups and national minorities in the vast state.

Lenin in Charge
At 47, Lenin, who had lived for revolution, was in charge. He saw the need for dictatorship, which he defined as “authority untrammeled by any laws, absolutely unrestricted by any rules whatever, and based directly on force.” When the previously scheduled elections to the constituent assembly took place in November, the Bolsheviks received only 24 percent of the vote, so they disbanded the democratically elected body.

Rather than withering away, the state was being reorganized by the Bolsheviks. Factories and land were taken over by the government, and peasants were told they could farm their new acreage freely.

In December 1917, the Bolsheviks established a new secret police force, the Cheka. Charged with defending the revolution, Cheka officers considered themselves the “sword and the shield of the party.”
Cheka officers were feared and recognizable—they wore long black leather coats and carried large Mauser pistols. The Cheka made its headquarters in a massive building known as the Lubyanka, which had earlier housed an insurance company. This became a feared place, with its long corridors, secret cells, and torture chambers.

The beginnings of a concentration-camp system were established to incarcerate political rivals and those deemed enemies of the state. One after another, rival parties were shut down and newspapers banned.

**International Affairs**

A new Red Army was established, with Trotsky as commissar of war. Internationally, the Bolsheviks called for an end to the war. Bolsheviks also started to call themselves communists. This was to differentiate themselves from defensist socialists and to use a name more universally understood than the Russian Bolshevik label.

Their next decisive measure was to exit the war, as Lenin had promised, which required signing the humiliating Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany and its allies. In the negotiations that opened in December 1917 at the fortress of Brest-Litovsk, the Bolsheviks aimed not just to bargain diplomatically, but also to win the battle for world opinion. They at first sent a delegation with ordinary workers, which German diplomats found shocking. This was meant to show that the Bolsheviks had overturned traditional hierarchies.

Later, Trotsky came to lead the negotiations, and he astonished the Germans by telling them that he would not bargain any more. Instead, his formula was “neither peace nor war,” and then he walked out. After the Germans got over their surprise, German armies simply resumed their advance, and the Bolsheviks had to plead for more negotiations. In other words, Trotsky’s propaganda move for world sympathy failed.

When the notorious treaty was finally signed in March 1918, it proved one of the harshest in history: The Russian state lost a third of its territory, a quarter of its population, and much industry and rich agricultural lands. However, when the dejected Russian delegates signed the treaty and brought it to Lenin, he refused to read it because he said he had no intention of enacting it. For Lenin, the treaty was a strategic retreat to win time.
Civil Wars
After leaving World War I, Russia saw dissent grow against the Bolsheviks. Many civil wars ensued on many different fronts, and these would rage with great ferocity until 1920. The costs were enormous. Somewhere between 9 and 14 million died in the turmoil, killed or brought down by disease and starvation. Millions more fled as refugees.

Across the territory of the former Russian Empire, Bolsheviks contended with counterrevolutionary Whites. This was the name given to a wide array of opponents, from those who had worked with the Provisional Government to those who wanted to restore tsarism. Incidentally, white was the traditional color of counterrevolutionaries, back to the times of the French Revolution and Bourbon royalists.

The Bolsheviks also faced surly peasants who fought back when government forces came to requisition the food they had grown. The Bolsheviks also confronted foreign intervention, including British, French, Japanese, and American expeditionary forces. Finally, former prisoners of war from the collapsing Austro-Hungarian army formed their own force, the Czech Legion. When the Czechs clashed with Bolshevik forces, the Czechs seized control of the Trans-Siberian Railway.
**Bolshevik Brutality**

To demonstrate dramatically that there was no way back to the old regime, the Bolsheviks murdered the imprisoned tsar and his family, shooting them in a cellar in Ekaterinburg on July 17, 1918. They feared the approaching White armies and the Czech Legion might free the ex-royals, who could then become a rallying point for counterrevolution.

The Bolsheviks saw violence and terror as necessary, legitimate tools of statecraft and a response to resistance. The Cheka started rounding people up into camps. This was the start of the Soviet gulag system that would expand under Stalin.

However, the instability grew worse. On August 30, 1918, a social revolutionary named Fanny Kaplan stalked Lenin after a speech and shot him at point-blank range to avenge the arrests of fellow socialists. Lenin survived.

Five hundred hostages in Petrograd were shot. An official decree, “On Red Terror,” was passed to crush resistance. The Petrograd Pravda newspaper announced on its front page, “All Soviets are to arrest right Socialist-Revolutionaries, representatives of the upper middle class and former officers and to hold them as hostages. If they attempt to resist or to hide, they are to be shot summarily without discussion.”

Being in any way suspected of involvement with the counterrevolution was enough. Questions of identity turned fatal. Tsarist generals were beaten to death. Middle-class people learned to soak their hands in alcohol to make the skin crack and to rub dirt over them, as soft hands marked one as a non-worker.

Amidst these horrors came unexpected news: World War I was finally over. In November 1918, Germany surrendered and a ceasefire was enacted. On November 11, the guns fell silent on the Western Front.

The question remained of what would happen next. Prophetically, the French socialist Albert Thomas announced in a newspaper article that the world had to decide between either Lenin or American president Woodrow Wilson.
Suggested Reading

› Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*.
› Reed, *Ten Days that Shook the World*.
Rosa Luxemburg: A Revolutionary Martyr

Lecture 10
This lecture provides an in-depth examination of the Polish-German socialist Rosa Luxemburg. She is perhaps the most famous woman radical in history. Her life was totally committed to revolution. She personified internationalism by entirely rejecting national or ethnic loyalties. In her revolutionary activities spanning Russia, Switzerland, Poland, and Germany, she underlined the elemental power of spontaneous revolt. She took on mythic stature, becoming a martyr to the cause for many. She also personified a struggle with the ambiguities of revolutionary devotion.

Luxemburg’s Background

Rosa Luxemburg was born on March 5, 1871, the very year of the Paris Commune. Her given name was Rozalia Luksenburg. She was born as a subject of the Russian Empire, in the Russian part of Poland. Her parents were an assimilated Jewish family in Zamo. Her father was a timber merchant, and when she was small, the family moved to the bigger city of Warsaw in 1873.

Though her family was not religiously observant, their ethnic origins also set them apart in heavily Christian surroundings. In 1881, there was a wave of pogroms in the Russian Empire after Tsar Alexander II was assassinated. Jews were blamed. Rosa never talked about fearing these murderous mobs, but some scholars argue that this was a formative experience for her, which made her identify with victimized people everywhere and reject national belonging as too narrow and exclusive.

She also grew distant from her Jewish heritage, arguing that she had just as much in common with plantation workers in South America, Africans being hurt by imperialists, and others. She rejected religion in favor of political activism. In fact, on at least one occasion, she said ugly things about Russian Jews, further exemplifying her break with her origins.

In high school, she and friends got involved in radical circles, which were banned by the Russian secret police. Here, she learned about Marxism as an ideology. After playing a role in organizing strikes with the recently established Proletariat Party, she attracted the attention of the tsarist police and felt that she had to flee.

A Misdiagnosis

As a young child, Rosa Luxemburg had a hip dislocation, which was misdiagnosed and treated badly. This condition healed incorrectly. For the rest of her life, she had a painful and strong limp.
The University of Zurich was one of the few in Europe that accepted women. She moved to Switzerland in 1889. There, she was also drawn to exile politics, because many German socialists had gone there as a result of Bismarck’s anti-socialist laws.

**Luxemburg’s New Life**

At the university, Luxemburg eventually earned a doctorate in law and political economy. She had a tight circle of friends and a lover, Leo Jogiches, who already was a rising socialist in Poland. At first, he was the dominant part of this couple, but then she became more famous. Over time, this created a passive-aggressive dynamic between them, which eventually drove the pair apart.

In 1893, they were among the founders of the Social Democracy of the Kingdom of Poland (SDKP). Factionalism divided Polish socialists over the question of whether to prioritize Polish independence or global class conflict. Rosa believed deeply that socialists should only be internationalist. At the 1893 Zurich congress of the Second International, she was expelled from the congress over this question, and she never forgot it, determined to be a better Marxist than anyone else.

She threw herself into journalism and continued work on her dissertation on Polish industrialization. In 1898, Rosa moved to the very center of the world’s most advanced socialist movement and the expected site of the coming revolution: Germany. She moved to Berlin. To enable this move, she contracted a fake marriage for German citizenship with Gustav Lübeck, an acquaintance. After they were married, they never saw each other again.

**Luxemburg in Germany**

Once in Germany, she became active in the huge Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). She quickly became famous for her epic fights with other socialist leaders. Luxemburg aimed to be a female Marx, the truest interpreter and continuer of his tradition, with her heavy theoretical work, *The Accumulation of Capital* (published in 1913).

She also came to lead the left wing of the SPD, arguing that the tactic of mass strikes would build a radicalizing dynamic and sweep the socialists into power. She challenged top party leaders like Karl Kautsky and August Bebel. She especially clashed with Eduard
Bernstein and his ideas of revisionism, abusing them as “opportunism.” Her *Reform or Revolution*, a refutation of Bernstein, appeared in 1899.

She also clashed with Lenin, the Russian Bolshevik leader, warning that centralization instead of spontaneity would produce despotism. She avowed that spontaneous proletarian action was always best.

She clashed with French radical Jean Jaurès over whether one could ally oneself with middle-class liberals. Additionally, she clashed with a fellow Polish revolutionary newly arrived in Germany, Karl Radek.

**Hopes of Revolution**

When a revolt did break out in the Russian Empire in 1905, Luxemburg hurried to Warsaw. She was active with the Polish, German, and Russian socialists, modeling internationalism in her own person. However, in actuality, she had arrived too late, as the revolutionary action had subsided. In the crackdown that followed, Luxemburg was arrested, imprisoned in Warsaw, and then released to her family due to poor health. Back in Berlin, starting in 1907, she taught at the newly founded SPD party school.

Luxemburg’s involvement in theory and politics could hardly be more intense. At the same time, Luxemburg’s biographer Harry Harmer points out that while she ardently identified with the proletarian masses, she remained curiously remote from them, unless they were her servants or members of the audience at her speeches.

Her ideas continued to evolve. She had been electrified by the Russian Revolution of 1905, seeing it as proof of her tactic of the mass strike. She prized the spontaneous action of the workers, rather than vanguard parties like Lenin spoke of. Yet she also avowed that “the worst working-class party is better than none.” Urging such tactics in Germany landed her in prison for two months in 1907 for “inciting violence.”

**The War and Luxemburg**

When World War I broke out in 1914, Rosa felt shattered and considered suicide. The SPD voted in favor of war credits—that is, in favor of funding the war effort. Only months later would a sole figure from the party, Karl Liebknecht, vote against a new
round of funding and denounce the war. Liebknecht and other radical socialists broke with their comrades to form the International Group, opposed to the war.

Luxemburg was arrested and sent to the Royal Prussian Prison for Women. Inside, she read and wrote, and was confident: “History is really working into our hands.” In Berlin, without her presence but based on her advice and counsel, anti-war socialists founded a new organization on January 1, 1916: the Spartacus League.

After a year in jail, Rosa was released. However, this did not last long: The imperial authorities cracked down again. Liebknecht had shouted at a demonstration, “Down with the war! Down with the government!” For this, he was arrested and sentenced to four years’ imprisonment.

After five months at large, Luxemburg was arrested again to be put in “protective custody,” as the state called it. While she languished in jail again, the SPD fractured as a party, as more deputies refused to vote for funding the war. These radicals broke from the SPD in spring 1917 and formed the Independent SPD (the German acronym for which is USPD). This new group included Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein, Luxemburg’s earlier adversaries in party arguments.

**Later Events**

Germany’s war effort was strained and started to buckle, feeding radicalization. The Revolutionary Shop Stewards movement emerged in the factories, stirring growing strike actions. They were inspired by the Bolshevik seizure of power in the Red October of 1917.

Luxemburg felt torn about the Bolshevik coup. On the one hand, here at last was decisive action. On the other hand, the Bolsheviks had abolished the elected constituent assembly when the vote did not go their way.

After three years of prison, Luxemburg suddenly found her condition overturned as revolution did take hold in Germany. The Russian Revolution had inspired many Germans weary of the war. However, in the upheaval that now followed, the split within socialism became murderous.
In fall 1918, Germany’s generals announced that the war had been lost. To placate the Allies in upcoming negotiations, the kaiser introduced reforms to make Germany a constitutional monarchy, but these came too late. Even though German defeat was looming, a naval order went out that the fleet should go forth on a suicide mission to clash with the British fleet. This insane suggestion led to sailor mutinies in Kiel, spreading to other garrisons and cities. The kaiser abdicated, and chaos reigned.

**Socialist Civil War**

On November 9, in Berlin, two rival republics were declared. A moderate socialist named Philipp Scheidemann declared a German democratic republic, which would later be known as the Weimar Republic after the town where its constitution would be written. At the same time, Karl Liebknecht, recently released from jail, declared from the balcony of the royal palace a new radical socialist republic.

Karl Radek arrived in Berlin as an expert consultant in seizures of power. The radical socialists advocated forming workers’ and soldiers’ councils, as had been done in Russia by the soviets.

The stage was set for socialist civil war. The day after the revolution, the moderate socialist government came to an agreement with the army. The socialist minister of defense, Gustav Noske, authorized setting up so-called Freikorps mercenary units to fight the radicals. The Freikorps were not friends of democracy, but brutalized veterans of the war who wanted to lash out at those they saw as internal enemies. Many would later go on to join the Nazis.

The German socialist and labor movement supported the government. For many of the moderate socialists, what was happening in Russia was Bolshevik disorder, something to avoid rather than imitate. To Luxemburg, civil war seemed inevitable. Socialists of different stripes engaged in firefights in city streets, while the Freikorps mercenaries rampaged.

Activists of the Spartacus League formed the Communist Party of Germany on December 30, 1918. From January 6 to 13, they led a revolt in Berlin to seize power for radical socialism. Luxemburg was skeptical of whether this was a good idea. Most of all, Luxemburg questioned whether the timing was right for revolt in Germany, and she urged
participating in upcoming elections first. However, because members of the movement were eager to move ahead, Luxemburg reluctantly joined the rising. In the next days of street fighting, the Freikorps and their machine gun squads wiped out the uprising.

The End of the Line
On January 15, 1919, the soldiers tracked Luxemburg down and arrested her. She was taken to their headquarters. As she was led away, one soldier smashed her on the head with his rifle. She was dragged to a car, and as it pulled away, another soldier fired his pistol through the open window at her temple. Then, they drove her body to the Landwehr Canal and dropped it in. She died at the age of 47.

Shortly afterward, the soldiers also murdered Karl Liebknecht, her ally. Leo Jogiches, Luxemburg’s former lover, was hunted down and murdered as well. Karl Radek was arrested and later released to Russia.

The memory of Luxemburg lived on. The revolutionary fratricide of 1919 led to lasting bitterness between the socialists and communists in Germany. This later meant they did not cooperate (as they might have otherwise) to oppose the Nazi rise to power in the 1930s.

The fact that her tragic end came before she faced any of the inevitable challenges of putting her politics into practice has made her a martyr figure in the communist tradition. For the Bolsheviks, another hope had perished when the German communists were defeated. But despite this disappointment, Lenin and his comrades were still convinced that world revolution was near.

Suggested Reading
› Harmer, Rosa Luxemburg.
› Luxemburg, Reform or Revolution and Other Writings.
Until roughly 1923, the new communist regime in Moscow and its allies worldwide continued to breathlessly await the outbreak of world revolution, for which Lenin’s Bolsheviks believed they had provided the spark. This period sometimes involved fighting and sometimes negotiating, but it always involved expecting. In essence, they sought a red bridge to world revolution, whether through war, subversion, diplomacy, or a combination of all of these.
After World War I

When World War I ended on November 11, 1918, the Red Army was set on the move. Soviet forces invaded the newly independent Baltic states, Poland, and Ukraine, stretching to link up with an expected revolt in Germany. These efforts continued and merged with the ongoing Russian Civil War, a confused series of clashes between Lenin’s Bolsheviks and different sets of opponents. These included Russian monarchists, social revolutionaries, anarchists, peasant partisans, and foreigners: some 200,000 soldiers from Britain, France, Japan, the US, and the Czech Legion.

By November 1920, the Bolsheviks had survived and beaten their enemies. The White forces and their foreign allies lacked clear goals or organization, and they never crafted a message that would appeal broadly to the masses. By contrast, from their embattled stronghold in Moscow, the Bolsheviks did have a plan: to hold out and then spread worldwide revolution.

Created and perfected by Leon Trotsky, the commissar for war, the Red Army proved the vital instrument for victory. The Red Army grew to 5 million strong by the end of the Civil War. With its help, the state pursued a ruthless extractive economic policy named War Communism, which left a very deep stamp on their state. They centralized government control even more by nationalizing factories and requisitioning food from farmers to feed the cities and armies.

The Comintern

To spread the message of global revolution, the Bolsheviks sponsored an entire institution tasked with that goal. This was their newly organized Third International, or the Comintern, short for Communist International. The founding congress of the Third International started on March 2, 1919, in Moscow, and the Comintern would be based there. One year earlier, the capital had been moved from Petrograd to the old city of Moscow, set more deeply in Russian territory.

The founding meeting began with a tribute to dead comrades, such as Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, who had been killed in Berlin two months before. At first, the Comintern was small, but by the second congress the year after, delegates from 37 countries attended.
At that meeting in Moscow in 1920, Lenin dictated 21 points as conditions for a party to be admitted to membership in the Comintern. Their core was following the lead of the victorious Bolsheviks in breaking completely with reformist socialists, following the formula of so-called democratic centralism and the party line, and planning for the phase of worldwide civil war.

Grigory Zinoviev was made the chairman of the Comintern, and working under him were Karl Radek and Victor Serge. Radek was the Polish Jewish Bolshevik who had been with Lenin on the sealed train back to Russia, and who along the way had bought Lenin the pants that he apparently wore for much of 1917. Radek was the classic internationalist: He spoke Polish, Russian, German, and French, and was a dazzling and witty journalist and conversationalist.

Born in Belgium to Russian exiles, Serge came to Soviet Russia in 1919. In his *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*, he relates how he lived through the same dilemma again and again as he worked for the communist regime. He condemned the Cheka, arbitrary arrests, and other abuses, but he did not break with Lenin and the Bolsheviks. Instead, he stuck with his role, speaking of a duty to both guard against external enemies of the revolution and to combat abuses within the party.

He would intervene—sometimes successfully, sometimes not—for those about to be executed. He would argue in debates against dictatorial rule and suppression of free speech, but then submit to party discipline all the same. He spoke of the atmosphere of terror as “intolerable inhumanity,” but then tolerated it by remaining within the regime.

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**John Reed**

Many foreign communists became prominent in the Comintern, including the American writer John Reed. His journalistic account of the Bolshevik seizure of power in Red October was entitled *Ten Days That Shook the World*.

Reed was from Portland, Oregon. Sent to Europe as a war reporter, he was thrilled by what he saw in Russia. Back home, he was among the founding group of American communists, and he eventually returned to Russia for a Comintern congress. There, he fell ill and died in October 1920, and he was buried in a tomb set into the wall of the Kremlin.
New Communist Parties
The Comintern united and encouraged new communist parties. Such parties were already being formed in Germany, France, and the US. The Chinese Communist Party was organized in 1921. In Moscow, Sun Yat-sen University was founded for Chinese youth, with Radek as provost. He described this as equivalent of Christian missionary schools, but for Marxism.

The later Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh was a founding member of the French Communist Party, and then he came to Moscow to work in the Comintern. A remarkable Japanese man, Sen Katayama, helped found the Japanese Communist Party in 1922.
Through front organizations, the Comintern sought not only active agents, but also sympathizers—*poputniki*, or "fellow travelers"—to aid the communist cause. The Comintern sent agents with money and advice and expected to have its orders followed.

From the moment of its founding in the late winter of 1919, those involved in the Comintern were deliriously hopeful. In fact, in the very first issue of its journal, *Communist International*, in April 1919, Chairman Zinoviev announced:

> As we write these lines, the Third International already has as its main foundation three Soviet republics—in Russia, Hungary, and Bavaria. But nobody will be surprised if, when these lines come to be printed, we have not three but six or even more Soviet republics.

**Hungary**

As it turned out, Soviet Hungary lasted for only four months and Soviet Bavaria for only three weeks. Hungary had been among the defeated powers of World War I, and in the aftermath, its territory was radically truncated, facing occupation by French forces, Romanians, and Czechs.

No mainstream party was willing to continue governing, so a power vacuum emerged. In dire straits, the socialists agreed to a fusion with the new Hungarian Communist Party, whose leader Béla Kun was hauled from jail to national office.

Kun was Hungarian-Jewish by origin. During World War I, he had been drafted into the Austro-Hungarian army and was captured by the Russians in 1916. As a prisoner of war, he joined the Russian Bolsheviks and got to know Lenin, who dispatched him to his native country to agitate.

Kun suggested to Hungarians that alliance with and help from Soviet Russia could be their salvation, and even nationalist Hungarians could support the new state. Coming to power on March 21, 1919, the new regime pushed back the foreign armies and undertook quick radical reforms in economics and culture.

However, food shortages, inflation, and rampant corruption were so bad that even government officials criticized their own regime. All these took their toll. When
Romanian and Czech armies moved on the capital of Budapest again, the regime toppled after only 133 days, collapsing in early August 1919. Kun and his associates fled.

**Bavaria**

To the west, in southern Germany, the Hungarian uprising inspired radicals in Munich, in Bavaria. With the end of the war, seven centuries of Wittelsbach royal family rule came crashing down. A new socialist republic was declared by Kurt Eisner, but he was assassinated by a radical nationalist student. In the aftermath, Bavaria was declared a Soviet republic.

The new rulers included anarchists, writers, and poets. The new regime only had enough time to promise the end of capitalism through the printing of free money. Its minister for foreign affairs demanded that Switzerland turn over locomotives to the new state, and when they refused, declared war on the Swiss. These men, however, were soon replaced by more determined revolutionaries. They were led by Max Levien, an adherent of Lenin, who announced that the new Bavaria would be a springboard to revolution throughout Europe.

But the government in Berlin had enough, and it sent in the Freikorps mercenaries, who had earlier crushed the Spartacus uprising and murdered Rosa Luxemburg. Blood flowed in the streets of Munich in May 1919, with the shooting of hostages and prisoners on both sides. The Freikorps killing spree was horrific.

Though Soviet Hungary and Soviet Bavaria went down to defeat, two important points may be made about them. First, some opponents of the regimes used the Jewish family origins of some prominent revolutionaries to assert a concept of Judeo-Bolshevism, the claim that Jews and communism were one and the same.

This was false, ignoring the fact that these same revolutionaries had deliberately rejected the traditions of their ancestry or any religious faith. Additionally, the class enemies they targeted, the bourgeoisie, also included many Jews. Nonetheless, this false equivalency would often be asserted and later became a core belief of the Nazis.

The second point has to do with questions of nationalism. Strangely enough, Béla Kun’s Soviet Hungary sold itself to Hungarian nationalists as the one true defender of national
sovereignty and interests, and it won some support on this score. This signaled the beginning of a longer and more convoluted relationship between communists in power and nationalism as a theme.

**Conclusion**

If the failed attempts at sovietizing Hungary and Bavaria were disappointing, remaining Bolshevik hopes were raised and then dashed in the Soviet-Polish War of 1920. In that war, the Red Army hoped to advance westward and link up with Germany. That meant conflict with an expansive Poland, which had just regained its independence after World War I.

Russian Bolsheviks assumed that Polish peasants and workers would rise up to support the Red Army. By the summer of 1920, the Red Army was on the Vistula River, but was held back by Polish forces in front of Warsaw. After a ceasefire in the fall, a peace treaty followed in 1921. The receding of hopes for revolution in the west was a bitter realization for Lenin.

The bitterness grew with the mutiny by Soviet sailors at the Kronstadt garrison outside Petrograd. Earlier the most ardent supporters of Lenin, they revolted in February 1921 against the one-party rule of Lenin. The sailors demanded that civil liberties be restored and that a new Constituent Assembly be elected for the country.

Trotsky directed the attack that crushed them, and the leaders were shot, their followers imprisoned in camps. In the lead-up to Red October, it had been these sailors who had demanded a radical seizure of power. Trotsky had calmed them down, calling them the pride and glory of the revolution. Now the same Trotsky was their butcher.

Lenin reacted to this crisis, and the dire economic situation, with another strategic retreat resembling the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Even as the Kronstadt revolt was being suppressed, the New Economic Policy was announced, eliminating requisitions and allowing some free enterprise on a small scale. This temporary measure allowed for a surprising level of recovery but stirred worries among communists.

A final measure that acknowledged the delay of the worldwide revolution was, paradoxically, the founding of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The Moscow communists did not give up on worldwide revolution, but they saw it as more
distant. They would need to rebuild and wait. Instead of presiding over the withering away of the state, they founded a new one. The USSR was founded on December 30, 1922. An unprecedented experiment in politics, it would last 69 years, until 1991.

Suggested Reading

› Serge, *Memoirs of a Revolutionary*.
› Service, *Spies and Commissars*. 
From the days of turmoil of taking power and then weathering the blasts of the Russian civil conflict, the Bolsheviks aimed to build a new society on a completely new basis, inaugurating in practice a new civilization. This lecture follows the trajectory of their social experiments until the death of Lenin in 1924.
The Rise of Communism: From Marx to Lenin

The New Regime

Leaders and thinkers of the Russian communist regime described their aim as building a “new Soviet man” and “new Soviet woman.” The prospects seemed dizzying, up to and including achieving new stages in human evolution. The victor of the civil war, Leon Trotsky, turned to these social questions and wrote the following in his 1924 book *Literature and Revolution*: “The human species … will once more enter into a state of radical transformation.”

In contrast to decadent bourgeois softness, the new Soviet person would be marked by a quality of hardness, realism, and toughness. The new society was to be collective. Additionally, technology promised to reshape society. In 1920, Lenin coined a potent slogan, which offered a formula for success: “Communism is Soviet power plus the electrification of the whole country.”

As different visions were articulated for what future society would look like, a large debate opened up about proletarian culture. Karl Marx had not been specific about the culture that would be produced by the victorious proletarian revolution.

In Marxist theory, culture was a superstructure on an economic base, so in time it would assuredly come to reflect the new social and political system. But the issue of culture took on special importance after Lenin introduced the New Economic Policy in 1921 as a form of strategic retreat.

Proletkult

Communist activists grew nervous about the influence of bourgeois experts at work in the economy and government. Militants also felt anxiety about the suppression of the Kronstadt uprising. For many, this proved a moment of disillusionment. If a pure proletarian culture were engineered, it might redress the balance of forces and push Soviet society into a transformed modernity.

Proponents of this view gathered in the Proletkult movement. (The name stood for Proletarian Culture and Educational Organization.) It had been founded just before Red October, and it grew tremendously in the years that followed.
Among its leading spirits was an earlier Bolshevik rival of Lenin’s, Alexander Bogdanov, who had come to believe that culture was key to proletarian victory. The organization founded workshops, clubs, studios, theaters, and over 23 journals throughout the country to unleash creative forces of ordinary people. It had about half a million members by 1920.

Proletkult leaders called for more autonomy for their mass organization, but also more state funding. This demand was not very realistic. Lenin grew increasingly irritated.

**Reforms**

Reforms steamed ahead. The old Russian calendar was dropped and the Western one adopted. Russian spelling reforms were introduced to rationalize writing.

All schools were nationalized and put under the People’s Commissariat for Enlightenment, or the Narkompros. This was led by Anatoly Lunacharsky, a patron of Proletkult. The commissariat also had under its direction the arts and culture. Vladimir Tatlin was put in charge of its art department. New literacy programs were launched to reverse high rates of illiteracy and pave the way for political awareness.

The status of women was to be revolutionized, too. Legally, women were given full equal rights with men. The Communist Party instituted a women’s department, the Zhenotdel, to focus on women’s affairs. Divorce, which had been rare and difficult, was now streamlined and made routine. Abortions, which had been illegal, were legalized and became common. However, in spite of promises to create equality for women, the Soviet state and party leaderships remained overwhelmingly male.

Family life was to be revolutionized. Collective kitchens and daycare were instituted. All housing was nationalized. In the cities, apartments were subdivided and assigned to multiple families, with shared kitchens and toilets.

The Komsomol youth organization aimed to foster activism. Communists gave their children newly invented names, which announced their ideology. These included Ninel, which was Lenin spelled backward, and Marenglen, a fusion of Marx, Engels, and Lenin.
Propaganda

A prominent feature of social change from the very outset was propaganda to create enthusiasm for the state’s plans. Lenin’s so-called monumental propaganda plan was announced on April 14, 1918. It changed the very appearance of Russia.

After tsarist monuments were gone, new statues needed to be built to transform cityscapes and to present people with images of heroes. Moreover, some statues would have built-in podiums at their bases so speakers could address crowds. Statues were to include figures like Spartacus, Marx, and Engels. An eager Vladimir Tatlin was put in charge of redecorating Moscow.

The determination to win hearts and minds also paradoxically led the communist regime to support minority nationalism in their multiethnic state, in a 1920s program termed korenizatsiya, or “putting down roots.” To win non-Russian people’s loyalty, the Soviet regime announced it would encourage their languages, cultures, and the growth of leadership groups of their ethnicity. This was a total contrast to earlier Russification policies under the tsar.
The people’s commissar for nationalities was Joseph Stalin, a Bolshevik of non-Russian origins. He was Georgian, from the southern reaches of the former Russian Empire. His ethnic identity was assumed to give him insights into the national question, but his true interest was in maneuvering to power. In April 1922, Lenin had Stalin made general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party. This post gave him control over personnel issues and assignments.

The Communists and Religion

In terms of winning hearts and minds, the communists in particular confronted religion, which their Marxist theory saw as superstitious and irrational. Laws decreed the formal separation of church and state, breaking the close association of tsarist times. Freedom of religion was also formally guaranteed, but the reality was different.

The League of Militant Atheists was established and agitated for discarding religion. Activists exhumed the bodies of Russian Orthodox saints to mock and dispel the aura of reverence around them. Youth leagues organized ironic versions of church rituals, like a communist Easter procession, to ridicule traditional belief.

As church and monastery lands were nationalized, some churches were taken over and turned into museums of atheism. Clergy were persecuted and arrested. Even funerary monuments were affected, as tombstones were taken to be used in construction, a vivid symbol of the destruction of the old world. In March 1922, at a time of famine, Lenin engineered a demand that the Orthodox Church give up its ceremonial objects to fund relief, knowing that these were indispensable to ritual.

The Cheka

The dictates and decrees of the regime were enforced by the feared political secret police, the Cheka. It was created within a month of the Bolshevik seizure of power. In 1924, it was renamed the Joint State Political Directorate, with the Russian acronym of OGPU. Under the direction of the austere Polish radical Felix Dzerzhinsky, it sought out so-called enemies of the people, including former socialist allies.

Several hundred intellectuals were arrested and deported. The Cheka also initiated a system of concentration camps, which later would grow into the gulag camp system. It arrested clergy, for as Dzerzhinsky stated, “Communism and religion are mutually exclusive.”
Voices of Dissent

In a decisive moment, at the 10th party congress in 1921, Lenin pushed through a resolution banning all factions in the party. Bolshevik activists were wracked with anxiety about the growing bureaucratic character of their own movement as it secured power.

Yet voices of dissent and warning about where this was headed could still be heard, in particular from thinkers who had earlier supported revolutionary aspirations. The writer Yevgeny Zamyatin, for instance, was a former Bolshevik who penned a dystopian science fiction novel in 1920 entitled *We*. This was about future society in a total state. It was immediately banned in Russia, but it later inspired George Orwell’s much better-known *1984*. Zamyatin was allowed to go into exile.

Boris Pasternak’s famous novel *Doctor Zhivago*, written decades later, dealt with this period of upheaval in Russian history and traced the disillusionment of many. The Bolshevik activist Angelica Balabanov also turned against her own movement, seeing its violence. In her biography, *My Life as a Rebel*, she declared that the tragedy began “when terror became a habit rather than an act of self-defense.” She, too, left Russia.

The Death of Lenin

A decisive moment came with the death of Lenin. His health had been damaged by Fanny Kaplan’s assassination attempt in 1918. He suffered a major stroke in 1922, which was followed by others. He lost his ability to speak. He died on January 21, 1924, after about a year of incapacitation. In notes for a last testament he struggled to produce, Lenin was full of doubt about the future of Soviet leadership. He criticized any possible successors, in particular Stalin, advising party leaders to remove Stalin.

But Stalin was among the pallbearers at Lenin’s funeral. Stalin is said to have tricked Trotsky about the timing of the funeral, so Trotsky was not in attendance.

Disregarding Lenin’s own wishes and those of his wife, Nadezhda Krupskaya, the Soviet leadership decided that Lenin’s body must be preserved for eternity. Lenin’s body was mummified and placed in a mausoleum outside the Kremlin. This was the first of many repeated examples of communist mummies.
In the summer of 1924, a temporary structure opened, and streams of visitors could view him. Near his body hung an old flag from the Paris Commune of 1871, sent by surviving Communards to honor Lenin. In 1930, a permanent red granite mausoleum was built, which also served as a viewing stand for leaders as parades passed by. Lenin's body, in a glass coffin, was re-embalmed every other year.

In the following decades, a team of up to 200 tended Lenin's body. It was officially claimed that between 1924 and 1940, more than 16 million people had viewed him. And he remains there today.

Lenin's death energized a personality cult that had already been forming around him. Petrograd was renamed Leningrad. Homes and apartments were to have Lenin corners, with a picture of him where icons of saints and Christ had once been venerated. Increasingly, this personality cult had a high priest, and that was Stalin, who used the memory of Lenin to expand his own power.

With the death of Lenin, the leader who had brought communism to power in Russia, a chapter closed in the history of this worldwide movement.

**Suggested Reading**

➤ Lynton, *Tatlin's Tower*. 
Quiz Questions

Answers are provided on page 90

1. Why did Marx deride earlier utopian socialists?
   A. He considered them too gentle.
   B. He considered them unscientific.
   C. He considered them too harsh.

2. Which earlier idealist philosopher is Marx supposed to have “turned on his head”?
   A. Adam Smith.
   B. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.
   C. Friedrich Nietzsche.

3. What philosophical term best describes Marx’s understanding of history?
   A. Dialectical materialism.
   B. Pragmatic idealism.
   C. Populist nihilism.

4. How long did the Paris Commune last?
   A. 7 days.
   B. 72 days.
   C. 100 days.

5. Where is Marx buried?
   A. Paris.
   B. Moscow.
   C. London.
6. Who was the leading socialist proponent of the idea of revisionism?
   A. Eduard Bernstein.
   B. Rosa Luxemburg.
   C. Karl Kautsky.

7. Given that Lenin was a revolutionary pseudonym, what was this person’s real name?
   A. Vladimir Ilyich Nechayev.
   B. Vladimir Ilyich Chernyshevsky.
   C. Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov.

8. The 1915 meeting of antiwar socialists took place in which location in Switzerland?
   A. Geneva.
   B. Davos.
   C. Zimmerwald.

9. Who uttered the famous phrase, “the rubbish heap of history”?
   A. Joseph Stalin.
   B. Leon Trotsky.
   C. Karl Radek.

10. What was the main argument of Rosa Luxemburg’s 1898 *Reform or Revolution*?
    A. She condemned revisionism.
    B. She argued that Marx’s timing was flawed.
    C. She considered Russia ripe for revolution.
11. What did radical political parties have to do to become members of the Third International, also known as the Comintern?

   A. Give up underground political activity.
   B. Agree with Lenin’s 21 points.
   C. Agree to conduct conferences in Russian.

12. Why did the Bolsheviks win the Russian Civil War?

   A. The Bolsheviks were disciplined, while their opponents were divided among themselves.
   B. Foreign intervention forces were successful.
   C. The new League of Nations intervened to enforce a ceasefire.

Quiz Answers

1. B. He considered them unscientific.
2. B. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel.
3. A. Dialectical materialism.
4. B. 72 days.
5. C. London.
7. C. Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov.
8. C. Zimmerwald.
9. B. Leon Trotsky.
10. A. She condemned revisionism.
11. B. Agree with Lenin’s 21 points.
12. A. The Bolsheviks were disciplined, while their opponents were divided among themselves.


› **Merridale, Catherine.** *Lenin on the Train.* London: Allen Lane, 2016. Focused and fascinating narrative of Lenin’s return to Russia in 1917.


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