

## E. The Russian Revolution (1917) and Rise of Communism

While World War I was shattering the civilization of Europe, yet another momentous change was occurring. The terrible effect of the war on Russia contributed to the fall of the monarchy there and its replacement by a form of government new to Europe, known as communism.

1. Ever since Peter the Great, Russia had been trying to become more of a European country, and to match its neighbors' level of development. By World War I, it still had not achieved that aim.
2. During the "century of humiliation," educated Russians had constantly asked the question "What is to be done?" in desperate recognition of Russia's inability to match Europe.
3. A group of revolutionaries led by a man named Vladimir Lenin believed they had the answer. They would create a form of government where the leaders commanded the necessary progress of the nation from the top down, catapulting Russia past Europe. This particular type of dictatorship is known as "communism."
  - a) Communism is based on Marxism—a theory of history and human nature put forward by German philosopher Karl Marx.
  - b) This theory, technically known as "dialectical materialism," proposes that human life and history are controlled by one thing above all: whether a person is born rich and powerful *or* poor and powerless. (The "materialism" part in the name comes from the fact that material circumstances are the key, and the "dialectical" part means there are always two sides in conflict.) Marx would point to ancient aristocracies the world over and the slaves they ruled, and in modern history, the owners of the new factories and technology on the one hand and the laborers on the other.
  - c) Marx's idea was that history progressed inevitably as the oppressed rebelled against the oppressors, in certain major stages, and that a (somehow) final stage of rebellion would occur when the industrial workers (which he called "proletarians") would rebel against the rich industrialists (which he called "bourgeois").
  - d) The product of this next, coming rebellion would be a new stage of history, Marx claimed, where everyone lived in perfect equality and harmony, according to the rule "*from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.*" This outcome is sometimes called "socialism," although that term has a range of meanings. It is also called "utopia," because the notion that humans can actually live by such an idea is a dream that defies all logic and justice. (*An individual who contributes to "society" according to his ability, but who receives little or nothing in return because he doesn't "need" it, is effectively a slave who is punished for his ability, which is an injustice, and a person who receives the product of the work of others through no claim other than need gets the undeserved and learns to take without earning. This is the reality of communism, and a key reason why all communist countries are poor and the people are in fact miserable. The antidote is the recognition of the individual's right to the "pursuit of happiness," which is, not surprisingly, why America has historically been aligned against communism and even policed the world against communism.*)

- e) Marx believed his version of a perfect future it was historically inevitable, and that it would arise some day in the most advanced societies, which would gravitated in that direction according to the laws of history that he believed he understood better than anyone before him.
  - f) The problem for Vladimir Lenin was that although he was a Marxists (a follower of Marx), he was impatient to bring progress to Russia. He didn't want to wait for history to bring socialism to Russia. He wanted to make Russia socialist right away. That's why he advocated "communism," a dictatorship of socialist leaders that would impose a proper way of life on everyone, and thus supposedly guarantee progress and prosperity.
4. In **1917**, when Russia had suffered terrible losses in World War I, and different groups in Russia were working to replace the Tsar, Lenin and his supporters took charge and directed the event known as the ***Russian Revolution***.

#### F. The Russian Civil War, Forced Collectivization, and Stalinism

1. Many people in Europe were upset about the Russian Revolution and the "Red Terror" its leaders enacted against everyone that resisted a violently imposed form of socialism. However, the Soviet Union (as it soon called itself) seemed to behave like a good country by backing out of World War I and by accepting the independence of its neighboring nations, such as Finland and Poland, which had ruled up to that point.
2. In Russia itself, however, the communists demand that everyone accept the principles of socialism. This meant that all property was "collectivized." (In socialism, there is no recognition of private property, because everything belongs to "society," i.e. the collective.) Peasants were commanded to farm the land on behalf of the nation as a whole and not allowed to consider their products as their own. Farmers who resisted were either slaughtered or enslaved to work in state factories, or shipped off to prison camps called "gulags."
3. The forced collectivization of agriculture almost destroyed Russia, but the United States, where many individuals feel an undefined sympathy for communism, shipped supplies to Russia and saved as many as 11 million lives because of it. Sadly, this did not prevent a famine in 1921, which claimed 5 million lives, and another in 1930, which claimed perhaps 8 million more dead.
4. Everyone who survived was forced to live under communism as well, which became even more oppressive, because every time things didn't work out, the rulers blamed the people for not being good enough (because, of course, the *theory* of communism was "perfect," and the rulers were doing the "right" thing, so who else could be blamed other than the backward Russians themselves!)
5. In 1937, Lenin's successor Joseph Stalin enacted the "Great Purge"—killing and imprisoning about 1 million political opponents, including former political allies. In every way since it was created, Russian communism, which claimed to aim towards equality and a society free of oppression, in fact operates exactly like absolute monarchy, where the communist leaders have total power and are totally corrupt.

## G. World War II and the Communist Empire

1. The ongoing horrors of communism were masked by the interruption of World War II.
2. As supernationalist Germany prepared to attack its neighbors once again Joseph Stalin made a deal in order to avoid being dragged into the war. It was called the “non-aggression” treaty with Germany. As part of the deal, Germany would conquer the western part of Poland, and the Soviet Union would conquer the eastern part. (Obviously this was not really “non-aggression” as far as Poland was concerned!)
3. Just like Russia’s deal with Napoleon, this one broke down and Germany invaded Russia.
4. This time the human cost of defending Russia totaled 24 million dead!
5. In a temporary military alliance with the United States and others, however, Russia was ultimately victorious in Eastern Europe.
6. As Russian troops moved towards Germany in the east, they occupied all of Eastern Europe, and soon forced the people there to accept communism as well.
7. Only because the United States decided to become the “world police power” was Russia prevented to conquering all of Europe, which had nearly ruined itself by the war.
8. At the end of World War II, Russia had become the second of only two cardinal cultures in all of the world. For this reason, Russian leaders like Vladimir Putin do not think World War II was a tragedy. They think of World War II as the “great patriotic war” that Russians should remember proudly.

## H. The Cold War

1. From 1945 to 1991, the United States and the Soviet Union/Communist Russia were locked in a “cold war”—a situation which is not the same as peace, because both sides are constantly ready to fight and worried about being attacked, and yet they do not actually fight a “hot war” (a war where weapons are actually fired).
2. During the Cold War, Russian leaders continued to believe that communism would ultimately create a better society. Nikita Krushchev famously ranted “we will bury you!”—by which he meant that Russia would outproduce all democratic nations and show that communism is indeed the best system.
3. When Russia took an early lead in the “space race,” by putting the Sputnik satellite in space in 1957 and then the first man in space—Yuri Gagarin—in 1961, it seemed like communism was successful in at least that way, but Russia was still a country where people experienced famines, and where store shelves were often empty of basic necessities.
4. On average, Americans were 2-3 times as rich as Russians during the Cold War, and by the end of the Cold War it was 4-5 times. Russia was clearly falling behind, and America was making amazing progress in computing, which Russia could not hope to match.
5. Faced with this clear sign that communism could not, in fact, match a free society, the Russian leader Mikhail Gorbachev decided that Russia should begin reforms in order to create a hybrid of communism and freedom. “Perestroika” (reform) and “glasnost” (openness) policies created changes that could not be controlled.

6. The abandonment of control over eastern Europe also contributed to the break-up of communism.
7. By 1991, the Soviet Union was at an end. The only question was what kind of Russia would emerge...

#### I. Vladimir Putin's Post-Communist Russia

1. From 1991 to 2000, it was not clear what Russia would become, and then in the year 2000, Vladimir Putin became the "president" of Russia. Since that time, he has changed job titles occasionally, and had the "laws" changed so that he can continue to hold power.
2. Clearly, in a time of uncertainty, Russia, like other cultures, has turned to this charismatic leader to define the direction for the country.
3. The war in Ukraine is a demonstration, however, that Putin has no good answers. He wants to prevent Russia from declining and losing its status as a cardinal culture, but by waging a war in Ukraine he has made Russia a pariah, which will now be excluded from the America-centric world and impoverished by lack of trade. (If Russia wanted to stay in the British-centric world of trade despite Napoleon, the importance of being in the America-centric world of trade is even greater today.)
4. Russia will now be viewed as an enemy by Ukraine, Europe, the United States, and all their allies in the world.
5. Sadly, Ukraine will be ruined in the process.
6. Until Vladimir Putin dies or is removed from power, however, there is no chance that Russia will be able to change in any positive way. It is stuck being *post-communist* and not knowing how to fit into the world.