

Background Information

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

The Russian Revolution consisted of two separate revolutions that radically changed the political system and way of life in early-twentieth-century Russia and culminated in the establishment of the Soviet Union, or the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

The February Revolution of 1917:

In **February 1917**, a popular revolution led to the overthrow of Czar Nicholas II of Russia, who had reigned as the Emperor and Autocrat of Russia since November 1894. A conservative ruler, Czar Nicholas, the last of the Romanov Dynasty, had long been considered inadequate due to the corruption that pervaded his government and his inability to comprehend the changing needs of the Russian economy. Poverty was wide-spread among Russia's working-class. The growth of urban industries and manufacturing enterprises created a new base of urban workers, but these workers were not paid livable wages and worked long hours only to live in dire poverty. Russian workers began to resent Nicholas for his failure to bring the Russian economy up to the standards of other European countries.

Calls for increased economic opportunity and political equality were fueled by Nicholas's empty promises for reform and a growing desire for a more democratic society. When Russia engaged in World War I, its military suffered considerable losses, and additional food shortages ensued. Failing to implement the reforms he had previously promised, Czar Nicholas helplessly witnessed as, on February 23, 1917, Russian workers left factories unattended, abandoned their work stations, and took to the streets in protest. They demanded food and vociferously articulated their criticism of the government. Workers were soon joined by students, dissenting members of the military, teachers, and other Russian citizens who sympathized with their demands. Without the support of either the military or his cabinet members, Czar Nicholas II was forced to abdicate on March 2, 1917. A Provisional Government, designed to lead the way toward a Russian republic, was implemented immediately.

The October Revolution of 1917:

The second stage of the Russian Revolution occurred in **October 1917** when the Bolshevik Party, under the leadership of Vladimir Lenin and the workers' soviets (councils), abruptly terminated the authority of the Provisional Government. The Bolsheviks claimed to represent the needs and interests of Russia's urban workers and peasants. They promised a redistribution of land to the peasants and a guarantee of democratic liberties, thus championing the socialist ideals formulated by the influential economic philosopher Karl Marx in the late nineteenth century. This precipitated the Russian Civil War that ended in 1921 with the formation of the Soviet Union (USSR).

Lenin argued that these goals could be achieved only if the Provisional Government was replaced and governmental power firmly assigned to the Bolsheviks. After Lenin's death in 1924, Leon Trotsky, an important fighter in the early revolution, and Joseph Stalin engaged

in a struggle for power. Trotsky was soon exiled from Russia, allowing Joseph Stalin to take over the Bolshevik party—now called the Communist Party—and to redefine Marx’s original socialist ideals. Lenin’s and later, Stalin’s rule quickly departed from the original socialist and democratic demands of the Russian Revolution, and the Soviet Union devolved into a government-controlled totalitarian state.

THE IDEOLOGIES OF SOCIALISM AND COMMUNISM

Socialism:

Socialism is an ideology advocating the distribution of wealth among all members of a society, achieved through community control over its citizens’ possessions and means of production. This social control can be administered through small councils or groups or by the government on behalf of the people.

In the late nineteenth century, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels formulated the principles of modern socialism. Marx and Engels believed that any capitalist society would ultimately face the inevitable struggle between the poor working classes and the rich bourgeoisie (those who owned the factories that employed the workers). This confrontation, according to Marx and Engels, would be followed by a socialist revolution. The socialist movement would completely eliminate the idea of private ownership of capital by placing ownership of the means of production into the hands of the State, thus ending the war between the classes.

Once a society had passed through the stages of capitalism and socialism, Marx envisioned that it would reach a third and final stage. Marx believed this stage would be marked by a completely classless society he characterized as **Communist**.

Communism:

The Russian Revolution of 1917 was fueled by Marxist Socialist ideals. The Russian population desired a more democratic government and sympathized with the plight of the working poor. Under Lenin’s guidance, the Bolshevik Party—later called the Communist Party—united all means of production under state control and created a government controlled by workers’ soviets (councils). Over the next few years, however, the government became increasingly authoritarian. Revolutionary fighter Leon Trotsky still clung to the democratic ideals of the original socialist movement, but he, and others, were overpowered by the leadership of Joseph Stalin, who eventually exiled Trotsky and took over the government almost single-handedly.

Stalin proclaimed that he would realize the ideals of **Socialism** and Marxist **Communism** by generating a massive program of industrialization. Although Stalin still claimed to follow the principles of Marx and Lenin, it soon became clear that he had seized power in order to reinvent the Soviet Union as an authoritarian state in which *he* would function as an absolute dictator. Stalin maintained his power by threatening and eliminating his enemies, using propaganda to maintain social control, and utilizing a personal police force to execute his orders. Stalin’s

communism is considered by many critics—among them George Orwell—to be a perversion and misinterpretation of the communist and socialist ideals of Karl Marx.

ELEMENTS OF TOTALITARIANISM AND AUTHORITARIANISM

Totalitarianism:

In a **totalitarian** state, the government exercises firm control over the public and private lives of its citizens and usually follows a particular ideology. For example, Stalin proclaimed the Soviet Union to be an ensign of Communist ideology. In addition, totalitarian states are led by dictators who retain strict control over their subjects.

Authoritarianism:

Authoritarianism is a form of government control comparable or almost identical to **totalitarianism**. In an authoritarian state, the government, under the leadership of a dictator, strictly controls the population, often through overt oppression or the elimination of democratic rights and liberties. In an authoritarian state, the government single-handedly writes and enacts laws. Citizens have no real opportunities for participation. Authoritarian states rely heavily on **propaganda** in order to control the population. Some techniques frequently employed in the maintenance of absolute control are the oversimplification of ideas, false and exaggerated patriotism, the promotion of group mentality, censorship, and an elaborate leadership cult. Hitler's dictatorship in Nazi Germany, or Stalin's oppressive government in the Soviet Union, are examples of authoritarianism.