

History UNFOLDING

RUSSIA'S REVOLUTION AND THE WORLD



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Introduction

The Bolshevik Challenge

In the fall of 1917, Lenin and his Bolsheviks seized control of Russia, ending a brief democratic interlude and bringing forth a new kind of regime the likes of which the world had never seen.

The Russian Revolution was a pivotal event that would shape the entire 20th century. The Marxist ideology that guided the Soviet Union for more than seventy years deeply affected far more than the particular regimes where it was adopted as official dogma. In fact, the communist movement after 1917 profoundly influenced just about every important social, cultural intellectual and political trend of our age. No understanding of the past eight decades is possible without a grasp of the nature and significance of the Russian Revolution.

This booklet uses 12 visual displays to focus on several of the key themes in the story of the Russian Revolution and its world-wide impact. Each lesson uses three visual displays to explore one broad topic. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

Russia Before the Revolution

The illustrations here focus on the conditions in Russia in the decades prior to the Revolution and the growing alienation of a radical opposition to the rule of the Tsar.

Two Revolutions

By late 1916, the disaster of World War I had led Russia to the edge of anarchy and chaos. In 1917, a spontaneous and democratic revolution swept the old order out. Then, a far less spontaneous takeover brought a determined and ruthless group of radical revolutionaries to power.

Terror and Civil War

A bitter civil war between "Reds" and "Whites" provided the context for the extremely harsh form of communism the Bolsheviks imposed. Terror became an accepted tool of policy. As the illustrations here make clear, the results were a disaster.

The Revolution and the World

The Russian Revolution gave Marxism more prestige and many more resources on which to draw. This intense faith and the equally intense opposition to it would affect the entire world for many decades.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*Russia's Revolution and the World***OBJECTIVES**

1. Students will better understand social conditions in Russia in the decades before its revolution.
2. Students will understand how bitter radical criticism of Russia's rulers had become by the early 1900s.

Russia Before the Revolution

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustration 1**

In the late 1800s, Russia was one of the great powers of Europe. Yet it was also very poor. Four out of five Russians were peasants like those shown here. Most of them still lived and worked as they had for centuries. The village was the peasant's world. Often, each peasant worked strips of land scattered throughout the village lands. These strips were assigned by a village commune made up of the heads of the peasant households. Individual ownership of separate farms was not typical. Loyalty was to the village and commune much more than to the nation as a whole.

Illustration 2

Russia was ruled by a monarch called a Tsar. Backing him were rich nobles, the army, the secret police and the Russian Orthodox Church. By the late 1800s, a small middle class of business owners, journalists, doctors, lawyers and others was also emerging. They were often critical of the Tsar's harsh rule. Their children in the universities were often attracted to radical, even terrorist, political movements. The British cartoon on the left comments on this trend, picturing a Russia torn between chaos and anarchy ("nihilism") and the Tsar's dictatorial and militaristic rule. On the right, a radical poster compares the Orthodox Church to a monster spider living off the people. Both images suggest the growing gulf between Russia's rulers and her embittered people.

Illustration 3

By the early 1900s, radical groups in Russia were growing in strength. Among the most important of them were the Bolsheviks, followers of Karl Marx. In 1848, Marx wrote a book called the *Communist Manifesto*. Most industrial workers then—those Marx called the "proletariat"—lived in squalid slums and worked long hours at very low wages. According to Marx, capitalism would over time only make workers more miserable, while their labor would only add to the wealth and power of a tiny ruling class. Marx wrote, "The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win." Using this metaphor of chained workers, the Bolshevik poster shown here neatly sums up Marx's ideas. In fact, the Bolsheviks saw themselves as agents of a proletarian revolution that would overthrow capitalism and launch inside Russia the world's first communist society.

Lesson 1—Russia Before the Revolution

Illustration 1



Roger L. Lewis Collection,
Hoover Institution Archives



Russian Pictorial Collection, Hoover Institution Archives

Discussing the Illustrations

1. In 1900, four in five of Russia's approximately 125 million people lived and worked very much the way the peasants in these two photos did. From what you know about Russia, what features in the photos help to show that these are peasants in Russia?
2. From the photos, what do you suppose life was like for the typical Russian peasant? How do the photos fit with what you already know about Russia? What do you find most surprising about them?
3. Many peasants farmed strips of land scattered throughout their village. Often, these strips were assigned to each household by a village meeting of household heads called a "commune." What do you know about these communes?
4. Every few years, the commune would make a new division of these strips. Many peasants liked this commune system. Some did not. Why do you think most peasants liked the system? What do you think some of them disliked about it?

Follow-up Activities

1. **Small-group activity:** Use the above two images as a starting point in a project designed to compare Russian peasants and U.S. farmers of the late 1800s. First look for more photos or drawings of Russian peasants and American farmers. Your teacher or librarian should be able to help you find sources with such images. Find illustrations that show the differences between the two groups in such matters as use of technology, patterns of land holding, family life, communities, etc. Make photocopies of five to ten illustrations for each of the two groups. Do whatever reading is necessary to understand what the images show. Write brief captions for each image and arrange them in a bulletin board display.
2. Read more about Russian communes in the 1800s and early 1900s. Based on what you learn, create an imaginary map of a typical Russian village. Show the land holdings of peasant families as they would have been assigned by the commune. Use your map to explain the commune system to the rest of the class.