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The Shaping of the "Second Europe" 1914 - Present

Communist Totalitarianism and the Revolt Against Europe

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Introduction: The First World War and Its Effects

The background to Communist Totalitarianism and much else that we will be looking at during the final section of the course was the [First World War \(1914-1918\)](#). Many historians think that it was *the* defining event for the 20th century. There is a lot of evidence for this judgment. The war itself was unlike anything Europe or mankind had known before.

After a few months of quick movement into Belgium and France by the German forces, the fighting quickly settled down into trench warfare. The German forces had planned a lightning swift sweep through Belgium and France, quickly defeating the British and French, and then to turn against Russia. As it turned out the Russians surprised the Germans in the East by mounting their own offensive and forced them to divert forces to the Eastern Front. And the German sweep through Belgium and France failed to outflank the French and British armies as planned. Each side then dug into trenches stretching for hundreds of miles through Northern France and into Belgium. Neither the Central Powers (Germany and Austria-Hungary) nor the Allied Powers (Britain, France, Russia, Italy, and in 1917, the United States) could get more than a temporary advantage. Each periodically tried to break through in massive offensives costing hundreds of thousands of lives, only to fall back when the other side counterattacked. In the West the front barely changed for four years. In the East after initial German victories against the Russians, there was more movement but no conclusion; Germany directed most of her energy against the Western Front. In addition to the staggering cost in lives, every nation went into debt to finance the war. Those war debts lingered after the war and caused massive economic problems. Only the United States emerged solvent. Russian losses in men and resources were so enormous that they led to revolution, the destruction of the Czarist system and the victory of Communism. Actually, as you will discover, there

were two revolutions in 1917. The first in the spring of 1917 forced Nicholas II to abdicate and established a provisional government. The second, the one most people think of as *the* Russian Revolution, occurred in October and November of 1917 when Lenin and the Bolsheviks staged their own revolution.

The war took a decisive turn because of German submarine strategy. Unable to break the trench war stalemate each side turned to the seas for an advantage. The British imposed a tight blockade to strangle the economies of the Central Powers. The Germans responded with submarine warfare against Allied shipping. At first they avoided neutral ships as a matter of policy. However, in 1917, German submarines began attacking all shipping, gambling that they could break free of the blockade and end the war quickly. It was a major miscalculation, because it brought the United States into the war on the side of the Allies. Within the year American armies and aid turned the tide and ended the war. The text has a full treatment of the war and its aftermath which you should read for additional information.

Briefly listed, the effects of the First World War were as follows:

- (1) The war changed the standing of England and continental Europe as industrial and economic leaders of the world. The wealth and economic supremacy of Europe, created by the Industrial Revolution and imperialism, disappeared in the mud and blood of the trenches, along with much of a generation of young men.
- (2) It leveled the social structures and institutions which had lasted for centuries. Most monarchies disappeared, as did the lavish and ostentatious aristocratic and upper class life styles. The defeated nations adopted democratic governments as a reaction to their humiliating defeat, but then blamed these governments for the economic and political chaos after the war. Totalitarianism followed.
- (3) It increased the authority of states over their citizens and economies in different kinds of "war socialism". War became so expensive that populations and resources had to be regulated as never before.
- (4) The war caused such enormous financial losses that governments could not meet the rising expectations of their populations for political and social benefits. This led to disillusionment and cynicism among the masses and a disposition to want to try totalitarianism as an alternative.
- (5) Despite greater military planning and state planning, war became so complex and unmanageable that states could no longer foresee the consequences of grand strategy.
- (6) War became a grand crusade to preserve some cherished ideal: making the world safe for democracy; defending the authenticity of German Kultur. Such idealism, fostered by governments to unite peoples behind the war effort, collapsed into cynicism and resentment after the war failed to achieve high moral aims.
- (7) The emergence of the United States as a world power. From now on it could not maintain its isolationist stance on European or world affairs.
- (8) World War II. The Versailles Treaty ending the war led directly and clearly to a greater war 20 years later. The "war guilt clause" by which Germany and Austria-Hungary accepted responsibility for the war caused enormous resentment in Germany. That and the economic dislocation caused by heavy reparations produced the setting in which Fascism rose in Germany.

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Stop for a minute and think with me about these effects.

Background to Totalitarian Communism: A Review of Marxian Socialism

Karl Marx proposed a revolutionary form of socialism which advocated a violent change to the capitalist system so that the proletariat or working class would take control of the wealth that it alone produced. He saw history sweeping toward a spontaneous world-wide uprising of the oppressed proletariat which would eliminate the bourgeoisie or middle class and its destructive control of the industrial system. The dialectic of material forces which had created the bourgeoisie and its capitalist pattern had also created the antithesis to that class and economic system in the proletariat. When the proletariat prevailed it would establish a dictatorship and eradicate all traces of bourgeois influence and power. Then the state would wither away in a classless society governed by the slogan "From each according to his ability; to each according to his need." Revolution was inevitable. Capitalism was doomed by its own excesses of overproduction and depression. Marx thought it was going to happen in 1848. Disappointed, he kept writing and waiting for the coming revolution, assuming it would happen everywhere, but would occur first in the industrial, urban countries. He would have been shocked and disbelieving had he seen where it first occurred, Russia, the most rural, least developed country in Europe.

Background to Totalitarian Communism: The Russian Setting for Revolution and the Revolution Itself

Russia had not only the most backward economy in Europe but also the widest social divisions on the continent. Not until 1861 was serfdom abolished. Between the rich aristocracy and the impoverished masses there was a wide gulf, a division made more painful by a repressive government and secret police. The Czar was an absolute ruler. There was no representative assembly. Because of the social tensions and despite the secret police, revolutionary groups thrived. One of these societies was the Russian Social Democratic Party formed in 1898 and professing Marxian beliefs. In 1903-1912 the party split into two factions: the Bolsheviks ("majority") and Mensheviks ("minority"). During the revolutionary period following the abdication of the Czar in the spring of 1917, Bolsheviks emerged with substantial power because of their united vision under the leadership of [Vladimir Ilyich Lenin](#) (1870-1924). (There is a fascinating book by the great American novelist and critic, Edmund Wilson, on the history of socialist figures and their ideas leading up to Lenin's arriving in St. Petersburg to lead the Bolshevik Revolution. The title is [To the Finland Station](#) (1940). What would have happened if Lenin had not arrived in 1917? No Revolution?)

Lenin's contribution to Marxian socialist theory was the idea of secret cells of revolutionary leaders who would lead, plan, and instigate acts of violence for the cause of revolution. Marx, as we saw, had assumed an inevitable revolution, the leadership of which would arise as spontaneously as the revolution. Lenin added the concept of the professional revolutionary leader in a work entitled [What Is To Be Done?](#) (1902). Comparing revolutionary socialists to those interested only in trade unionism, he said:

I assert:

- (1) that no movement can be durable without a stable organization of leaders to maintain continuity;
- (2) that the more widely the masses are spontaneously drawn into the struggle and form the basis of the movement and participate in it, the more necessary is it to have such an organization, and the more stable must it be (for it is much easier for demagogues to sidetrack the more backward sections of the masses);
- (3) that the organization must consist chiefly of persons engaged in revolutionary activities as a profession;
- (4) that in a country with an autocratic government, the more we *restrict* the membership of this organization to persons who are engaged in revolutionary activities as a profession and who have been professionally trained in the art of combating the political police, the more difficult will it be to catch the organization, and
- (5) the *wider* will be the circle of men and women of the working class or of other classes of society able to

join the movement and perform active work in it....

The active and widespread participation of the masses will not suffer; on the contrary, it will benefit by the fact that a "dozen" experienced revolutionaries, no less professionally trained than the police, will centralize all the secret side of the work-prepare leaflets, work out approximate plans and appoint bodies of leaders for each urban district, for each factory district and to each educational institution, etc.

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1. How important is timing in making historical events happen? If Lenin had not arrived at the Finland Station in St. Petersburg in 1917, what would have happened?
2. Did Lenin get it right about what makes a revolution succeed?

Lenin's Bolsheviks gained control of the workers' and soldiers' revolutionary organizations (soviets) in the spring of 1917 using the slogan of "Peace, land, bread!" and overthrew the provisional government in the fall of 1917. Following Marxian theory, Lenin and the Bolsheviks in the next months eliminated or silenced their opponents, including other socialist revolutionaries. After all, they believed they were establishing a dictatorship of the proletariat. In 1918 when free elections for a constituent produced a majority for their opponents, they simply dissolved the assembly. Civil war followed from 1918-21 as opposition parties and czarist supporters united to try to oust the Bolsheviks; even foreign nations invaded Russian ports to try to lend support to the anti-Bolshevik forces. In the meantime the Bolsheviks continued with their Marxian programs. They nationalized all land, nationalized the banks, and even forcibly requisitioned food from peasants. By 1921 economic conditions had reached such a desperate state that Lenin was forced to begin the [New Economic Policy](#). By this policy rigid central controls were relaxed, food conscription was ended, peasants were allowed to sell their surplus produce for private gain, small private farming was permitted, and entrepreneurs were allowed to set up private businesses in cities.

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Lenin's New Economic Policy was the earliest sign that Russian Communism was doomed to fail. Agree? Why? Why not?

Russia Between the Revolution and World War II

Lenin lived only a few years after the Revolution. When he died in 1924 a power struggle broke out among his lieutenants [Joseph Stalin](#) (1879-1953) and [Leon Trotsky](#) (1877-1940) over the direction of the revolution in Russia and throughout the world. This was not just about who would control the party and Russia, but about Marxian ideology. Trotsky believed that everything must be sacrificed, including the Russian economy, to foster world-wide revolution. Stalin took the view that the revolution had to be consolidated in Russia first, (under the slogan, "building socialism in one country"), then extended to other countries. Stalin won and ousted Trotsky because he was the more ruthless of the two and controlled the party machinery. But that debate outlasted both men, communists arguing both ways right up to the collapse of Soviet Russian Communism in 1989.

Stalin triumphed in 1926 and exiled (1929) and murdered Trotsky (1940). Stalin's major problem was to industrialize and modernize the Russian economy. He chose to do so by the same ruthless measures he had always used. In 1928 he began the first Five Year Plan whose goals were to get industrial and agricultural production to certain levels within the period allotted. To reorganize farming Stalin started farm collectives, large combinations of land and workers with central direction, resources, and quotas. The theory behind the collective movement (which does have some basis in Marx's idea of agricultural armies) was that collective farming could be better planned and more easily mechanized, and that the collectives could form the basis for military units in time of war. The practical side of collectivization was that it ended private ownership which was a threat to central authority. Those who would not agree to give up their land (given to them earlier by the party) were forcibly dispossessed; those resisting were executed. Collectivization was pushed as official Soviet policy from 1929 to 1960. It is estimated, perhaps underestimated, that four to five million peasants lost their lives resisting the collective movement.

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Stalin's brutal collectivization was the second sign that Russian Communism was doomed to fail. Agree? Why? Why not?

To speed up industrialization and strengthen the Soviet economy, [the Five Year Plans](#) concentrated first on heavy industry. And the results were impressive if you discount the cost in lives. From 1928-1940 it is estimated that steel production went up over 4 times; electrical output went up 8 times; cement, 2 times; oil, 3 times; and coal output increased 4 times. The Soviets did in only a decade what it had taken unplanned economies seventy-five years to accomplish. But at a staggering cost in lives and waste of resources, and all to prepare Russia against the threat of war Stalin saw looming. By the time of the German invasion in 1941, Russia had a heavy industry and was able to make most of the war goods she needed.

Stalin and Afterwards

Stalin added his own doctrines to Marxian theory, and while his brutality and repressiveness were eased by his successors in 1953, these ideas still served as the basis for Russian policy from 1926 to 1989. Stalin spoke of Communist doctrine in terms of four basic tensions:

- (1) World-wide tension between the capitalists and the proletariat. This comes right out of Marx. Stalin declared that it would be communist policy to do everything possible to create antagonism between capital and labor around the world, to promote strikes and fund labor opposition parties.
- (2) Tension between the imperialist, capitalist states and their colonies or former colonies. Colonial peoples should be helped in revolting from their imperial masters. Those who have broken away should be courted and aided by communist states. This doctrine was put to the test in Africa after 1945. Insurgency movements against the imperial powers were funded and assisted by Russia and other communist states. The same thing may be said about revolutionary movements in Asia, including China, Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia. All got Soviet support of one kind or another.
- (3) Tension among imperial states. This too came from Marx. Imperial states competed with each other because of the demands of industrial capitalism. Such differences should be exploited by the communist states. In fact any policy differences between capitalist countries should be exploited by communist states.
- (4) Tension between capitalist states and communist states. This is not Marx's idea. Marx envisioned a world-wide collapse of capitalism, leaving no continuing hostility between capitalism and communism. Stalin, however, saw things taking a lot longer and requiring what came to be called a World Front or common front of revolution around the globe. Russia would be the home base for this front.

Following Stalin's death in 1953, the most excessive features of Russian Communism began to relax. But his successors up to the 1980's never relaxed their long-term commitment to Marxian ideology or other traditional features of Soviet policy and life. Some measure of improvement in consumer goods occurred in the period up to the 1980's. But the economic success of the western democracies never did make it to the Russian or other communist societies. The disparity in freedom and material goods became ever greater, and could not be concealed in an age of world-wide communications and mass media. Finally, in almost every country, communism collapsed of its own weight. The verdict is still out on Vietnam, China, North Korea and Cuba. Nothing is inevitable. Still, Fidel Castro and his comrades have every reason to worry that history is going to sweep away all their systems.

Communist Totalitarianism and the Second Europe

Lenin and other 20th century revolutionaries are dogmatic: truth is what the party or the party leader says it is. In that sense it is anti-rational, despite Marx's pretension to a scientific socialism. Communist totalitarianism, like its Fascist variety, denies the basic equality and dignity of man. The needs of the state come first, whether in collectivizing farming or forcing industrialization. Individual rights do not deter those on the way to a revolution for the *people*. In 1918 Lenin said in a [hanging order](#) to local commissars:

Send to Penza To Comrades Kuraev, Bosh, Minkin and other Penza communists

Comrades! The revolt by the five kulak [units] must be suppressed without mercy. The interest of the entire revolution demands this, because we have now before us our final decisive battle "with the kulaks." We need to set an example.

You need to hang (hang without fail, so that the public sees) at least 100 notorious kulaks, the rich, and the bloodsuckers.

Publish their names.

Take away all of their grain.

Execute the hostages - in accordance with yesterday's telegram.

This needs to be accomplished in such a way, that people for hundreds of miles around will see, tremble, know and scream out: let's choke and strangle those blood-sucking kulaks.

Telegraph us acknowledging receipt and execution of this.

Yours, Lenin

P.S. Use your toughest people for this.

So much for the contract theory and the right to resist government. As with Marx, Communist totalitarianism is atheistic. There is no room for any God, even a Deist one. And as for the view of the future, the classless society is one version of heaven on earth. But no one but a communist would want to go there.

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Don't you like Lenin's hanging order? The totalitarian mentality simplifies things wonderfully, doesn't it?
